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Dangerous Lover

CHARLENE TEGLIA

The heat is on...

Take Me, Lover, Book 4

Just a few more weeks and accounting student Cherry Harris will officially get her master's degree and kiss her pink waitress uniform goodbye. There's something else she'd like to make official, too—no more bad boys.

Tired of getting burned, she's determined that from now on, it's nice guys or nothing. What could be nicer than a firefighter rescuing a kitten from a tree? Joe Deluca looks like the perfect way to break her romantic destructive pattern.

Perfect melts like ice cream on a hot day when Cherry finds out that when Joe's not in uniform, he rides a motorcycle and wears a leather jacket over his tattoos. Is he a nice guy, a bad boy, or the man who's just right for her?

The five-alarm passion Joe inspires proves an irresistible temptation, but Cherry's determined to guard her heart if not her body. Until a firebug leads them both into danger and Cherry is forced to admit her heart's been in jeopardy from the beginning...

Warning: Contains a sexy firefighter and burning-up-the-sheets sex scenes that use ALL the words. May induce Harley-Davidson motorcycle fantasies you should not attempt on a moving vehicle.

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Charlene Teglia

Dedication

Thanks to my husband for answers to motorcycle-related questions and for not choking when he found out why I wanted to know. Thanks to Sasha White for reading and giving helpful feedback. And as always, thanks to the Write Ons: Jackie Kessler, Jill Myles, Megan Crane, Michele Lane and Michelle Rowen. You almost make writing a book painless. Write On!

Chapter One

“Cherry Harris, you’d better smile before your face freezes like that.”

Cherry’s head snapped up and her gaze connected with Marla Waite’s dark brown eyes. The older woman was shaking her head. The movement didn’t budge the dark auburn hairstyle that would probably hold through gale-force winds. Cherry wondered how much hairspray Marla went through. A lot, she guessed, since Marla’s big hair was rivaled only by her big heart.

“Sorry,” Cherry said, forcing her lips into something she hoped resembled a genuine smile and not a corpse-like grimace. “Bad day.” She thought back and added, “Bad decade. Do you realize I’m twenty-six?”

Marla’s eyes widened in pretend shock. “Ancient.”

“Ha. So not. Just old enough to know better.” Cherry quit trying to smile and focused on filling the apron pocket of her pink retro uniform with an ordering pad and two pens. The uniform went with the interior of Sweet Delights, Melba, Georgia’s 1950s-style diner. Some days, going to work felt like stepping back in time. The unmistakable voice of Elvis Presley belting out “Maybelline” from the jukebox helped the illusion.

“I started dating when I was sixteen. That’s a decade of experience and now it’s time for me to learn from my mistakes.”

“Ahhhh.” Marla gave her a knowing look. “So I don’t have to ask how your date went last night.”

“He went.” Cherry rolled her eyes. “He never should have come in the first place. After ten years of dating, I should have known better, but I see the error of my ways now. I have officially dated my last bad boy.”

Marla looked past Cherry. “Does that mean you want me to pick up table sixteen?”

Cherry followed Marla’s gaze. Her eyes came to rest on the back of a man’s head. He wore his dark hair in an almost military crew cut and sported a circular symbol with four offshoots that resembled a cross tattooed on the upper arm his tank shirt left bare. His tanned, amazingly well-defined upper arm, which the tattoo in no way detracted from.

Cherry swallowed. It was a good thing she could only see the back of his head, the line of his shoulders, and that tattoo. If the rest of him lived up to the first impression he made, the impact of the whole might weaken her resolve. She’d just sworn off bad boys and it was probably like quitting smoking. No point in tempting herself too far, too early. She had to clear out her system first.

A week earlier, she'd have been thrilled to find him seated in her section at the start of her shift. She would have flirted with him, and he would have flirted back. Good thing he hadn't come in last week.

Today, she was a stronger, smarter woman. A woman who could see the sexy packaging for what it was—a bad boy alert.

"Yes, thank you," Cherry told Marla. She felt a pang over the loss of what probably would've been a good tip. College tuition was eating her alive, even with student loans, partial scholarships, and this job. Still, given her history of attraction for his type, she was coming out ahead by giving up the table.

Marla bustled off to take his order. Cherry checked the board for the day's specials then glanced over at the ice cream counter with a longing that almost rivaled the way she'd looked at the tattooed stranger. A scoop of chocolate cherry chunk drizzled with hot fudge sauce and topped with a swirl of whipped cream and a sprinkle of nuts would go a long way towards improving her mood.

Then again, if she was going to substitute food for love, dating might be the better choice. Too many sundaes and her uniform would get a little too snug. The short skirt didn't provide much camouflage for extra pounds, either.

Be strong, Cherry, she told herself sternly. Her goal was in sight. *Another month at the most*. She'd almost finished her master's degree in accounting. Then she just had to pass the CPA exam and find a new job before she could turn in her pink uniform and say goodbye to the daily temptation Sweet Delights subjected her to.

Her eyes drifted towards the temptation table sixteen presented. Suppose she didn't give up dating, just changed how she went about it? She really did need to clear her system, and that meant she needed an antidote. The anti-bad boy. Sort of like eating carrots to make up for ice cream.

"Are you sorry you gave him to me?" Marla asked, coming back with the man's order.

"No." Cherry gave Marla a wide smile. "I just realized what I need to do. Instead of giving up dating, I need to change who I date. I'm going to go out with the next nice guy I see."

"Uh-huh." Marla gave her a long look. "Good luck with that."

"It's a perfect plan." As long as she kept her eyes off Mystery Man's bare biceps, it might even work.

By the end of her shift, Cherry's tip jar was full and her determination to stick to her plan was firm. She walked home riding a wave of optimism. When she rounded the corner to the old Victorian split into four apartments she called home and found a fire truck parked out front, her optimism wavered.

She picked up the pace, her heart racing. There were two other students renting apartment units, and one elderly lady in the fourth unit upstairs. If there'd been a fire, Miss Lewis would've been home.

The last few steps were nearly a run. Cherry came to a stop when she saw a man climbing down from the spreading oak tree out front with Miss Lewis's fat Persian secured under his arm.

Relief left her knees weak. Or maybe that was due to the smile the firefighter gave her. He had dark hair, cropped short like her mystery man's, but unlike the tattooed stranger, he looked every inch the

dependable man in uniform. He also had deep blue eyes and an indented chin that made her fingers itch to trace the dimple. The smile made his face exceed the sum of its very attractive individual parts.

It made her feel a little breathless and reinforced her decision to date the next nice guy she met. Here was a nice guy, and oh, was he ever nice to look at. Her eyes went to his hand stroking the cat's soft fur. *He can pet my pussy anytime*, she thought, and then mentally slapped herself.

"Hi," Cherry said out loud. "Miss Lewis must've called you to rescue Clara Belle." She waved a hand towards the Persian. Clara Belle, no dummy, stayed put.

"Yes." He held the cat out to her. "Yours?"

"No, Clara Belle belongs to Miss Lewis, my upstairs neighbor. But, between you and me, the stairs are getting to be too much for her."

"I'll save her the walk, then." He gave her a smile that made her toes curl inside her shoes. "I'm Joe Deluca."

"Cherry. Cherry Harris."

"Nice to meet you, Cherry."

"Nice to meet you too," she echoed. Then he went up the stairs with the cat and she realized she'd missed her opportunity to make a move on the first nice guy she saw. "I am so out of practice," Cherry muttered. Bad boys always took the initiative.

She grabbed her mail and went inside, kicking off her shoes as she came through the door. The uniform followed the shoes, discarded clothing forming a trail to her bedroom. She put on a pair of denim cutoffs, worn nearly white, and the first clean T-shirt she grabbed off the pile of folded laundry she'd meant to put away before work.

The T-shirt was halfway over her head when she heard a knock. Cherry swore under her breath as she yanked it down, padding barefoot back the way she'd come.

Joe stood on the other side of the door. "Hello again," he said with a warm grin. "Since I'm here, I thought I might as well check all the smoke detectors and make sure everything's working. Your neighbor's needed new batteries."

"You fixed it for her? Thank you." Cherry stepped back and waved him inside. Then her eyes went to the clothes she'd dropped on the floor. She pointed to the smoke detector to distract him from the sight. "In the kitchen."

"Got it." As soon as he was busy with the electronics, she scooped up her uniform and hose and stashed them in the bedroom.

"Yours is working fine," Joe informed her when she returned. "I checked the fire extinguisher in the stairwell, and that's good to go too."

"Good to know."

He winked. "If I make another trip here, I'd rather it wasn't for anything work-related."

She felt a smile tilting the corners of her mouth up. "Is that a hint?"

"Yes. I would love to take you to a movie. I would hate to pull you out of a burning building."

"If I had to be pulled out of a burning building, I'm sure you'd do it very well," Cherry said, pretending to weigh the two options. "But I'd rather go to a movie."

"I have no idea what's playing," Joe admitted.

Her smile widened. "Do we care?"

"Well, I'd rather not be seen going into a chick flick."

He crossed his arms and Cherry tried not to stare at the way it accentuated his chest and shoulders. Joe must lift weights.

"I can see how that would be a problem for you," she said. "Real men don't do chick flicks."

"Unless it gets us in the good graces of our dates," Joe conceded. "Then it's all right. It's in the Real Men's rule book."

"I don't really like chick flicks," Cherry admitted. "I like explosions."

"It's a date, then. I have to get back to the fire station, but I'll give you a call with the choices and times."

"Okay." Cherry wrote her cell phone number down and handed the slip of paper to him. Just like that, she had a date with a nice guy. Who made her knees weak. Progress.

She locked the apartment door behind Joe and went to deal with the laundry. If he ended up on the other side of her bedroom door, she didn't want him to have any trouble finding the bed.

While she was scooping up the clothes, she caught sight of herself in the mirror and groaned.

The words Sweet Delights were spelled out across her generous breasts. Her face looked okay, although any makeup she'd started off the day with had worn away. The shoulder-length mop of inky curls on top didn't look any messier than usual, but combined with the slogan over her D-cups, she looked like she'd just gotten out of bed instead of getting off work.

"Sweet Delights," Cherry muttered. That shirt would be the first thing she grabbed. Oh, well. Did she mind if it made Joe think of something a lot hotter than ice cream?

She had a sudden image of the shirt replaced by strategic dabs of cold vanilla over her nipples, and Joe licking them off while she shivered in delight. Her heart rate kicked up and the temperature in her apartment seemed to soar.

"So I'm fantasizing about a guy I just met. It's not my fault," Cherry told the now-flushed mirror image of herself. "I haven't had real sex in so long, I have to go with my imagination."

The recent string of bad boys hadn't led to hot, grinding satisfaction. Just the death of attraction as they said or did something to kill the rising swell of desire. God forbid she accidentally led one of them to reproduce. Cherry groaned as her internal mercury dropped. Great. Now her past was buzz-killing her present.

"I am capable of being attracted to the right kind of man," Cherry said out loud. "Joe's proof. And this time, I'm going to follow through." Before she died of frustration.

Get the degree. Get a career. Get some. Her to-do list was small, but it was made up of big goals. Maybe she should start with doing the laundry. Cherry went off to do it, feeling closer to the life she wanted already.

The next night, she was dressed and ready for a Kung Fu flick that won her vote over the weepy drama that constituted the current movie choices. The hormone rush she'd gotten from Joe's company was better suited to action than angst. Instead of a T-shirt with suggestive lettering, she wore a white polo shirt left unbuttoned at the throat, a pair of jeans, and white canvas sneakers.

Underneath, she wore a matching white lace bra and panty set. Just in case. Condoms in her bedside table drawer, checked for the expiration date. How sad was that? People her age were supposed to run out long before the damn things dried up and cracked.

"I'm going to use up the rest of that box," Cherry promised herself. If things didn't go well enough with Joe to result in even a fling, there were other nice guys out there, and at least one of them would make her libido sit up and take notice.

Her naked ice cream fantasy had driven one point firmly home. It was time to give her personal life the same focus she'd given to going after the career she wanted. No reason the same approach couldn't be used on her social life.

The knock at her door, right on time, added to the happy sense that the date was going according to plan. Cherry opened the door to see Joe standing there with his hands in his jeans pockets. He wore a short-sleeved T-shirt, displaying muscles that tempted her to reach out and trace the outlines. The pose made his shoulders seem a little broader and she took a second to appreciate the effect.

"Hi," she said, a little breathless now that he was there.

"Hi, yourself." He smiled at her, the heat in his blue eyes kindling a matching warmth in the pit of her belly. He stepped back to give her space to come out, and Cherry joined him.

She pulled the locked door closed behind her just as Joe stepped forward again, bringing his body closer to hers. Not quite touching, but to put more space between them, she'd have to move back against her door. He drew his hands out of his pockets and planted one on each side of her, framing her.

"I thought we should get this out of the way first."

"This?" Cherry felt her pulse skip as he bent his head so his forehead touched hers.

"The goodnight kiss. If we do it now, we won't be distracted all through the movie."

“Oh.” She felt her lips curving in a smile that died as he slowly, so slowly, lowered his mouth to meet hers. Since he was taller, she had to tilt her chin up and rise a little on her toes. She put her hands behind her to use the door for balance.

The kiss was warm, sensual, unhurried. Joe didn’t take his hands off the door to pull her closer or take it further, and she followed his lead. The single point of contact sharpened her awareness, focusing her senses on the press of his lips against hers, the taste of him, the breathless pause that drew out as her heart thudded faster. When he ended the kiss, her eyes slowly opened again to meet his.

“I was wrong,” Joe said. “I’m going to be more distracted now.”

“Me too,” Cherry admitted.

He gave her a crooked half-smile and stepped back, offering her his hand. She took it, glad for the extra support as their fingers intertwined. He led her down to the parking area, and stopped between a pickup and a motorcycle with the distinctive Harley-Davidson logo on the gas tank.

If this was one of her typical dates, there’d be no question which vehicle they’d be taking. Cherry grinned as she waited for him to unlock the truck.

Instead, he turned to pick up a helmet strapped to the back of the Harley. When he extended his arm to retrieve it, his shirtsleeve rode up, revealing a distinctive circular, four-pointed tattoo she recognized instantly. The short, dark hair, the muscles, the tattoo... Cherry groaned inside as her plan blew apart.

She’d planned to date a nice guy instead of the type she was attracted to, and here she was with her lips still puffy from kissing the bad boy at table sixteen. Who she hadn’t avoided after all.

Chapter Two

Find a reason to get out of this. A doctor's excuse. A test I forgot I have to study for. I don't need to date another bad boy.

But he'd retrieved her neighbor's cat from a tree. And checked her smoke alarm. The man rescued people and pets for a living. How bad could he be?

While she argued with herself, Joe buckled her into the helmet and helped her straddle the leather seat that let her feel every vibration of the Harley's powerful motor and the road under them. Then he climbed on, and her torso and open legs were plastered against the length and breadth of Joe. Her arms hugged him close to keep the bike's acceleration from pulling her backwards. A necessity she enjoyed a little too much.

Okay, well, it was just one date. They'd go to a movie. He'd take her home. And she couldn't tell if it was the angel or the devil on her shoulder who approved, anyway. Maybe after one date, both sides would agree.

Between the aftereffects of the kiss, the proximity of their bodies, and the throbbing motor she felt every bit of right where she was primed to appreciate it most, Cherry made the trip in a blur of sensory overload that played havoc with her good intentions.

As soon as Joe parked at the movie theatre, she wasted no time getting onto safer ground. The temptation to linger a little longer, press a little closer, was too strong. She pulled the helmet off and handed it back to him. He stowed it and then caught her hand in his as they started to walk.

"So, tell me about your tattoo," Cherry said, latching onto the topic to keep from saying *take me now, finish what your kiss and your bike started*.

"What about it?" He gave her a half-smile, lazy heat lingering in his eyes.

"What is it? When'd you get it? Why'd you get it?"

"It's a fireman's cross. I got it after I started the job."

Like a military tattoo, something that identified the person with their particular branch. "I didn't know firefighters did that."

"Do you know much about firefighters?"

"I know they're good at putting out fires," Cherry said, her mind on the one he'd kindled in her.

"What about you?"

"I don't have a tattoo."

Joe laughed, a low sound that she found far too easy on the ears. "Guess you can't show me yours, then."

"No," Cherry said, trying desperately not to imagine doing a strip tease to show him anything he wanted to see.

"I meant what about your job," Joe went on.

"Oh. Well, I'm finishing up my master's degree in accounting so I can become a CPA. And, while I'm doing that, I'm waiting tables at a diner and ice cream parlor."

"Sweet Delights," he said. "I remember."

Oh. Right. The T-shirt. Her uniform.

"I've never dated an accountant before."

"I've never dated a fireman before," Cherry said.

"Well, then, here's to firsts." He stopped and tugged her close as his lips skimmed her temple. The light caress sent a pulse of anticipation through her.

And seconds, and thirds, Cherry silently agreed.

The movie made a welcome distraction, enough noise and special effects to keep her attention, while the dim setting, close seating, and shared popcorn kept her all too aware of Joe.

Whether or not it was smart to date him, she wanted him. The attraction was mutual. And, for all she knew, he wasn't even interested in a relationship. Maybe he was looking for a fling with a busty waitress who had an ice cream fetish.

That thought was enough to trigger a flashback to her new favorite fantasy. Cold vanilla melting on her skin, puckering her nipples before they met the heat of his tongue. Oh, God, the things she wanted him to do her with that mouth.

A fling would be good. With Joe, a fling just might be divine. A hot night with a hot firefighter and the kind of sweet satisfaction that wouldn't go to her hips.

Besides, maybe her attraction for bad boys was less about them, more about her. She remembered catching a pop psychology segment on TV that claimed people dated those who had qualities they didn't want to admit to in themselves. In that case, what she really needed to do was embrace her inner bad girl and live out her own fantasy fulfillment. She had the perfect opportunity to do just that with Joe.

"Want to get a drink?" Joe asked as the credits rolled.

"Not really." Cherry turned towards him, feeling the point of no return pass by her. "I'd be too distracted."

"Oh?"

"Mmm-hmm." She let her eyes drift down to rest on that delicious mouth of his. "That was some kiss. I keep wondering what the next one will be like."

His fingers teased the back of her neck. "Same here. But if we don't go someplace public, it'll be harder to stop at kissing."

"If we go someplace private, you can kiss me anywhere you want to," Cherry pointed out.

His hand slid up and cupped the back of her head. "I'd hate to get arrested for public indecency just when things were getting good."

"That's the kind of first I'd like to avoid," she said in heartfelt agreement.

"Your place?" He used his hold to keep her in place while his lips brushed across hers.

"Yes."

"Are you planning to use me for sex and throw me away?" His voice took on a teasing tone that made her smile.

"I prefer to think of it as recycling." Cherry leaned forward and nipped at his lower lip. Channeling her inner bad girl was easier than she'd expected. "Also, it depends on the sex."

"A challenge." His mouth curved in a bad boy grin that said he was more than up to it.

Well, so was she. And the ride home straddling his bike would guarantee that she stayed that way.

She was a quivering mass of unfulfilled lust when Joe closed her apartment door behind them, shot the bolt to guarantee they'd stay undisturbed, and draped her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. His hand on her upturned butt held her in place. "Bedroom?"

"That way." Cherry pointed vaguely and they were off, her body rocking into his with the motion. She closed her eyes and sank her teeth into her lower lip, reveling in the rush of arousal, attraction, anticipation. "Are we playing fire rescue?"

He reached the edge of her bed and tumbled her onto it, then followed her down. "Yes, ma'am. Got a call about a pussy in distress."

She fluttered her lashes at him. "My hero. I'm sure my pussy is in good hands."

"Hands are only the beginning." Joe sank to his knees beside the bed. He peeled off his shirt and leaned forward to rest his hands on her thighs. "I might need to give the kiss of life."

"And are you a trained professional?" Cherry managed to keep a straight face while her blood surged at the idea of Joe's kiss of life.

"Fully qualified," he assured her. His hands moved up until they rested just below the juncture of her thighs. "Maybe you'd like me to demonstrate."

"God, yes." She started to unfasten her jeans. His fingers took over the task halfway through, lowering her zipper, spreading the denim open. Then he kissed the skin he'd bared just above the edge of her panties.

Lower, she urged him mentally. His fingers smoothed the white lace, teasing her while his lips caressed and explored her lower belly. His tongue swirled in the dip of her navel and she decided there was no need to rush him.

Joe's mouth traveled over her ribcage, leaving a wake of fire behind. His hands skimmed under her polo shirt and tugged it up, baring the lacy bra she wore underneath. Cherry raised her upper torso and grabbed the hem so she could haul it up over her head.

"White lace. Pretty." Joe ran his hands up her sides, not quite touching her breasts.

"I wore it for you."

"Thank you." He kissed the line of cleavage she'd bared. "I'll try not to rip it when I take it off."

Cherry laughed and raised up again so he could reach the hooks between her shoulders. He unfastened it with practiced ease and drew the straps down.

"You're good at that."

"My performance ratings are excellent."

Cherry laughed again, dizzy with heat and need and a giddy exuberance. Then his mouth found hers and the laughter died away, replaced by hunger.

His tongue danced with hers while his hands slid her bra cups down. Cool air rushed over her bared breasts as she shrugged her arms free of the straps. She let her hands wander the line of his shoulders, exploring the ridges of muscle before moving up the sides of his neck to dig her fingers into his hair.

Joe shifted, lowering his upper body onto hers. She caught her breath as a wall of hard, hot male pressed against her tight nipples and the soft swells of her breasts.

"Too much weight?" Joe raised his head to look down into her eyes.

"No. Feels good." She arched up into him, wanting more pressure.

"I don't want to crush you."

"I'm not that tiny."

"You're perfect." He murmured the assurance as his head dipped to hers again for another dizzying kiss. His lips left hers to caress her cheek, the line of her throat, and finally the upper curve of her breasts as he shifted to explore more of her.

"So are you," Cherry breathed out, then gasped as his mouth closed over first one nipple, then the other, suckling both with equal attention while his hand cupped and squeezed her breasts. An ache of need spread through her. She moved restlessly under him, unable to keep still.

His hands skimmed down her waist to her hips and his fingers caught the edge of her panties. "I haven't given you the kiss of life yet."

Joe peeled the lacy briefs off slowly, taking his time. He drew them down her legs at the same leisurely pace, making the motion a caress that woke every nerve ending from her hips to her ankles. He tossed the white lace aside and scooted down between her legs. Cherry let her eyes drift shut and exhaled a

low sound of pleasure as his tongue began to lap lazily at her. He tasted her as if savoring the experience. Then he closed his mouth over her clit and suckled while her muscles pulled tight and then everything released in a blinding burst.

“You did rescue my pussy,” Cherry panted out as an aftershock of pleasure pulsed through her.

“Not yet.” The promise in his voice made her toes curl.

She watched through half-closed lids as he stripped out of his jeans and low-hipped briefs. The sight of his engorged cock made her eyes open wide. It curved out from his body as if seeking hers, a sheen of moisture gleaming on the head. She licked her lips and imagined herself tasting the salty tang of him.

Joe caught the reaction of her wayward tongue. “Want this?” His voice deepened as his hand wrapped around the base, working the shaft until another drop pearled for her.

The sight of those masculine fingers stroking up and down, milking himself for her, aroused her even further. Giving in to temptation, Cherry sat up and slid forward, bending her head down until her mouth met the flesh that enticed her. Opened to invite him in. Closed around him while her tongue collected the seminal fluid that coated the head of his cock.

“More.”

His hoarse encouragement was all she needed to suck greedily while his hands continued to move up and down. His fingertips brushed her lips, retreated, returned. He pumped himself between his hands and her mouth, while she hungered for more of him. She wanted to protest when he pulled out.

“Condoms?”

“There.” Cherry pointed to the bedside table. She started to crawl up the bed to retrieve one, but Joe beat her to it, ripping a packet open and sheathing himself while she struggled to catch her breath.

He pressed her back down to the mattress while he moved on top of her. “Wrap your arms and legs around me.”

She did and held on while he sheathed himself in her flesh with one long stroke. He withdrew, then surged back inside, finding his rhythm. Cherry shifted with him, trying to get more pressure where she needed it.

“Not the right spot?”

“Not quite.”

“Hang on.” Joe pulled out of her, and before she could shriek in protest at the loss, he flipped her over onto her belly and pushed her thighs apart and up. He slid a hand under her until he cupped her mound. His fingers pressed into her clit as his cock filled her again, this time from behind. The head rubbed over a sensitive point deep inside as he thrust. “How’s that?”

“There,” Cherry managed before her mind slipped to a wordless place. “Oh, God, right there.”

“Got you.” Joe held her in position with his other arm wrapped around her waist and stroked her into insanity. She came so hard it nearly blinded her and she lay still under him, trembling with aftershocks while he pumped into her until his shaft throbbed with the force of his own release.

Chapter Three

Joe stayed planted inside her, his body curved over hers, while his lips played over the nape of her neck. “Still planning to recycle me?”

Cherry grinned with kiss-swollen lips. “I’d fantasize about cuffing you to my bed, except you’re stronger than I am and there’s nothing to attach handcuffs to on my headboard.” She didn’t have any handcuffs, either, which now struck her as terribly shortsighted. Being a bad girl clearly required better planning.

“Maybe I’ll cuff you to mine.” Joe withdrew and rolled her onto her back then pulled her into his side. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand going low to cup her hip, the other cupping the back of her head as she settled it on his shoulder.

“Kinky.”

“You inspire me.”

She kissed the pectoral muscle that flexed under her cheek and burrowed closer, breathing in the masculine scent of him. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the ones who wear white lace for me on the first date. What are you going to wear for the second?”

“You’ll have to show up to find out.” Cherry stretched, feeling deliciously sated.

“I’ll hope for that T-shirt you had on the first time I was here. And no bra.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “How about no shirt and an ice cream bra?”

“If you have ice cream, I vote we do that now.”

“I have ice cream.”

Joe put a hand under her chin to raise it up. “I’m in the mood for dessert. Be right back.” He planted a quick, hard kiss on her mouth, then rolled to the edge of the bed and stood.

Cherry watched him until he walked out of her line of sight and breathed out a sigh of appreciation. The man had a backside to swoon over. Before he came back, she scooted over and pulled the comforter down to save it from close encounters of the dairy kind. She settled on her side, propped up on one arm, and watched for Joe’s return.

The sight of him naked and holding an ice cream carton in her doorway made her heart thud. He had a spoon in his mouth. He paused and lounged to one side in the doorframe, holding her gaze with his while he licked the spoon clean.

“Oh, lord.” Cherry fell back. “I hope you have time to call the paramedics before I die of orgasm overdose.”

“I know CPR.” Joe walked closer, naked, muscled, and glorious. He scooped a spoonful from the container. Then he set the carton on the bedside table while he coated his index finger with the icy treat. He drew circles around her nipples, painting her like a bull’s eye while the cold puckered her nipples and sent a contrasting wave of heat through her. He used the last of the spoonful to coat the center of his target.

Cherry gasped as the cold touched her hard, tight buds. Joe placed the spoon in the ice cream carton and licked his finger. The wicked grin he gave her melted her insides.

“I love vanilla.” He joined her on the bed and pushed her legs apart with his knees, then lowered himself over her, braced on his arms so his body didn’t rest on hers. He brought his head down to one breast and slowly, lazily, traced the outer circle of ice cream with his tongue while her brain melted. Around, around, moving closer to the center with each circle, until finally his tongue flicked over her nipple to lap up every drop.

He moved on to her other breast and gave it the same treatment while Cherry shivered in delight and gave herself up to the experience. The heat of his mouth, the cool cream, the erotic awakening of every nerve ending in her torso primed her for the moment his mouth closed hard over her the tip of her breast. The suction made her inner muscles clench and made her almost painfully aware of an emptiness she needed him to fill. Now.

“Joe,” Cherry said in a low groan. “Condom.”

“Not yet.” He turned to suck on the opposite tip while her hips jerked in reaction.

“Now.” She broke away from him and groped for a condom with frantic fingers.

“Not so fast.” He captured her wrists and pinned them to the bed with one hand, her arms pulled above her head. “Your turn for dessert.”

She might have actually whimpered while he used his free hand to get another spoonful of vanilla ice cream.

“Are you going to behave?”

“Probably not,” Cherry admitted.

Joe gave her a long look, put the spoon back, and felt around the bed until he came up with his T-shirt. He wrapped it around her wrists and tied a knot she could have gotten free from, but she played along and kept her bound hands above her head.

She watched while he coated his cock for her oral pleasure. He moved to plant a knee on each side of her and lowered his hips until the head brushed her lips.

Mmmm. She licked, and sweet, cool ice cream melted on her tongue while the musky, male flavor of Joe provided an erotic contrast. She drew her tongue around the ridge of the head, up and down the hard

shaft, over the plum-shaped top, and then she opened her mouth wide and drew him in. He worked his hips to push deeper, sliding in as far as she could take him, pulling back, sliding forward again.

The fulfillment of her fantasy with the twist Joe added had her body on fire. Cherry squeezed her thighs together then clenched her inner muscles in an attempt to get relief from the aching emptiness. She sucked harder, flicked at him with her tongue, and reveled in the sensation of being tied under him while he fed her his cock like an x-rated treat.

“Ahh. Stop there.” Joe drew himself out of her mouth, inch by inch. She caressed the head with her tongue as he pulled all the way out, then watched, breathless, as he effortlessly collected a condom and put it on.

A heartbeat later he was over her, on her, and sliding into her while Cherry wrapped her legs around his waist and arched up to meet his thrust. She was hot and slick, making it easy for him to bury his shaft to the hilt. He paused for a moment, all the way inside her, then started to move in a series of long, slow thrusts.

“Tease,” Cherry muttered, and nipped at his chest.

He stopped and levered himself up so he could look into her face. His eyes glinted with wicked humor. “Was there something you wanted?”

She rocked her hips up into his. Being naked under him with her arms over her head while he drew it out was making her wild. “You. Faster.”

He moved inside her, tantalizing her. “You want a good, hard fucking?”

Just the words were almost enough to make her come. “Yes.”

Joe gave up the game, rested his full weight on her and reached under her to wrap his arms around her, his hands going low to hold her ass. Then he fucked her hard and fast, nothing held back, driving them both straight to release.

Cherry felt the inner muscles of her sex grip his shaft tight as her orgasm took her, the first ripple leading directly to the second in a series of spasms that rocked her. She could feel Joe deep inside her, his cock jerking as he came as hard and fast as he’d fucked her. The sensation set her off on another series of contractions. He felt her reaction and began to move again, thrusting into her until they’d both spent themselves into slack-muscled lassitude.

After a long pause of recovery, Joe untied her. Cherry curled on her side with a blissful sigh while he moved around, getting rid of the condom and dumping the carton of melted ice cream in the kitchen sink. He came back and ran a hand down her spine, ending the caress with his palm curving around her bare ass. He stroked, gripped, and fondled her butt while he looked down at her.

Cherry could have closed her eyes and enjoyed that for another half hour, but she roused herself enough to look up at him. “Was there something you wanted?”

He gave her a long look. “You. Again.”

She stretched and considered it. “Now?”

He shook his head. “I’ll call you. I’ll bring my bike over. You wear a dress with a loose skirt and be ready to ride.”

Her brows hiked up. Did he expect her naked under the skirt? “Underwear?”

“Yes. A pair you’re not fond of, because I’m going to rip them off you.”

Yowza. “Okay,” Cherry said, feeling faint.

He kissed her long and hard. Then he dressed while she snagged the sheet and wrapped it around herself, since she didn’t feel capable of anything that took more effort. Cherry walked him to her door. Before he left, he pulled her body against his and ran his hands down her sides, then around to cup her ass. He held her close for a long minute. Then she felt him drop a kiss on top of her head before he let her go.

She held the door for him and watched him go. When he moved out of sight, she realized she was leaning in her doorway wearing only a sheet. If anybody caught a glimpse of her like this, her undressed state would broadcast what they’d been doing.

She closed the door, leaned back against it, and exhaled. Then she locked the door and headed for a tub full of hot water and sudsy bubbles.

He stood out of sight and watched her silhouetted in her doorway, clearly naked under a sheet. Her flushed cheeks and rumpled curls looked like an invitation to go back to bed for another round. He could see the heat in her from where he stood. She wanted to play with fire? He’d give her what she was looking for. Fire was always hungry. First it would warm her. Then it would devour her.

He smiled in anticipation.

“You look like your new dating rule agrees with you,” Marla said the next day.

“I’m definitely doing something new,” Cherry said, flashing on the things she’d done with Joe.

“Somebody new, you mean.” Marla gave her a knowing look.

“Mmm-hmmm.” A wealth of satisfaction infused the sound.

“Glad the change is working for you, sweetie.”

It was, although the temporary nature of it was a little unsettling. She hadn’t ever been the fling type. More of a serial monogamist. She’d never met a man who turned her into a puddle of lust, either. While bad boys left her wanting, Joe left her wanting more. More of him?

Probably. Cherry bit her lip, hoping she wasn’t starting to fall for a man she really didn’t know. Falling for a fling kind of violated the point of hot, fun, uncommitted sex. If she fell for Joe, it would screw

everything up. Besides, she still didn't know if he was as bad as his leather jacket, tattoo and motorcycle implied, or as good as his sense of humor, excellent bedside manner, and job led her to believe.

Whatever he was, Joe was a new experience, so at least her plan was working on that level. She might be making a big mistake, but at least it was a new one. And she was definitely owning her own bad-girl desires instead of letting somebody else act them out.

The shift went fast. Business was steady and the pace kept her on the move, delivering orders, taking new ones, clearing empty dishes and wiping down empty tables to reset them for the next round.

It was during the height of the rush that she smelled smoke. At first, Cherry thought somebody was violating the rule and smoking indoors, so she searched around for the offender. But nobody had an unauthorized cigarette burning.

The kitchen. Cherry moved towards it at a jog, glad for the firm grip her sneakers had on the floor. She went through the swinging doors and scanned for the source of the smell. She saw the smoke first, billowing up in a black cloud to cover the ceiling. The cook had already grabbed the fire extinguisher off its hook and seemed to be searching for something to aim it at. The teenage dishwasher just looked scared.

Marla came up behind Cherry. "Fire?"

"I think so, I can't see anything." Cherry stared around in frustration. "We'd better call the fire department and get everybody out."

"I'll call. You get everybody out." Marla grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back as she shouted to the cook and dishwasher to leave through the kitchen exit. "I don't see flames. It might be in the wall."

"How do you have a fire in a wall?"

"Electrical. Maybe a wire shorted. I don't know, but you get back and clear this place." Marla let go of her and pulled a cell phone from her pocket, punching numbers before she finished talking.

Feeling like she was moving in slow motion, Cherry put her orders into action and got the customers on their feet and out the door, not in the orderly manner of a practiced fire drill, but at least everybody moved in the right direction and nobody panicked.

Marla joined her and helped herd the last of the group outside as a siren wailed in the distance.

Cherry stood with her, arms wrapped around her middle, shivering with cold despite the sunshine. She'd gone her whole life without experiencing an uncontrolled fire. What were the odds she'd hook up with a firefighter just before she found herself needing his professional services?

His job had seemed sexy before she was faced with the reality of it. Now she saw what it could mean to run into a burning building with the level of danger unknown.

She coughed to clear her throat then stood blinking against the stinging in her eyes that wasn't entirely due to the black cloud that followed them out of the building, her heart thudding in her throat.

Marla gave her a one-armed hug while they both watched the fire crew sprint into action, suited men hooking a hose to a fire hydrant and charging inside, armed with hatchets. "That's going to leave a mess."

Cherry made a choking sound that didn't quite pass for a laugh. "I hope it takes us all night to clean up. It'll mean we still have a restaurant and a job tomorrow." More than that, she hoped none of the men who'd answered the emergency call would come out hurt.

"You said it, sugar."

When they finally got the all-clear to go back inside, the destruction wasn't as bad as Cherry feared, but evidence of the short-lived disaster was everywhere. Black smudges marred the ceilings and walls, along with water stains. Every surface looked scorched and then drowned. The fire might not have gotten far, but repairing the damage from smoke and water was going to take more than a day. It might take a week just to air out the acrid smell.

"We're closed," Marla sighed as they took in the scope of the mess. "Head on home. I'll call the owner back with an update on the situation, and we'll get the ball rolling on an estimate for the insurance company. We'll need a specialty cleanup team for this."

Cherry nodded. At least she'd collected good tips before her shift ended in disaster. She'd had time to grab her bag as she cleared the customers out, so she hadn't lost anything. Except her job, for at least a week, judging by the extent of the damage.

Chapter Four

Her cell phone rang on her way home. Cherry fished it out of her bag and answered it. “Hello?”

“Cherry.” Joe’s voice filled her ear. “Just heard about the fire at the ice cream shop. Are you all right?”

“Fine.” Except the hand holding the phone was shaking, she realized. “Mostly.”

“Were you there when it happened?”

“Yes.” She blinked hard, eyes still stinging from the black cloud she’d left behind. “It happened so fast. One minute everything was fine, and then I smelled smoke.”

“Nobody hurt, according to the report.” But his voice sounded taut, not his usual relaxed tone.

“No,” Cherry agreed. “We got everybody out and the fire truck arrived almost immediately.”

She heard him exhale as if he’d been waiting for her to confirm it before he believed it. “Good. I wasn’t sure if you were working today, but I had to call.”

“Worried about me?” A spot of warmth flickered to life inside her.

“Yes. I have plans for you.”

Oh, yes. Plans that included him, his bike, a loose dress, and a pair of panties she could live without. What did he have in mind? Whatever it was, it was sure to take hers off the unexpected emergency she’d just been through.

“If you’re offering to distract me, I could use a distraction,” Cherry said.

“Me too.” His voice took on a raw sound.

She blinked again, not entirely due to the irritants she’d subjected her eyes to. The dangers Joe risked every time he reported for a shift had to make the relatively small and uneventful fire at the restaurant pretty minor on his scale. But he had been worried about her. Maybe because he knew firsthand how bad a fire could be.

“I’m all for distractions.” She tried for a light tone, but a note of real longing came through. She needed the diversion Joe offered. “You’re not working today?”

“Not at the station. When I’m on there, it’s for twenty-four hours straight. I do two of those shifts a week.”

That had to make for really long days. Especially if an emergency happened after twenty-three of those hours. The relatively open schedule must make up for it.

“What do you do the rest of the time?” Cherry reached her building and headed for her apartment, curious about what Joe did off-duty.

“I’ll show you. Are you home now?”

“Just.” She stopped outside her door and fished out her keys.

“Be ready in fifteen minutes.”

Figuring that was long enough for a shower, Cherry let herself in and locked the door behind her, stripping as she headed for soap and water. She wadded her discarded clothing and dumped it in the laundry basket, hoping the smoky smell would come out in the wash.

After she hopped out of the shower rinsed and clean, she felt better. A few minutes with some hair gel and a blow dryer got her mostly ready. Cherry skipped a bra and pulled on a soft pink T-shirt. A flared mid-calf-length denim skirt went on next. The draping fabric was loose enough to let her straddle a bike and long enough to keep her decent. She decided to live dangerously and wear pink lace briefs underneath. If she had to sacrifice them to great sex, she was pretty sure the orgasms would be adequate consolation.

A knock sounded at her door just as she finished. Joe appeared in the peephole. Cherry grinned at the fish-eyed view of him then opened the door.

His eyes took her in from her sneaker-clad feet up, warm with approval. “You’re right on time.”

“So are you.” Cherry retrieved her bag and slid it up her shoulder as she joined him outside, locking the door behind her and dropping the keys into her bag.

His hand settled on her waist as he pulled her against his side. “You feel unscathed.”

“Yep. Just a little shaken up.” She leaned into him, enjoying the warmth of his body touching hers, the sexy way his fingers gripped her waist and the buzz of anticipation his closeness filled her with.

“I should check you out thoroughly,” Joe said. “In case anything got overlooked.”

Cherry nodded, trying for a solemn tone. “You’re right. Better safe than sorry.” Although, right now, she didn’t want to play it safe, and she wasn’t sorry.

They reached Joe’s motorcycle and climbed on. Cherry leaned forward, loving the feel of her breasts pressed against Joe’s back and her arms around his middle. Her feet found their pegs as he revved the engine and then they moved forward.

He drove her through neighborhoods with spacious yards and shady trees, winding around side streets, before coming to a white two-story house with a long driveway and a detached garage that sat sideways at the end of it, surrounded by a copse of ash and birch trees.

The Harley came to a rumbling stop while Joe retrieved an electronic opener from a pocket. The garage door slid up and they rolled in. Joe aimed the Harley at a metal stand and parked on it. The stand raised the bike up a little and held it stable. Cherry could see shiny rows of tools hanging neatly on one wall and various other bikes on similar stands, some with wheels off and in differing stages of assembly. Parts covered a workbench that ran the width of the back wall.

Joe reached back and ran a hand up her thigh under her skirt. "Climb off and get back on in front of me."

What did he have in mind? Cherry swung a leg over, stood, and came around to the front. The motor continued to idle, a deep rumbling sound. The open garage door meant whatever they did, they weren't going to die from carbon monoxide in the process. And the sideways angle of the garage to the street, with the additional privacy afforded by the screen of trees, meant nobody passing by could look in.

With a mental shrug, Cherry did what he wanted and climbed on, facing the gas tank while Joe slid back on the leather seat to make room for her.

His body framed hers as his arms wrapped around her. His mouth found her ear, nipping at the sensitive skin of her lobe before speaking. "Hands on the handlebars."

Okay. Cherry leaned forward and gripped them. It helped her balance, especially when Joe's hands moved to cup and squeeze her breasts, thumbs seeking out and rubbing her nipples through the thin fabric of her T-shirt. Then down her waist and hips, catching the hem of her skirt and hiking it up to her waist. She drew in a sharp breath when he toyed with the lace edge of her panties.

"You going to miss these?"

"Terribly," Cherry said, the catch in her voice giving away the lie. "You can console me by making their loss memorable."

"You won't forget this."

Joe kissed the nape of her neck, his warm breath sending shivers dancing down her spine. The rumbling vibration of the bike between her spread legs made her feel like she was primed to take off and rocket into ecstasy. He teased her, running his fingers around the upper edge of her panties, then the legs, starting at her hips and slowly moving towards her center.

"Joe." She wanted him to touch her there, between her legs, to feel the pad of his finger pressing against her swollen clit.

He answered her with more instructions instead of the touch she was on the edge of demanding. "Scoot up a little."

Cherry hitched forward and gasped as that put her clit in contact with the warm, vibrating gas tank.

Joe reached around her and gunned the throttle, increasing the vibration.

"Oh." Cherry's eyes went wide and her lips bowed as she rocked into the machine.

"Now you. Work it the way you like it."

She followed his demonstration and tentatively increased the throttle herself, groaning in pleasure as the engine obeyed her. She dimly heard the sound of his zipper going down, a foil packet rip, and felt him shifting behind her as he got ready to take this game further.

Joe tangled his fingers in the lacy briefs. They tore easily under the pressure he exerted. He tugged the flimsy fabric away as Cherry lifted her hips to help him. Cool air touched her bare skin. Heated metal

purred between her legs. Joe's hands molded her ass, squeezed, lifted, and then she felt the head of his cock nudge the valley of velvety skin between her butt cheeks.

"Want it like this?"

Cherry bit her lip, suddenly possessed by an insane urge to say yes. But she shook her head. The one time she'd given anal entry a try, she'd found it too uncomfortable to repeat. She hadn't been spread-eagled on a vibrating machine at the time, though, and she was willing to bet that would change the experience. Still, she wanted his cock in her pussy, driving deep, hitting that magic spot.

"Raise up a little more for me, then." Joe's hands positioned her and guided his shaft down until the head pressed against her slick, swollen entry. He pushed forward, testing the angle, working the head in. Cherry worked the throttle and rocked her hips, moaning in pleasure as he thrust deeper, deeper, until he was all the way in.

She gave up trying to control the engine and simply clung for balance, moving with Joe as he moved inside her. Filling her. Withdrawing almost completely. Surging forward again until she could feel the head of his cock at the entrance to her womb. Again. Again. His strokes pressed her clit harder against the source of those delicious vibrations. She could feel her orgasm building until it seemed like the blood was roaring in her ears and her entire body was straining for release.

Joe reached under her shirt and cupped her breasts, his palms rasping against her nipples while he rocked his hips into hers, harder, faster.

The increased tempo sent her hurtling over the edge, and she took him with her. Her inner muscles clamped around his shaft and milked his cock while he emptied his balls into her.

Afterwards, she hung there, clinging to the handlebars and trembling. Joe reached around her to turn off the motor, and then his arms wrapped around her to hold her close, while he remained planted fully inside her.

"Was that adequate consolation for your loss?"

She turned her head, angling for a kiss. "Did I lose something besides my mind?"

Joe's lips covered hers. He increased the pressure, licked at the seam of her lips, and slid his tongue inside to glide along hers before he ended the kiss and pulled back. "Guess that means you won't miss that scrap of lace you had on under your skirt."

Cherry let out a low laugh. "No. But if you find my mind, I'm going to need it in time for my CPA exam."

"While it's missing, tell me if you'd consider repeating the experience with a variation."

She was pretty sure what he meant. But best to be clear about it. "You want to fuck me in the ass while your big motor vibrates me to orgasm?"

He kissed the corner of her mouth. "Yes. In a bad, bad way."

"I'm open to the idea," she admitted, mentally giving in to temptation. "But I think I need to work up to that." Some bad girl shenanigans required a little practice.

"Another time, then." His arms squeezed her around the middle in a bear hug.

"Is there going to be another time?" The question came out of her mouth, bypassing her brain.

Joe rocked his hips against her, his cock still engorged inside her. "If I have anything to say about it, yes. What do you say?"

She had no idea what this thing was between them, where it was going. With him hot and hard and in her as deep as he could go, there was only one answer. "Yes."

He held her tight for a breathless minute. Then he withdrew from her and stood, taking her hand to help her down.

Cherry tugged her skirt down and looked around. "You really like motorcycles."

He tucked her against his side, securing her there with one arm. "I told you I'd show you what I did when I wasn't at the station."

She frowned, trying to make sense of the jigsaw that was his garage. "Play with motorcycles?"

"This is my business. I do restoration and customize them."

She grinned. "You play with motorcycles." The idea of sexy Joe as an overgrown boy with a garage full of toys amused her. Even if he did legitimize it by making a business of it.

"Yeah, I play with motorcycles."

And given the performance he'd just put on with her, she wasn't the first woman he'd taken for a ride while the engine idled. The realization gave her a pang, and that horrified her.

Oh, lord, was she jealous of the other flings he'd had? Maybe was having, alongside her? For all she knew, he'd been banging somebody else all morning. What was she doing here? What was he doing?

She wasn't ready for answers to those questions, so she pushed them away. "I need to get back home," Cherry told Joe, the regret for the necessity audible in her voice. "I have to study."

He rubbed a thumb along her cheek. "You're pretty close to finished, aren't you?"

Cherry nodded. "Now that I don't have work, I can wrap things up pretty fast." Hopefully before she ran out of money. There was no telling how long the diner would be closed, but if she pushed, she could get through the rest of her requirements, take the test, maybe even land a job before the cushion of her savings wore too thin.

"How close?"

She calculated silently. "A week, maybe."

"Okay." He brushed his mouth across hers. "You study hard and we'll celebrate when you're done."

Celebrating with sex. Well, there was something to look forward to. Later, when she'd had time to pull herself together and could trust herself not to do something stupid like demand to know his intentions when she didn't even know her own.

“It’s a plan,” Cherry said.

She rode sedately behind him on the return trip to her apartment, her long, loose skirt hiding the fact that her panties were now lace scraps on the concrete floor of Joe’s garage.

Chapter Five

The week flew past in a blur of late nights, endless cups of black coffee, and the final push to the finish. Her completed classes meant only one obstacle remained. The day of the exam, Cherry felt like a rubber band stretched to the snapping point. But once she got into it, the answers poured out and she relaxed. She knew the material. She was ready. She finished in a haze of exhilaration and an odd sort of letdown.

The long-term goals of her degree and the all-important certification exam were suddenly behind her instead of in front of her. Only the hunt for a real job remained. And then what?

"I don't know," Cherry admitted out loud to herself, back in her apartment. But whatever the future held, she was pretty sure she wanted it to include Joe. She wanted to see where things led.

She was looking forward to seeing him again with an intensity that surprised her. He hadn't called, giving her space to concentrate. She wanted to hear the sound of his voice. Wanted his hands on her. His mouth on hers. His body in hers.

As if conjured by her thoughts, her cell phone rang and his number lit up the display.

"Hello."

"Cherry." Joe's voice filled her ear.

"That's Ms. CPA," she corrected with a grin.

"That's my girl."

It was ridiculous to thrill to the warm approval in his voice and the possessive *my*. But she did. She gave up trying to decide if she should take her reaction as a warning sign that she was too emotionally involved to carry on with a fling and just went with it. "Did your motorcycle miss me?"

"Ask it yourself. I'll bring it over."

Cherry looked around her apartment, noting the evidence of her neglected housekeeping. "What time?"

"I'm finishing up a project and then I'll need to clean up. I'll be there in a couple of hours."

That was long enough, if she hustled. "Okay. See you then." She clicked her phone off and got to work.

She'd finished dusting and running around with the vacuum, wiping down counters and stowing laundry neatly in baskets, ready to wash, when she heard the piercing shriek of her smoke alarm, echoed by others in the building.

“Oh, no.” Cherry felt a knot of dread form in her stomach. She didn’t smell smoke in her apartment. One of the other units? She grabbed her bag and ran out. Joe had mentioned a fire extinguisher, and she remembered seeing it on one of her visits to Miss Lewis upstairs. She pulled it down and pounded up the steps to beat on her elderly neighbor’s door.

Miss Lewis came out with Clara Belle secure in her arms. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Maybe somebody in one of the other units had an accident with the stove or something.” Cherry took the older woman’s arm in a gentle grip, noting how fragile she seemed. “Come on, I’ll help you down.”

“Thank you, dear.” Miss Lewis shuffled down with her at a fairly rapid pace. Cherry left her at a safe distance from the building, and looked around, trying to determine the source of the fire. Nobody else came out. Were they the only two tenants home? Worried, Cherry pounded on the remaining two doors, but nobody answered. So she retreated to safety and had her cell phone out, ready to call 911, when it rang.

“Hello?”

“Cherry,” Marla said, relief in her voice. “I’m glad I got a hold of you. Remember the man with the tattoo, the one you didn’t want to wait on?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the fire at Sweet Delights wasn’t an accident. The investigation turned up a witness who saw a man with a tattoo like that behind the building, the side with the kitchen, right around the time of the fire.”

Cherry felt her heart stop. “What?”

“It’s pretty distinctive. I remembered it, and I thought you would too. I wondered if you saw him that day?”

She’d seen him, all right. She’d let him rip her underwear off and fuck her brains out in his garage with the door wide open in the middle of the day. But she hadn’t seen him at work. He hadn’t been with the crew that responded, either, because it wasn’t one of his days on.

“I didn’t see him around the restaurant,” Cherry said carefully.

“I’m sure you’d remember if you had.” Marla let out a sigh. “Well, it was worth asking. Anyway, keep your eyes open. Since that fire was set deliberately, the people investigating think there’ll be more.”

“They said that?”

“No, but you don’t spend as much time working with people as I have without learning to read them. They want the guy responsible.”

An hour ago, she’d wanted him too. And he’d said he’d be arriving about now. Was he already here? What possible reason could he have for setting fire to her place of employment, her apartment building? Was Joe really capable of that kind of action?

"I have to go," Cherry mumbled and hung up with a promise to call if she remembered anything helpful. She heard the siren that signaled a fire engine on the way and went back around to the side door to try one more time to see if anybody was home, maybe trapped inside.

This time her knock was answered. The door opened, and a man's bare arm, with the distinctive fireman's cross decorating the bicep, reached out, grabbed her, and yanked her in.

Cherry blinked, trying to see in the darkened apartment. The man held her from behind, and he'd grabbed her so quickly she hadn't seen anything but the tattoo. Was it Joe?

No. The height was wrong. This man was too tall to be Joe. The arms were longer, more wiry than muscular. The chemical rush on body contact wasn't there. But he had the same tattoo, and he was here, at the scene of another fire.

"Are you a friend of Lucy's?" Cherry asked, playing for time. "I heard the alarms, but I didn't see her come out. I was worried about her. Is she out?"

"Yeah, but I knew somebody would be home." The man's voice rasped in her ear, an unpleasant sound. "I was hoping it'd be you."

Cherry licked her lips in nervous reaction. "Why me?"

"I saw you with him. He won't be able to save you, and that'll burn him the way he burned me."

Who *was* this man? A psychotic ex-firefighter with a grudge who wanted to roast her for some crazy version of revenge? "If you mean Joe, he's not my boyfriend."

"I mean Joe, and I'm not blind. I saw the two of you together. He's your boyfriend."

Fine. Maybe he was her boyfriend. She was kidding herself that she could keep having an uncommitted, undefined fling indefinitely. She didn't want to be bad with anybody but Joe. But first, she had to get out of this.

Cherry tried to pull free while stomping on his instep the way she'd been promised would cause an attacker to let go in self-defense class.

But this man evidently hadn't taken the class. He held her tighter, wrenching her arm painfully up behind her back. She dropped the fire extinguisher and heard it bounce once before it rolled away.

"Oh, no. You're not getting away." He dragged her farther into the apartment, pushed her into the bedroom, and shut her in. She heard him drag something heavy in front of the closed door, but she pushed at it anyway, trying to get it open. The door wouldn't budge.

The smell of smoke grew stronger. Was she imagining it, or was it getting hotter?

She tried to calm down and think. She couldn't open the door, so that left the window. She whirled to it and tried to force it open, but it was stuck tight. A closer look revealed that it had been painted shut during some incompetent bout of maintenance. "Dammit!"

Okay. It was stuck. She'd have to break it. She searched the room for something, anything heavy, and came up empty. So she grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around her hand and forearm, then made a fist

and aimed at the pane. It broke, and she pulled her hand back, then grabbed a paperback from the nightstand and used it to clear the shards from the edges. Hopefully she could escape without cutting herself to pieces.

She heard a masculine shout and running footsteps and froze. Oh, shit, was it him? Had he been watching, waiting to cut off her escape?

Joe's face appeared in the empty window frame and she almost sagged in relief. Until she saw another face behind his, one feral and twisted with hate. Fear for him clutched at her heart. "Joe, behind you!"

He spun around and the two men grappled, exchanging blows and kicks. The taller man had the advantage of reach, but Joe was more heavily muscled. He absorbed the punches and kept plowing forward until he'd managed to topple his opponent and pin him to the ground.

"Cherry, get out of there," he yelled.

She padded the window frame with the blanket and climbed carefully out. Then she ran past the two prone men to the front as the fire crew arrived. "Back that way," she shouted, pointing. "He started the fire. He tried to trap me in it. Joe's holding him, but he's strong."

Two men ran past her to help, and Cherry staggered back to the patch of grass where she'd left Miss Lewis. She collapsed on the ground, breathing clean air in gasps.

"Oh, dear, what happened?" Miss Lewis bent down and peered at her.

"Lucy's apartment," Cherry managed. "She didn't come out, but when I knocked, a man grabbed me and dragged me in. He started the fire."

Her neighbor's eyes went wide. "What is this world coming to?"

Cherry shook her head, wordless. She watched as the rangy stranger was handcuffed and bundled into the back of a police cruiser that had responded to the emergency call along with the fire truck. Joe waved his hands in descriptive patterns, answering questions. Then he started towards her with a rapid stride that had him in front of her a minute later.

"Cherry. You breathed some smoke. I want you to get checked out."

She nodded and let him help her up for medical assessment. When her lungs were declared undamaged by her exposure, he pulled her away from everybody, towards his motorcycle. "Are you up to riding to my place?"

"Yes." The wind would blow away the smell of smoke that clung to her hair and clothes. And she could press close to Joe. There would be time enough to air out of her apartment later.

The ride ended too quickly. This time, Joe parked in the garage and shut off the motor before he put down the kickstand and helped her off. No fooling around with stands and orgasms. She wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed.

Joe wrapped an arm around her and walked with her close to his side as he led her to his back door and inside. She looked around the kitchen, taking in the expanse of gleaming chrome and white tile. “I see you restore more than motorcycles.”

“Yes. I’ve been working on this project for a couple of years.”

Forty-eight hours on duty each week, operating the motorcycle business, and remodeling an old house. That didn’t sound like it left a lot of time for banging strange women on his bike. “You stay busy.”

“I like being busy.”

Cherry turned to face him and slid her arms around his waist. She pressed her cheek to his chest and breathed him in. “I’m glad you weren’t too busy to rescue me today.”

“You were rescuing yourself when I got there.” His arms closed around her in a solid grip.

“Why was that man starting fires?” Cherry asked. “He had a tattoo like yours. He seemed to have a grudge against you.”

Joe rubbed his chin against the top of her head. “His name’s Cal Wilson. I used to work with him. He got fired for negligence. I provided the testimony in addition to the physical evidence against him that got him fired. He was a danger to the crew and I was glad to see him canned. A crew has to have trust; we put our lives in each other’s hands.”

Cherry nodded, her cheek rubbing against the soft cotton of his T-shirt.

“When I got there and saw what was happening and couldn’t find you...” His arms tightened around her. “He was responsible for the fire at your restaurant too.”

“I know.” Cherry shuddered. “What I don’t get is why.”

“To get back at me.”

Cherry lifted her chin, pulling her head back so she could look into Joe’s eyes. “He said you were my boyfriend and hurting me would burn you.”

“He was right.” There was no teasing light of laughter in Joe’s eyes now. His mouth was solemn.

“I thought we were having a fling.” Sex on the first date didn’t usually lead to anything lasting.

“We can have a fling. As long as it’s exclusive and long-term.”

“I think I’d like that.” Cherry shifted forward until her lips brushed his.

Joe swept her up in his arms and carried her through the kitchen, down the hall to his bedroom.

Chapter Six

One year later, Cherry sat at her maple desk, admiring the way the sun glinted on the surface and brought out the grain in the wood. The printed balance sheet spread in front of her was squarely in the black. She admired that too, as she raised her arms over her head in a sinuous stretch.

“Taking a break?”

Cherry turned her head in the direction of her boss’s voice. He was framed in the doorway, watching her. “Yes. Don’t tell my boss. He’s a slave driver.”

“Maybe your boss owes you a few more perks. I couldn’t have expanded my bike business the way I have without your help this past year.” Joe straightened and came towards her. He held out both hands, fists closed. “Choose.”

What was he up to? Cherry searched his face for a clue, but he gave nothing away. So she tapped his right hand. “That one.”

He opened his hand to reveal a folded piece of paper.

Cherry plucked it out of his hand, unfolded it, and grinned as she read the printed confirmation from a travel agent. “We’re taking a cruise to the Bahamas?”

“Yes. Tax season is over and you deserve a vacation.”

She smiled at her, her heart almost aching from the romantic gesture. “It sounds perfect.”

He frowned. “Well, almost perfect. You forgot to check your other option.”

She felt her brows rise, but played along. “Okay. Let’s see what’s behind door number two.” She tapped the back of his hand with her fingertip. He turned his hand over and opened it, revealing a marquise-cut diamond on a platinum band.

“Joe.” Cherry stared at it and forgot to breathe.

He dropped to his knees beside her desk. “Marry me. Make it a wedding cruise.”

“Yes.” Moisture blurred her vision. She blinked it furiously away and held her hand out. Her fingers were trembling as he slid the ring on.

“I love you.” He leaned forward to claim her lips in a gentle kiss. “I think I fell for you the first time I saw you.”

Cherry gave a shaky laugh. “You mean, when I ogled you while you rescued a cat from a tree?”

“No, when you ignored me in an ice cream shop. I kept trying to catch your eye. You wouldn’t look at me. Then when I saw you later, it seemed like fate.”

“Maybe it was,” Cherry said, thinking of her master dating plan. “Maybe some things are just meant to be.”

“Speaking of meant to be.” Joe nipped at her lower lip. “Come on out to the garage. I have a new stand for the Harley and I think we should test it.”

Laughter bubbled up in her throat. She put her hand in his and let her dark, dangerous lover lead her into temptation again.

About the Author

Award-winning author Charlene Teglia loves penning tales of romance and adventure. Among other accolades, Charlene has been presented with the prestigious Romantic Times BOOKreviews Reviewers' Choice Award for Best Erotic Novel and nominated for Best Erotic Romance. When she's not writing, she can be found hiking or opening and closing doors for cats.

For news and excerpts, please visit www.charleneteglia.com, or follow Charlene on Twitter <http://twitter.com/CharleneTeglia>.

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Redline Lover
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Adventure Lover

Coming Soon:

Red Queen
Kiss of the Demon

Even a plaything can be pushed too far...

Doll

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Power.

Chloe Barnes thought her marriage to a wealthy politician would be the stuff of fairy tales. Instead, he took advantage of her naiveté and used her as a plaything to fulfill his twisted sexual needs. Ten years is enough. She returns to Bellhaven Island to sell the summer cottage she inherited, hoping the money will buy her freedom—and custody of her daughters.

Memories.

Fisherman Dustin McDougal never forgot the childhood crush he once had on the fairy-like Chloe. The woman she's become has a haunted look that brings his feelings back, stronger than ever...with a mature edge. Along with all his protective instincts.

Sexual healing.

Their passion blows stronger than a Maine nor'easter, awakening Chloe to the joy of true love. Yet it may not be strong enough to free her from the past...

Warning: This title contains politicians doing all sorts of nasty things and flashbacks of male domination. It also features hot sex on a boat, hot sex in an attic, hot sex on a work bench...you get the idea.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Doll:

"Have you been on your boat?" she asked dreamily, as he ran his hands over her back.

"Had to fix a bearing. That engine's always making some noise or other. Sometimes I think it just wants my attention."

"I don't blame it." He found the lower edge of her sweater and snaked his hand under it. At the feel of his work-roughened palm on her skin, a shudder went through her. Immediately he stopped.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes! You're not following the rules. If I want you to stop, I'll tell you. I don't want you to stop. As a matter of fact—" She drew away from him. "Let's take off our clothes. Together. At the same time."

He looked amused. "On the count of three?"

"One..." She stepped out of her skirt. Underneath, she wore woolly leggings for warmth. "Two..." She started to pull off the leggings.

"Hang on! You're getting ahead of me." He unbuttoned his jeans, revealing boxers and a huge erection. She felt the breath leave her body.

It was a good feeling.

She put her hands to the hem of her sweater and slid it over her head. It was quickly followed by her turtleneck. She stood in front of him, wearing only her pink lace underwear, while he unbuttoned his flannel shirt. Under it, he wore a "Save the Whales" T-shirt, which she found so endearing, she laughed.

"Am I that funny-looking?" he asked with a wounded look.

"I didn't know you were a tree-hugger."

"Some of my best friends are trees." There was a twinkle in his deep blue eyes that put her completely at ease. "The rest are whales."

"I think that might be a whale in your pants."

He waggled his eyebrows lasciviously, then laughed, an infectious chuckle that made her answer with one of her own. Never before had she laughed during sex, or the buildup to sex. Never before had she even smiled. Or joked. Or teased. If they stopped right now, this would still be a groundbreaking experience for her. But she had no intention of stopping. "You're still wearing boxers and a T-shirt."

"And you've got the bra and panties. Not that I mind the view."

For a moment, she stiffened. Fearfully, she raised her eyes to his. Would she see that same calculating hunger she was used to? That greedy look that reduced her to a thing, a possession, a trinket? But no. His expression was the opposite of that. Happy appreciation shone from his eyes. His smile had a touch of the devil in it, and a promise of delicious fun.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. A ghost. We haven't said three yet."

"If we don't do it soon, I'm going to forget how to count."

Giggling, she put her hands behind her back, on the fastening of her bra. He grabbed the bottom of his T-shirt, poised for take-off.

"Three!"

Clothes flew into the air, a flurry of underwear. Surrounded by discarded clothing, they stared at each other. Chloe felt her rib cage rise and fall with quick breaths. Without looking down, she knew her nipples were already at attention. As was his erection. It rose from a thick nest of black curls and pointed straight toward her, as if it had eyes only for her.

Suddenly, desperately, she wanted to know what he saw when he looked at her. "Do you think...do I seem like...a..." she whispered, "doll?"

"Oh, no. You're no doll."

What did he mean? Did he think she was ugly? Maybe he was used to a different type. She crossed her hands over her breasts.

"No! Don't hide." With one quick stride, he was in front of her, holding her face in his hands. "You're beautiful. Wonderful. But you're no doll. You're too alive. Too sensitive. Look, I can feel the pulse beating in your throat. I can feel your skin warming under my hands. You're a living, passionate being. How could

anyone think you were a doll?” He ran his thumbs over her cheeks with a touch that seemed to treasure the very shape of her face. When he bent his mouth to hers, the depth of his kiss brought tears to her eyes. His tongue searched her mouth, as if he wanted to track down whatever sadness remained in her and soothe it away.

She let herself sink into the comfort of that kiss for a long moment. But then she moved restlessly against him. Enough gentleness. She needed heat. Fire. Stepping back, she put her hands on his and drew them to her chest. As those warm palms encircled her breasts, she let out a long moan. Already stiff, her nipples hardened even more as he filled his hands with her flesh.

“That feels nice,” she heard herself say. In the past, she’d never said anything during sex. She’d become that mute doll Andrew had demanded. Never once had she asked for anything. “Can you lick my nipples, please?”

“No need to be polite, sweetie. I’ll do anything you ask.”

“Lick them, then. A lot. Don’t stop until I ask you to.”

“I wouldn’t think of it.” He tilted her face up one more time, and smiled into her eyes. Then he bent his head to the rosy nipples begging for attention. As soon as his mouth enclosed her right breast, her head fell back with a groan. Her nipples were used to being tweaked, fondled, squeezed, displayed in provocative lingerie, teased and tormented—but this was what she’d always longed for and never gotten. Long strokes of a loving tongue. Moist nibbling that sent electric jolts to her lower belly. A heated mouth tugging on those sensitive points, pulling moans from her.

And Dustin’s mouth didn’t stop. Not when her nipples had swelled to the size of rose hips. Not when she shuddered from the pleasure. Not when his erection jerked against her thigh. She wasn’t at the mercy of his mouth. No, that mouth was at her service. She could ask it to do whatever she wanted.

“Dustin,” she said in a whisper. “Go lower.”

Loving him couldn't be worse than losing him... Could it?

Rock Me

© 2010 Cherrie Lynn

Candace Andrews has had enough of pleasing others. In an act of birthday rebellion, she sets out to please herself—by walking into the tattoo parlor owned by her cousin's ex-boyfriend. All she wants is a little ink, and Brian's just the guy to give it to her.

As soon as she submits to his masterful hands, though, the forbidden attraction she's always felt for him resurfaces...and she realizes the devilishly sexy artist could give her so much more.

Sweet, innocent Candace is the last person Brian expected to see again. She's everything he's not, and her family despises him. He doesn't need the hassle, but he needs *her*, and this time no one is taking her away. Not even those who threaten to make his life a living hell.

Backed into a corner, Candace faces the worst kind of choice. Cave in to those who think Brian is a living nightmare...or hold her ground and risk it all for the one man who rocks her world.

Warning: This book contains explicit sex, naughty language, tattoos aplenty, family drama, a hot rock concert...and a bad boy hero who's pierced in all the right places.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Rock Me:

Candace closed her eyes as Brian's finger traveled gently up her nape, raising gooseflesh on her arms. "Maybe you had a point, as far as how my parents are going to react to you. Maybe it'll always be that way."

"Does it have to be?"

"How else could it ever be? There's no changing my situation."

"Sweetie, there's no way to say this without sounding condescending, but you're young. Right now this is all you can see, but trust me, this won't always be your reality. Pretty soon you'll be able to make your own way in the world no matter what they think."

"You don't know them very well, do you," she said flatly.

He cupped the back of her neck in his hand, bringing his other over to tilt her chin toward him, trapping her for the kiss she knew was coming if she didn't do something fast. But he just held her that way, stroking her cheek with his thumb, his gaze searching hers as if all the answers were inside her somewhere.

If only that could be the truth.

"I don't. But I think I have a pretty good handle on *you*. You're going to be okay."

He stared at her so intently. His eyes were a dark, turbulent ocean, and she wanted to drown in it. Suddenly she became aware of the aching fullness of her lips and the weight of her breasts pushing against her bra.

This skirt was so short, and she'd chosen it for that reason alone, but maybe it had been a huge mistake. Reaching under it *and* her black G-string would take absolutely no effort on his part. Not good, though she wanted that so, so badly, she couldn't resist rubbing her bare thighs together as his gaze continued to melt through all of her defenses.

Just when he knew she was about to go up in flames or melt right there in his truck, he leaned in. Warm lips slanted over hers as a breathless cry rushed from her mouth into his. She brought up her hands, clenching his shirt in her fists as his tongue stole past her teeth and plundered her mouth. His was the kiss she had dreamed of all her life, deep and somehow as fierce as it was gentle. It opened the gates to a flood of emotion and erotic sensation that had her almost writhing against the seat.

His hand finding her breast seemed the most natural thing in the world. Even through two frustrating layers of fabric, she could feel his heat as he palmed her and circled the tight bud of her nipple with his thumb, forcing it to pull even tauter. When he pinched it, she moaned into his mouth, clasping his wrist in her hand. But not to stop him. To make sure he didn't stop. The little jolts of pleasure/pain sent lightning zipping all through her body, striking at the juncture of her thighs. Her skimpy underwear was no barrier to the growing wetness there. She began to fear making a mess on his seats.

She pulled away from his mouth to breathe, and he attacked her throat with his lips, his heavy breathing the sexiest sound she had ever heard. He was shuddering as hard as she was. His teeth raked her throat and an involuntary "Oh" slipped out before she could stop it. It seemed to only enflame him further, and he plunged a hand under her top, pushing up the cup of her bra as he finally brought his fingers flesh-to-feverish-flesh with her aching nipple.

She had no anchor, nothing to buffer her from these insane sensations. The worry of getting caught was only a minor flicker in the back of her mind...they were in the back of the lot, it was dark, and his windows were tinted. She turned into him as much as she could, trying to bring her right leg over his, to straddle him. If he would only pull her into his lap so she could grind against him...

He got the hint. Almost before she could cry out in frustration, he pulled his hand out of her shirt and plunged it beneath her ass, yanking her hard over him as if she weighed nothing. The new position, legs splayed over him, pushed her skirt the rest of the way up over her hips. She was bare except for a scrap of fabric he could easily rip. Instead, he ran both hands down the small of her back, allowing his fingers to become entangled in the strings as he cupped both her bare cheeks in his palms.

"Jesus Christ, Candace," he groaned, leaning his forehead against her shoulder as his hands massaged, soothed, played and tantalized. It felt so good, so good...

“Oh, God.” The words were a shuddery sigh. Spread open this way, with his fingers only inches away. “Please.”

“Please what?”

She ground her pelvis into him hard, so that her clit barely rasped across the fabric of his jeans. She couldn’t get close enough. His hands continued tormenting her, squeezing her ass, tugging her panties, but making no move to address the need burning hot and wet at her center. “Touch me.”

“Where? Let me hear you say it.”

He didn’t have to ask twice, but her mouth—so squeaky clean until she’d started hanging out with him—tripped over the word she didn’t think she’d ever uttered out loud in her entire life. “My…pussy.”

Pressed cheek-to-cheek with him, she felt him smile. He ran one fingertip lightly down the crease of her bottom, reaching under her until he found the source of all her torment. His other hand wandered up to her breast again, still bare under her shirt.

She wrapped her arms tight around his neck and sobbed as two of his fingertips trailed through her wetness, finding her entrance and nestling there until she wiggled and pushed down against him. He evaded her, chuckled maddeningly. She was caught, and it was torture. Did she push back and give him easier access to her slick channel, or lean her hips into his and grind her clitoris against him?

“Hasty little thing. I’ve got to teach you to slow down and savor this.”

She didn’t want to savor it. Not now. He couldn’t understand. She’d denied herself this for so long, too long. She’d bought this skimpy freaking underwear dreaming of the day some guy would rip it off her in crazed lust. Her pent-up frustration had her running in the red, and she was about to burn down.

He had mercy on her, snuggling his fingers into her tight passage as she let her head fall back, groaning as loudly as he did. He withdrew and reentered, slicking through her, soothing the sting that was briefer and much less intense than it had been last night. She rocked her hips gently against his hand, bringing her head forward again to kiss him and struggling to open wider to his invasion of both her mouth and her pussy. He thrust his tongue between her lips in the same rhythm that his fingers plundered her body, and she nearly flew apart. “Ohhh, Brian.”

His answering sigh formed into the most beautiful words she’d ever heard. “Candace. Come home with me right now and I’ll give you everything you need, sugar. Everything you want. If it takes all night.” His fingers plunged deep, as if to show her exactly what he meant, and she cried out.

But Samantha’s earlier words were somehow filtering through her frenzied thoughts, making her want to scream. *Make him sweat.* Then Macy’s, telling her how insane she was. Her mother’s haughty, disapproving face.

Michelle’s expression softening with yearning and traveling a million miles away at the memories of him.

All at once, she was barraged with all the voices of reason in her life, every one in direct opposition to what her body was begging her to do right now.

“I can’t,” she whispered, pulling away from his lips to cram her face into his neck. Praying he would understand, but that he wouldn’t stop. Selfishly trying to claim what she couldn’t have.

“I feel how wet you are,” he murmured sinfully in her ear. “How much you need this. To hell with everyone else. Let me give you what you need.” His tongue flickered against the soft shell, and she moaned as his talented fingers continued to work their magic. But he was slowing his pace, touching her too shallowly, holding her teetering on the edge of a devastating orgasm. Trying to make her give in. And she couldn’t. “No one has to know,” he cajoled.

“Please don’t do this to me,” she cried, fearing the dam stopping up her emotions was about to burst. She couldn’t let it, couldn’t do this. And Brian froze, pulling his hands away from her as if she’d seared him.

To survive, she'll have to keep up with him all day. And all night...

Adventure Lover

© 2010 Charlene Teglia

Take Me, Lover, Book 3

Jill Martin loves adventure—as long as it comes between the covers of a book. Preferably one sporting a bare-chested hero. But to reinvent her faltering travel agency, she needs to start with reinventing herself. Her assignment: a three-day backpacking trip through the Olympic High Divide.

Soon she's forced to cope with bears, blisters, and a basic instinct to get horizontal with her vertical guide. He's as hard as the ground they sleep on and his heart's as icy as the glaciers that surround them. Not a problem, since she's only interested in his body.

Ryan Lowe knows how to read terrain, and Jill's is easy. Soft lips, soft eyes, soft curves, soft muscles. She won't last a day. Plus, if she knew what his imagination was doing with her body right now, she'd turn tail and run. Yet the city girl surprises him with her sheer grit—and sassy tongue.

When they run into geocachers using the remote location as a drug drop-off, there's only one way to escape—plunge headlong into the untracked wilderness. As she puts her life in Ryan's hands, Jill wonders if she's in danger of losing something more precious. Her heart.

Warning: All the romance and twice the heat! Contains graphic non-vanilla sex, the great outdoors, bears, bad guys, and binding commitment. May cause hot flashes if read in unventilated room.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Adventure Lover:

By the time Jill crawled into the tent, she was having serious doubts about her ability to do anything but fall into a coma.

"I think you really did kill me on that damn trail," she groaned before she collapsed on her belly, still dressed except for her boots. She could hear Ryan moving around, stowing their backpacks, zipping the tent closed. He'd smothered the campfire and cleaned up earlier, and now there was nothing but the light of a billion stars and a fat yellow moon to relieve the darkness.

"Dead people are quieter."

"Ha-ha."

His hands settled on her hips and gripped. "I'll make it up to you."

"My muscles hurt," she said, feeling pitiful. "All of them. Including ones I didn't think I had. Backpacking is hard. Why do people want to do this?"

"To get where you can't go unless you're on foot." His fingers dug in, released, then shifted to her butt. Jill started to protest, but then he did something with his thumbs, finding a spot in the center and

applying pressure. At first it raised the low-level complaints her ass had been sending her brain for the last three hours, and then the pain eased and the relief staggered her.

“That’s fantastic,” she mumbled. “More.”

Ryan was already working the muscle farther down, kneading, pressing, making it hurt more and then taking the hurt away. “Tell me if it’s too much. Massage can be really intense.”

“It’s intense,” she agreed, inhaling sharply as the pressure built. “But if you keep this up, I might be able to walk in the morning.”

“I’m hoping you’ll feel better tonight.”

“I feel better already.” Her mouth shaped a smile as she relaxed into his touch. She had no idea so many pressure points were in her butt or the backs of her thighs, but Ryan systematically searched them out, working magic. By the time he reached her calves, her body hummed with a sense of well being she wouldn’t have believed possible after the punishment she’d given it.

She’d never done anything so physically demanding before. She’d also never experienced such sheer scenic variety in a single afternoon. She’d seen waterfalls, rainforest, and alpine vistas, all in a few hours.

She’d sipped dried soup as if it was the nectar of the gods and devoured the lake fish Ryan had caught and baked in the coals of their fire, amazed at the flavor and texture. She’d never eaten fish that tasted like that at any restaurant.

When she asked Ryan why everything tasted so good, he’d looked at her as if she was slow and said, “The water. The air.” Then he’d added, “And when was the last time you were really hungry?”

Under his firm touch, she could feel a different hunger growing. When was the last time she’d been touched like this? Really touched. She couldn’t remember ever being with a man who’d explored her body so thoroughly before. She hungered for more, for the touch of his hands against her bare skin, his naked body pressed to hers, inside hers.

Ryan flexed her leg and raised her foot, massaging the heel with so much pressure she bit her lip at the sudden pain, and then exhaled relief as pain fled and pleasure took its place. His fingers dug into the ball of her foot next, then her toes, releasing every tight muscle and leaving her limp, relaxed, and intensely aware of her entire body.

When he peeled her wool socks off and rubbed the soles of her bare feet, his touch shifted from therapeutic to caressing. His hands moved up under her pant leg, tracing patterns around her ankles and lower calves, awakening nerve centers.

Jill rolled onto her back and waited as his hands slid up the outsides of her legs before finding her waistband and unfastening her jeans. She raised her pelvis while Ryan peeled the denim down below her hips, all the way down her legs, and off. His hands returned, stroking up the insides this time in a single, unhurried movement from her ankles to the juncture of her thighs.

A sharp breath escaped her at that first touch. Ryan drew his hands back and forth, rubbing lightly between her legs, the fabric of her panties the only barrier between them. He didn't move them aside or cup her pubic mound. Instead, he kept going upward. His fingertips trailed across her hipbones, teased her belly, grazed her ribcage with a touch light enough to almost tickle, but instead it made her arch up, aching for his hands on her breasts.

He cupped the undersides and rasped his thumbs over her nipples. They responded to the attention, tightening under her shirt and bra.

"I have too many clothes on," Jill said, putting her hands over his. "Help."

"I'll have to stop touching you to do that."

She bit her lip. "That's a problem. Tell you what, let's race. I do mine, you do yours, we meet back here naked."

"What do I win?"

She laughed, knowing he'd probably beat her even though she had a head start. "Anything you want."

Jill got down to skin faster than she'd ever undressed in her life, despite sore muscles and the awkwardness of doing it half-lying down in a small, enclosed space. Ryan was still faster. After she tossed her bra into a corner of the tent, his hands closed on her waist and pulled her close.

She sucked in a breath at that first contact of skin to skin, her soft body conforming to the hard contours of his. His hands gripped her butt, bringing her even closer. She could feel his engorged shaft against her belly. His obvious arousal filled her with a mix of greed and wonder. *All for me.*

"I win," he informed her as his lips grazed her temple and his fingers dug into her ass.

"Then I guess you get to claim your prize."



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