



Roxy Harte
HEART of CHANGE

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True love hides where you least suspect it.

After the truth comes out about her age, forty-something porn star Simone Sinclair is handed her walking papers, ending a career that has become more extreme sport than art form. The final straw is her long-time partner's idea to start their own international studio with a marriage proposal tossed in to sweeten the deal. After two decades of waiting for him to deliver the white picket fence, it's not exactly the offer she was expecting.

At least she doesn't need a man to answer the alarm of her biological clock. And when she shares a dance with Geri, one of her lesbian gal pals, she discovers she doesn't need a man to fulfill other fantasies, either. But Geri's not interested in touch and tease—she wants more than Simone is ready to give.

Torn between three dreams—a post-retirement career, a family, or lasting love—Simone retreats to get her head on straight, coming to one conclusion. She can't have everything. But two out of three is worse than nothing at all...

Warning: Contains an over-the-hill porn star with a lot of attitude and a biological clock that is ticking out of control, who refuses to admit she's a lesbian until her best gal pal convinces her to cross the lines of friendship. There's bondage in the back of an ambulance, sex on a public picnic table, and a steamy encounter in the back of a limo. There's also some super-steamy strap-on action that will challenge every preconceived notion you've ever had about female-female encounters.

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Heart of Change

Roxy Harte

Dedication

This book is dedicated to YOU.

My reader.

I think of you often and fondly.

I love you more than you will ever know.

Without you my words would have no life, no meaning, no ever after.

And not to be too sappy about it...

Thank you.

Chapter One

The studio is dark, with the exception of the special-effect spotlights, and today it seems the set is especially quiet. I breathe in and my breath seems to be the loudest sound in the room. I am cued to look at the camera and I do, though I look past the camera and the cameraman to the director, who seems to be barely breathing as he watches me from the edge of his seat. *It's a good scene.* I'd thought that it was, but the look on his face makes me believe it.

I close my eyes, forcing myself to forget that I am on film.

I am *Simone Sinclair*, pronounced with a French accent even though I've never been to France in my life. I do, however, have a perfect accent that I can attribute to my past life...not that I believe I am reincarnated. No, my past life refers to all things prior to meeting the man who created me, Simon Kramer, the time when I was a middle school teacher, specializing in foreign languages. Now, I am a porn star and I have succeeded in being the best in the business by believing what is happening to me is real. I don't act—I react.

Especially now that porn has become an extreme sport.

Ten years ago, the emphasis was on the storyline. Maybe an executive and a secretary or a bored housewife seducing a butcher...raw sex with lots of boob and ass shots, moaning...cum. But then there was a subtle shift toward BDSM, with bondage being the especially sought-after kink. I fought it. I liked the purity of sex without the props.

I gave up the battle of avoidance and started accepting some shoots that involved bondage of one form or another, just one here or there. I didn't like doing them, I still don't. But now, a couple of years after I caved in, almost all of my shoots involve restraints of one form or another. I'd like to say I got used to it, that I'm more relaxed now. I can find my happy place.

Yeah, that's bullshit. Maybe some do. That's fine, that's their kink. Personally, I don't like being forced to another's will...and a shrink could probably analyze it for me, but honestly it boils down to control, and I like to be the one in control. So why is it that having to delay my orgasm is the highlight of the shoot?

I don't like the way I feel when I'm restrained.

I strain against the rope that holds my arms tight against my sides. I am strapped to a backboard in unnatural angles, somebody's novel idea that seems ridiculous in my mind. So an ambulance was driven

into the studio. With the doors propped open, we did half of the shoot, but it wasn't really working because there wasn't enough room for me and the actor and multiple cameras.

I admit that the flashing lights and all of the medical equipment are exciting props as part of the scene staging. I even got to play around on the inside, sounding the sirens and pushing lots of buttons. That was fun.

And really, finding the highlight of the day, the moment that makes me laugh or smile...or cry...the one that becomes a memory, is how I've survived my life. And the truth is, and I never believed I'd say this two decades ago, I enjoy my life...I enjoy my job. *I enjoy being who I am.* Good thing too, because I've given up everything that was once important to be who I am now.

Today, I'm portraying a very hot, very sexy, very bored EMT. At one point, I was even wearing the stiff blue uniform. My co-star is still wearing his as we start to film all of the close angles outside the ambulance that will be spliced in and *hopefully* make it appear that we were in the back of the vehicle all along.

The camera pans from the frustration on my face to my breasts, which are also wrapped tightly in rope. They are bright pink from the bondage and appear swollen, painful, although they aren't necessarily either. However, the rope wrapped around them and anchored to the backboard keeps me from moving the way I want to move, the way I *need* to move.

I *really* need to move.

I was surprised the first time my body responded on camera. I didn't expect it. I thought I would be too embarrassed, too shy, or too tense, to ever orgasm. And when it happened, I didn't know what to feel—surprise, sure, but also terror at what that said about me. *Slutty. Dirty. Whore.* I cried for a day. And then I got over it.

There's much to be said about the power of a woman's scorn. It reshaped who I was.

Now, I expect to orgasm. *One of the perks of the job.* And the punk-ass kid holding the vibrator is pissing me off. I try to arch my hips up, but the ropes won't allow me to push up high enough to meet my target, the vibrating wand. That part is truthfully frustrating, but not nearly as frustrating as the whiny moan emanating from my throat. I look at the man holding the vibrating dildo inside of my vagina, making sounds for him that I fight not to make as I try to remember his name. He's the new guy. That's what I remember. I try to forget that he is younger than me by about two decades. I beg, "Please let me come!"

"You want to come?"

I whimper, mewling like an infant, or a cat in heat. "Yes, yes, yes!"

He pulls the vibrator away from my clit. "No."

Smart-ass. I wail in frustration, my hips bucking against the wood board they are tied to, my body fighting against the rope. "Please!"

"Please?" he teases.

“Please, please, please.”

He focuses the vibrator directly on my clit and my body responds, seemingly no longer interested in what my brain has to say about it. I need to be in control, but I’m not in control of *this* as the lifting spiral of my orgasm begins.

He pulls the vibrator away and the promise of release plummets unfulfilled. *You fucking ass!*

He laughs and I get angry, my body tense, spiraling out of control. My brain is not in control of my mouth as I beg, “Let me have the vibrator! Let me come! I need to come!”

He brings the vibrator just close enough to tease—or so he thinks. It is enough, just enough, for my orgasm to wrap me in bliss. My entire body trembles as the first wave hits and then I am convulsing in the rope, wave after delicious wave cresting over my bound body. My muscles strain to be free and it hurts because I am bent in an unnatural position. I feel the burn in my arms and chest, in my thighs, and I know that I am going to pay for this in pain for days, and I am going to regret doing yet another *extreme* movie, a bondage role, but right now, in this second, the burn intensifies my orgasm, lifting it a notch, and even though he has yanked the vibrator away, I don’t stop coming. I ride the wave and the film keeps rolling, catching my every gasp, curse, scream.

For my faithful fans and other viewers of this latest film, I look at the camera—eyes wide open through each orgasmic wave—letting them see *me*. This I share with my audience, even though past lovers have never gotten this close.

For this chapter of my life, my only lover is the camera. The actor is just another prop.

I feel a swat on the top of my thigh, a sting, and it takes a second for my brain to register that it was a riding crop (yeah, I know, a riding crop in the back of an ambulance...who knew?), or that the man is yelling at me, “Did I give you permission to come, slut?”

I roll my eyes. I can’t help it, because suddenly the lights and cameras are back, suddenly I am just a woman in a porn movie and this scene just became as ridiculous as all the bad porn out there. The moment is lost.

I’ll leave it to the director to try to salvage what he can, but for today, I’m done.

The kid, who is honestly in his early twenties, isn’t believable as my *top*. Who cast him anyway?

The director yells, “Cut!”

I fall back, at least as far as the ropes will let me fall, and relax against the hard board my ass is strapped to. My head stretches back to rest on the wood, even though my shoulders are still pulled too far forward to make true relaxation possible. “Could someone please get me out of this?”

“The scene isn’t finished!” my co-star whines, pouting.

One of the riggers starts the process of undoing rope. It will take him ten minutes at least and I tremble, freezing, as I wait for my freedom. “Can we get some warming towels?”

My head jerks up and I catch the gaze of the rigger, knowing he made the request. He whispers, “That was an intense scene. I don’t need you to go into shock.”

“I’m fine,” I grit out between chattering teeth. “It’s just adrenaline making me shake.”

“Yeah, that too,” he says, winking.

That too? I don’t ask, I don’t want to make the mental jump that I am getting special treatment because I am old...like a mare ready to be put out to pasture. I’ve never been paranoid about my age, not even after I hit my thirties, but now, because of Howard Stern’s on-air proclamation last week that I am the sexiest forty-something he knows, everyone knows, because word is out. I am not thirty-something. I am forty-four.

Even Jay Leno found room in his script last night for an over-the-hill-porn-star joke. I cringe to think what the *Saturday Night Live* crew will do with it. In my mind I can see the skit, gray hair, sagging boobs...and sadly, that is my real-life nightmare. Every morning that I manage not to sag too much, not to wrinkle too much, I am thankful for another day of filming, because the girls in my industry are getting younger and more beautiful every year. At least that’s what I tell myself.

It is hard for me to believe I was ever that young, beautiful or innocent, but when I watch myself in the archive videos, I know it is truth. Twenty-four to forty-four doesn’t seem that far, at least not far in my memories, but compare my photos from then to now...

The difference is striking.

I think I am more beautiful, age and wisdom has made me sexier than I ever was. At twenty-five, I knew nothing, and it shows in the depth of my eyes in those old archive videos.

As warmed towels are wrapped around my shoulders and draped over my stomach and over my knees, I relax, despite the fact that the rigger is taking too long to untie me or that the next scene is being set up. The new guy is flirting with the model for the next scene. I know she is eighteen, she has to be eighteen by law, but damn if she looks a day over twelve. The sight of her makes me want to vomit. I refuse to retire so that she can take my place. I look at her again and am disgusted by her perfectly round, fake boobs, her shaved mons decorated with a garish tattoo, and her sprayed-from-a-can tan, but then I have to ask, what is happening to me? I’ve never been so petty before. I refuse to turn into one of those bitter, reclusive, retired porn stars who hides behind closed doors, her biggest fear being photographed with wrinkles.

The jarring alarm wakes me from a dead sleep, making me jump, then moan because my *everything* hurts. The taunting *beep, beep, beep* grows annoying, but moving isn’t worth the pain until I become conscious of how badly I need to pee and moving seems my only option. I smack the alarm clock as I roll over, then grunting—okay, screaming—I stand up. “Oh shit!”

My room is dark, the walls purposely painted the deep, full-bodied blend of reds and purples that make up an expensive merlot. Equally dark are the windows fitted with blackout shades, because it isn't always night when I fall in bed to sleep. And though normally I could walk the straight line from bed to bath with my eyes closed in seconds, this morning it takes minutes. The twenty steps across the room seem like a hundred and every muscle screams each step of the way, letting me know that I pushed myself too hard yesterday.

I knew the bondage pose I was tied into was a physically challenging one, I even suspected I'd be a little sore, but this morning's pain wouldn't constitute *little* or *sore* by anyone's definition—I'm in agony. I guess the endorphin high masked more than I'd thought.

As I sit down to pee, I realize that any filming in the next few days will be impossible. I may just sit here for days...maybe for the rest of the week. The phone rings beside my bed. *Oh hell!*

I pee, letting the phone ring. The truth is I couldn't get to it before the voicemail picked up anyway, so why bother trying? When I finally decide that sitting on the toilet all day is probably not an option, I stand up, but not on the first try, or even the second. My body shouldn't hurt *this* fucking much! *It does.*

Standing in front of the mirror, I have to face facts. I'm getting old...at least for a porn star. Maybe if I'd just stuck with straight porn instead of trying to compete in the kink arena—or maybe I should just face facts and call it a wrap—permanently. Honestly, I've had a good run. Twenty years. I shake my head, hardly believing that it has been that long since I met Simon Kramer, but the lines that have formed around my eyes don't lie.

I've been in the business long enough to not hate him as much as I once did.

For a while, I hated him enough to wish he was dead, but I've gotten over that. We've had our ups and downs, but twenty years later we've covered all the ground two people can—lovers, haters, antagonists, friends—and through it all, partners. He's managed my career since the beginning, creating *a somebody* out of a no one.

The phone rings again, this time my cell, which I was smart enough to tote into the bathroom with me. Seeing it is the devil himself on my Caller ID, I answer with annoyance. "What?"

"Is that any way to say hello to your favorite man on the planet?" Simon asks.

"I don't know, baby, I worked with *the new guy* yesterday and his eleven inches may have just bumped you down a notch."

"Ouch," he says. "You hurt me, Simone."

I laugh. "What do you want Simon?"

"Not on the phone. Come to my house."

I snort. *How many times have we had this discussion in twenty years?* "I am not coming to your house!"

"Come on, babe. I need to talk to you and I want it to be a private conversation."

I sigh. *Privacy? The only reason he would want privacy is because he thinks that I am going to make a scene... Oh, hell no, as in if he thinks he's taking someone else to Tokyo...*

"Are you backing out of our deal, Simon? Because I am going to Japan. You promised."

"I don't want to back out, Sarah."

Sarah? He hasn't called me Sarah in twenty years. *What the fuck?*

Simon and I go way back. Everything I am today is a result of Simon Kramer's effect on my life. He loved me, he destroyed me, he recreated me, and in order to best haunt him and remind him every single day that he is responsible, my stage name is *Simone*. He despises my choice with a true passion and I love it that he does. It says something that I know him so well that I knew just what to do that would make him the most insane. The name change did it.

The funny thing is, I've never thought of Simon as a nice guy, or even a likeable guy—maybe a dangerous guy—but love doesn't care if you like someone first. That's the beauty and the really ugly of falling in love. It's what makes it possible to *love* one minute and *hate* the next...

I met him at my old day job, a fourth-grade teacher at Wright Middle School. It was my second year teaching and I'd learned to handle most parents, but during a requested conference with him, I was out of my league and I knew it. He reached out his hand and, against my better judgment, I shook it. He was Simon Kramer, father of the demon spawn who was making my classroom a living hell.

It's funny how remembering the moment brings with it an olfactory memory, the permanently infused stale scent of years of sweaty children and closed rooms, chalk, and today's special. Time and space seem to disappear and I am suddenly introducing myself all over again...

"Sarah Sinclair." I motioned toward a chair, a child-size chair.

I'd learned early on, get the parents uncomfortable and they will agree to anything to get out of my classroom and back into the comfort zone of their normal, everyday life. He didn't sit in the seat, like he should have. He sat on the desktop and I knew right then that his son came by his obstinacy honestly.

"I'll get right to the point, Mr. Kramer, your son, Jeremy, is becoming quite a discipline problem, and together, we are going to work out a solution."

He startled me by pushing a strand of my shoulder-length blonde hair behind my ear. "Let's discuss this over lunch. I'm starved."

His touch made me dysfunctional. I'd been having a hard enough time focusing on Jeremy's behavioral problems with his father being as devastatingly handsome as he was, but his touch, such a calculatingly seductive gesture, made my hands tremble and my knees shake. I looked into his dark brown eyes and he smiled, a dimple forming in his left cheek. It was the same look his son gave me when he admitted that he was being naughty and he would try to do better. *Dear God, Satan has a face and it really is this man.*

I fought to not say yes and run off with him to lunch because my mind had already traveled past lunch to his request to take me home. My brain envisioned him carrying me up the flight of stairs to my apartment Rhett Butler style, kissing me passionately as I fumbled to find a key before he took charge and unlocked the door for me with his far-steadier hand. My heart would be pounding as he kicked the door closed behind us and we would only get two steps in before he would rip open my shirt and push my bra above my breasts so that he could suck my nipples...

"Lunch would be highly inappropriate, Mr. Kramer."

"Please, call me Simon."

I shook my head, my nipples tingling as if he had sucked on them. "That *too* would be inappropriate."

He lifted my hand and I was embarrassed to know that he could feel me trembling. He promised, "It's just lunch."

To my further embarrassment, my stomach growled, proving that I was sorely tempted by the prospect of lunch, but I managed to pull my hand from his and say, "Lunch is out of the question. Now can we please focus on what you feel is the best course of action to get Jeremy back on track?"

"Over lunch I'm certain that we can figure out a way to make sure that Jeremy becomes a more satisfactory student."

I shook my head. Using my stern teacher voice, I said "I'm sorry, Mr. Kramer, but this matter must be resolved now or I'm afraid I will have to take this to the next level." I'd hoped my threat would make him realize the seriousness of why I had called him to meet with me.

His eyes sparkled with the challenge. I almost believed that he would force my hand and I would have to schedule a meeting with the principal present, but then he promised, "I'll speak with him. I'm certain you will see a measure of improvement over the next few days."

"Mr. Kramer, I honestly wish it could be that easy."

"It is," he promised. "Life is as easy or as hard as you choose to make it. So, stop making it so hard. Now let's talk about when you will allow me to feed you."

Despite his insanely good looks, I wanted to scream. Walking to the door, I gave him the distinct signal that our meeting was over. "I'm teaching. The students will be back in the classroom in ten minutes, so I'm afraid this was all I had time for."

He followed me, challenging, "Your only excuse to my adding a little decadent corruption to your life is the lack of time?" His eyes twinkled merrily and I saw that he was enjoying teasing me.

"I'm your son's teacher. It's against school policy—"

He stopped my words with a touch of his fingertips to my lips, "Haven't you ever broken a rule?"

I gasped, shocked by his total disregard for the situation...and also because I tingled all the way to my toes from just that one touch. I pushed through the desire pooling low in my belly. "I'm beginning to see why I'm having a problem with your son."

“I told you, no more Jeremy problems after today.” His hand rubbed down my arm inappropriately, stopping at my hand. It was only a fleeting thought that I should jerk my hand from his, but that would have required motion and my brain functioning at full capacity, which it wasn’t. I couldn’t even unlock my eyes from his gaze, and for that moment at least, I was trapped in the sensual desire I saw in the depth of his.

Leaning forward, he whispered, “Let me corrupt you a little, Sarah,” and I almost came in my panties. Yes, he was that handsome and he had that much magnetism. Intrigued, I asked, “Is having dinner with you tantamount to corruption?”

“You implied as much.”

Remembering school policy and how obscenely inappropriate our closeness could be regarded, I stepped back just as the children, flushed and excited from their lunch break, rushed through the door. He laughed. “I’ll pick you up at four.”

“Be here at two.” He interrupts the memory, being as assumptive as he ever was before. “It’s important.”

I roll my eyes, but I’ve already decided to meet him because I’m curious. “Not today. I’m not feeling well. Tomorrow.”

“Should I be worried?” he asks, sounding concerned.

I grit my teeth, hobbling back to bed, trying to not scream with each painful step. “Nothing a day in bed won’t cure. No worries.”

Chapter Two

A day later and I'm barely less sore, but I force myself into a light blue, very clingy, very sexy, *he-will-want-me-even-though-he-can't-have-me* latex minidress and matching four-inch heels.

Sitting across from him in his posh living room, the memories flood back and I remember why it is that I hate him so much. I try to focus on the room, not the man, and definitely not the memories...

He's redecorated since the first time I sat here, or maybe it was the last girlfriend who redecorated. Julia? Or was it Cleo? He's had so many that I've lost track, all of them aspiring to be his next famous face—all of them aspiring to be me. I decide I liked the way his living room was the very first time I was here. Then it was chic, very modern, and exceedingly masculine. Black Italian leather juxtaposed against stark white walls and shiny chrome. The decorating was severe and the eye was immediately led to the wall bank of windows overlooking Lake Washington. Unlike the last time I was here, when the view was a white wonderland, this time of year everything is green, except for the wide bank of bright yellow wildflowers that flow down the embankment at the edge of Simon's property.

Regardless of the season, the view is never a disappointment.

Whoever last decorated tried their best to hide the view, by making it seem intrusive. Nature can't compete with gaudy. Of course the view is still there, but softened, almost to the point of being nonexistent, by the many layers of ornate curtains that hang from a wide, gilded, gold rod with extravagant finials at the ends, in the shape of...angels? My head tilts, trying to make my mind believe what my eyes have already confirmed. Bright gold, naked cherubs. A quick look around the room confirms that it is a theme and the cherubs are peeking at me from everywhere, the mantle, above doors, carved in the frames of mirrors. *Someone did this on purpose?*

It's been years since I've been here, but not nearly long enough to forget the pain of the day he broke my heart.

He was making love to me...my bare breasts pressed against the cool, solid glass of the very window I'm looking through now. His latex-wrapped dick slid in and out of me, making me writhe, and he seemed to know exactly when I was getting close to orgasm, because he would change the rhythm—harder, deeper, faster, and then slow, shallow strokes—I was losing my mind. My hands slapped into the glass high above my head as I reached for anything to hold on to, but there was only the window and it was icy cold beneath my hands.

"Oh God, please, please, please."

“Please?” He laughed, teasing, “Please what?”

“Oh!” I screamed, trying to buck into him, trying to get what I wanted. “Harder! Harder.”

“Tell me, Sarah.” I knew he wanted me to say *fuck me harder* but I couldn’t say *those* words.

I danced around the edge of the vortex, my orgasm touchable, but not attainable. His stroke deepened, bumping hard against my cervix. I screamed, feeling so close, so fucking close. Reaching for it...reaching...

His pace slowed again as he fucked me with shallow thrusts, pulling almost completely out of me each time.

“Oh please...please, please, please...I want to come!”

His pace quickened.

Thrust, thrust, thrust.

Pleasure building...

I entered the swirling vortex, his demands making my body spiral higher and higher. I closed my eyes, riding the orgasm that swept over my body...wave after wave...it seemed like I could orgasm forever.

I thought I was falling in love with him. But he was also the man who taught me that great sex, great orgasms, did not equate to love. I was barely coming down from the high of that orgasm when he burst my fairytale-of-true-love bubble and hit me square between the eyes with a poisonous dose of reality, killing my illusion of love.

“Beautiful, but you really need to get over saying the word fuck. Talk dirty to me, sweetheart,” he whispered. I turned in his arms, marveling at how well we fit together as I laid my head on his bare chest. He whispered into my hair, “Let me make you famous.”

“What?” I asked, perplexed, backing away to look into his face. He’d alluded all evening to an important proposal...I assumed he was going to ask me to marry him, because we’d dated for months and our relationship, at least in my eyes, had pointed in that direction.

“Come on, Sarah, you know who I am, you know what I do.” He kissed my collarbone before looking into my eyes. “Don’t act so naïve. Let me make you famous.”

I pushed away from him. “Are you joking?”

He caught my hand to pull me back into his arms. “I wouldn’t joke about this. I need a new face, a new body, and nothing...no one...compares to you. Let me make you wealthy.”

I gasped. “I can’t destroy my career just to give you a jolly. And besides, what would Jeremy think?”

He looked at me with a perplexed expression. “This isn’t about giving me a jolly and this has nothing to do with my son. I think that you are the one. You will bring new meaning, new life to porn...and in doing so, you stand to make a handsome sum of money.”

“Oh my God, this has always been about a job offer!” I accused, understanding slowly dawning. I jerked my chin up with a sharp laugh that held no humor. “I thought you were enjoying my company because I was different than the women you surround yourself with at work. I thought you were falling in love with me.”

He reached for me, but I turned and ran to his bedroom. He followed me. “I do enjoy your company. I just want you to benefit from a better life.”

“I was dreaming of being your son’s mother!” I sobbed, grabbing my dress from the floor and pulling it over my head. “I thought you were planning to make me your wife.”

“My son has me, he doesn’t need a mother, and a wife is the last thing I want.”

Shoving my feet into my boots, I grabbed my coat and my bag. “All you need is a fresh face to turn into your newest *porn star*?” I spit the words.

He grabbed at my arm as I flew past him, making my escape to the front door. I was halfway to my car as he called out, “Don’t leave like this, Sarah.”

He didn’t understand the depth of my anger at the time.

I meet his gaze, thinking that maybe he still doesn’t. He looks at me inquisitively, “What are you thinking?”

“You need an interior decorator.” I clear my throat, swallowing back long-dead emotion as I gesture around the lavishly done room. “This really doesn’t suit your personality.”

He laughs. “Because you know my personality so well?”

I shake my head, “No, I guess I don’t. Not really.” *But once, I thought I knew you. I fell in love with you. And you fell in love with me.* Maybe I shouldn’t be so cocksure that he did love me, but I’m fairly certain he did, because why else would we still be doing this insane dance after all these years...if he really did never love me?

“Why am I here?” I ask, not amused at all now that I am here, now that I’m remembering. I thought I was over him, but sitting this close, the hurt starts all over again.

“Tell me how you would redecorate this room.”

I sigh heavily, looking at him closer than I’ve looked at him in months, and decide he is looking every one of his fifty-seven years, the gray at his temples doing him no justice, and the pinched lines between his brows deeper than before. “Why am I here, Simon?”

“Are you still doing yoga? Still vegan?” he asks, his lips smirking. “Still celibate?”

“I’m hardly celibate, as you well know,” I answer saucily. “Now, tell me what this is about, because it’s my day off and I could be sleeping.”

He rolls his eyes. “Last I heard, I’m paying you for this consultation. So relax, *enjoy my company*.”

I bite my tongue as the memory of me being pressed against his window wall and being fucked senseless replays through my mind.

"I've been thinking about changing my lifestyle. I need to start living healthier and one of the cameramen told me I should ask you because you've gone on quite the health kick, organic food, no cigarettes, no drugs, and you don't have sex after hours. Is that true?"

I blink.

I'm not sure whether I'm shocked, offended, or amused.

"I had no idea that my life...my lifestyle was such an interesting topic on set." I look past him, through the window, trying not to let it show that his knowledge of my private life embarrasses me.

I stand, ready to leave. "You should have called a nutritionist. I'm just the *porn star* who makes you lots of money. So, if this is all you've got, Simon, I really have better things to do with my time. And by the way, the next time you bring a woman here, make sure she's an interior decorator before you fuck her."

I walk to his front door and my hand is on the handle when he says, "I need you to do something."

I turn to look at him, arms crossed, brow lifted, waiting. He doesn't beat around the bush. "Announce your retirement."

"What?"

"Baby, you're not getting any younger," he tells me softly, walking toward me.

"Am I still making you a bloody fortune?" I demand.

"That isn't the point." His eyes look sad. "It's over, Simone. You've had a good run."

Turning back toward the door, I fight to work the handle. I am shaking so hard, I can't make it turn. *How dare he.*

"Please, Simone, hear me out." He touches my shoulder gently to make me look at him and my fists ball in reaction. I have to get away from him before I slug him.

I turn around slowly.

He lifts his hand, not touching me, though it seems he might put his hand on my shoulder, or stroke my face. "I love you, baby."

He thinks he can take the sting out of telling me I'm old by saying he loves me? I already knew he loved me. And it suddenly doesn't matter that he's said the words I've waited two decades to hear. I shake my head, backing away from him. "Screw you if you think I'm retiring!"

"I wish you had a choice, sweetheart. This is a corporate decision. I'm afraid you can leave the easy way. Or the hard way."

I gasp, spin on my heel, and manage the door handle. I swing open the door and throw myself through it, slamming it hard behind me. Thankfully, he doesn't follow. We've had enough arguments in our past for him to know that coming after me is a very bad idea. I fall back into the door, staggered, gasping, trying to right my world that has suddenly tilted. I knew *I* was worried about aging, but I had no idea that anyone else was really paying attention.

I manage to get myself peeled off the door and walk to my car, although how I do it wobbling and shaking on four-inch heels is beyond me, except that I am a professional.

I can pull it out when I have to. Nerves of steel.

Tough, hard-core. I know who I am and I can live with that.

I climb behind the wheel of my bright yellow Lotus Elise, but I don't start my engine. Instead, I sob like it is the end of the world...because I honestly believe it is.

Chapter Three

The last few hours seem like a nightmare and I keep waiting to wake up, but I know I'm not going to. When I first watched the parodies of *the Old Porn Star*, I was mad, but after I compulsively watched them over and over again on YouTube, I laughed. The jokes were funny...and they are only funny because I do not look old. Maybe it's good genetics, because I never have looked my age.

Sure, I obsess. I stare in the mirror for hours, waiting for those first lines to appear, I compare naked photos of myself from ten years ago, five, looking for the slightest sag, the most minimal cellulite, but I honestly thought it was only my obsession...

Twenty years ago, if anyone had told me that I would leave teaching to become a porn star, I would have laughed my ass off, but then I went two weeks without seeing Simon. I missed him. No, I needed him. Like a narcotic, I was addicted to him. I saw no rhyme or reason, I only saw a way of making him *see* me.

I was so convinced that he loved me. I was so convinced that he would go into a jealous rage seeing me having sex with other men that he would propose on the spot.

I was so naïve.

By the time I realized that he was never going to propose, no matter how devastatingly provocative I was, it was too late. I was in. I started identifying more closely with who I was as Simone Sinclair than I had ever identified with sweet little Sarah. When I looked in the mirror, Sarah was long gone...and I didn't want her to come back.

I'll probably go to hell for saying this, but I love being a porn star.

And as much as I hate Simon Kramer tonight for trying to destroy my life by taking away my career, I am still thankful for him...because I owe who I am to him.

The girls are waiting by the time I finally arrive at O'Leary's Irish Pub, centered in Seattle's art district. It's after nine and I'm more than an hour late, but I couldn't very well go to the bar dressed the way I was when I left Simon's, or still sobbing my eyes out. So I went home and cried some more before I was finally able to shower and change into jeans, a tank, and an oversized sweatshirt. I'm dressed to blend in, because I rarely do, and on Friday nights, I just enjoy being one of the girls. It's also why I left the yellow Lotus at home, bright, sleek, and fast doesn't blend, but my staid, dark blue Subaru Wagon does.

Usually I find them sitting at one of the secluded booths tucked into a cozy nook, but tonight they are at a high table close to the dark wood bar and surrounded by the masses. Always busy on a Friday night, the bar tonight seems especially crazed, due in part to the booking of the popular Irish rock band playing

onstage. The loud music hits me in a wave, the drums seeming to jump in my chest. I fight not to hyperventilate, which has nothing to do with the noise and everything to do with still being emotional. To hide my puffy eyes, I plan to sit in the shadows, which shouldn't be hard because O'Leary's is dark, soft lighting dimmed further as it is absorbed by the wall's dark paneling, even the ceiling and floors are stained wood. It feels like we really could be standing in a quaint, out-of-the-way pub somewhere in Ireland, except for the stage and the blinding spotlights that swirl over it. But the girls are on the far side of the club, far away from the stage, and that suits me fine.

I stop by the bar long enough to grab a double of Jameson and down it before the girls see me. When I look at the girls, they draw me over like a flaming beacon of hope.

They are strong.

Stronger than I ever will be, but I keep hoping their strength will rub off.

We've met here every Friday night for six years, ever since I pulled up a chair and introduced myself. I was tired of men and even more tired of Friday nights home alone. I'd gone to the bar to get some air and found myself watching the three of them, except that night there were five women at the table, the other two, as I would learn later, were not regulars, but merely the love interests of the moment. I was intrigued by them because, although they each seemed very masculine, they also seemed like the most beautiful women I'd seen in a very long time. They stood out from the crowd, obviously lesbians, but strikingly beautiful, even though only one of them wore makeup. I thought at the time it was the absence of makeup, the strength of their self-confidence that made them outshine every other woman in the room. But it was their ease in each other's company that was the true attraction that lured me to their table to introduce myself.

In the industry, the competition is so fierce that there has never been room for friendship, and I desperately missed talking with other women.

Geri, Tina, and Meg welcomed me into their group, even though I was upfront about not being a lesbian and totally honest about my career. I've never really asked them why they accepted my offer of friendship, I'm just thankful they did.

Geri Martin is the toughest of the three, very opinionated, loud and usually in the highest spirits. She's a hard worker and, from what I know about her, very successful as the owner of an eco-friendly travel agency, Gaia Eco-tours. She puts her soul into her job and much of her week is spent in quality control—hiking, camping, kayaking, rock-climbing and literally anything else that her firm offers. She is tall, lean, and athletic, keeping her blonde hair very short, guy short, almost military short, except for the very front, which is longer and always looks windblown. I usually try to stay out of her way because she tends to give me the hardest time about what I do. She always lets me know how much my job repulses her.

Tina Nightingale is the smallest and quietest of the group, but also the one I most identify with.

She keeps her dark brown, almost black hair pulled into a severe ponytail and has a reserved quality that makes her seem fairly unapproachable; however, I feel like I understand her because I was once so much like her. But that may only be because she teaches at the middle school a few blocks away and absolutely nothing to do with our being anything alike.

Meg Stoker is unique, with bright red hair and a flair for the dramatic. She wears funky hats and sports purple eyeglasses. She stands out and I think it is because she has an innate need to be noticed. Short, round, and always smiling, her enthusiasm for life is utterly contagious. She is the local artist responsible for several sculptures around town—bare breasts seem to be a recurring theme—and is better known as the eccentric who starts petitions for anything and everything on a whim. Some good, like when she saved an endangered coastal area from developers or when she demanded a better selection of independent and foreign films at the local theater, some strange, like the one she currently has going around town asking that the historic downtown thoroughfare be closed to motor vehicles. Her dream is to make the three-block length completely pedestrian and bicycle-friendly. I guess it has worked in other places. I try to stay uninvolved—okay, I signed the damn thing, but only because she is so damn cute when she’s trying for persuasive.

I love them all like sisters...

The music is so loud, we scream greetings over it. I see a bottle of Jameson already holds down the center of the table.

“Here’s to strong women and stronger whiskey!” Geri is making a toast as I join the table and another shot of whiskey is poured for me. We drink, we laugh, and more shots are poured.

Meg kisses my cheek as I sit down. “You work too late, beautiful.” She is wearing new glasses, bright red, and a new hairstyle, which is shorter, softer and looks more windblown than her normal shoulder-length bob. The combination makes her look a decade younger.

“You look amazing!” I kiss her cheek back. “I wish I could say I was working. That would have definitely been preferable.”

Her eyebrow goes up at my cryptic answer and I can’t bear to go into details, so instead I assure her, “No worries, everything’s fine, just another *Simon moment*.” The group as a whole rolls their eyes, all well-versed in Simon drama.

Tina elbows me and nods toward the bar. My entrance has caused a surge in rubbernecking. Geri’s reaction is typical as she gripes, “You’d think they’d never seen a woman before.”

“I don’t get it.” I defend myself, pointing at my hair, pulled into a tight ponytail.

Sure, I have in my earrings, three studs and two hoops per ear, and my silver bracelets, dozens on each arm, though they are currently hidden by my jacket, as is my belly button ring. I’m wearing no makeup because the girls still think I encourage the attention—even after all these years—and maybe sometimes I do, just because I like to remember what it feels like to flirt. Just to convince myself that I still

have it. Even though I wouldn't date any of them. Not because they're men, I like men, I've even been known to lust after a few, I just don't date. Relationships terrify me and I don't need a shrink to tell me that Simon did a royal number on my head. He did. I'm fully aware of the fact. I'm also aware of how sick I am to still want him as badly as I do. It goes through my head that he finally admitted that he loved me...but then as quickly I remember that he said those words to buffer his request and I get pissed off all over again. I growl. "Errgh! Isn't it obvious I'm not trying for attention?"

They all laugh at me, Geri the hardest, hugging me as I sit on the tall stool beside her, "Baby, you walk in here exuding pheromones from every pore and you expect them to not notice? You're crazy!"

"Pheromones, huh?" My cell phone vibrates and I see that it is Simon. *Didn't I make myself clear when I peeled out of his driveway?* My heart speeds up and my palm itches to answer, even though I'm pissed as hell. My mind is pissed. My body has been horny since I sat down on his damn couch and looked at his damn window and remembered how well we fuck together. I hate myself for wanting him.

The boys at the bar start making noise, trying to draw attention and, as I shove my unanswered phone back into my hip pocket, I realize that I'm in enough of a mood to give it to them. Why men think loud and obnoxious equates to sexy is beyond me. I unzip my gray hoodie and pull it off, revealing that I am wearing a tiny white tank with no bra underneath. "I'll take care of the appetizer order."

"No, Simone." Geri puts a restraining hand on my arm. I jerk out of her grip, daring her with my eyes to try to stop me. Our gazes catch, we both bristle.

"Let her be." Tina leans a shoulder in close to Geri, whispering as she does loudly enough for us both to hear, "Can't you tell she needs to blow off some steam?"

I lift my eyebrow in a singular challenge at Geri before turning on them both to saunter over to the bar, squeezing between the two loudest men. I give the bartender our table number and appetizer order, taking the pint of O'Hara's Irish Red she hands me with a wink, knowing she means for this one to be on the house. "Thanks, Sandy."

I wink at her with a smirk. The beer seems a fair exchange for the scene we both know is coming, since I go way back with Sandy. Even though she knew me in the days I would never have started anything. That was her job then—head cheerleader at Pasadena High, chief troublemaker, center of the limelight. I was the one pushed as close to the wall, hiding as far in the shadows as I could get, though by watching, I knew how a girl like Sandy handled herself. I guess we've just changed roles in the last few decades. Now I'm in the limelight, scene-stealer, sometimes troublemaker. I smile at the flash of memory, from the time before I was ever known as Simone.

The girl I was then wasn't *bold*. Or sexy. And I've spent twenty years perfecting both.

Whipping the elastic tie from my ponytail, I let my hair fall around my shoulders, shaking it free. I lean back against the bar, lift the frosted mug to my lips and drop my head back, stretching my neck out as

I chug. Right on cue, the loudest of the obnoxious boys puts his hand on my shoulder. “Well, *hello* beautiful.”

I turn to face him, running the mouth of the cool glass along my bottom lip, before asking seductively, “Hello, yourself. What’s your name?”

“They call me Jim.”

“Oh they do, *do they?*” I ask, eyes widening for effect. On the inside, my femme fatale is doing a happy dance. I want him to want me. I want him to want me so bad his balls ache from the wanting...right up until the moment I smack down his ego with rejection. I almost feel sorry for him. I’ve spent twenty years perfecting sexy and, noting that he is probably all of twenty-five, know his hormone-ruled mind doesn’t stand a chance. Such a baby face and a body that five years ago may have been sculpted of stone but has recently gone soft, making him appear even younger, despite his two-day growth of stubble.

He nods, leaning in close enough to gag me on his heavy, cheap cologne. He reaches up to stroke my hair and I grab his testicles through his jeans, squeezing hard, too hard for him to jerk free. “Did *they* ever tell you that it was impolite to touch a girl without asking permission? ’Cause I bust balls bigger than yours every day and I really don’t like being touched without being asked. Call it my pet peeve.”

Jim starts stuttering and fidgeting around, but getting out of my grip isn’t going to be easy. The man beside him starts laughing, “I told you man, don’t be messing with those *lesbos*! This’ll teach you.”

“Oh, I don’t swing that way,” I correct, winking.

The man standing behind Jim points at me, mouth gaping, “Oh my God!” He hits the man identified as Jim on the back of his head. “Do you know who she is?”

He shakes his head, still looking down at his crotch, no doubt wondering how he is going to get free from the vice-grip my fingers have on his balls.

“You idiot. She’s that famous...” he stumbles over the words and I supply, “Porn star?”

The friend nods emphatically. “You know, she did that *thing* last summer.”

Jim looks at him as if he doesn’t know what his friend is talking about. “What the fuck are you talking about, Luke?”

The man now identified as Luke looks embarrassed, trying to jog Jim’s memory. I supply one, “Did you see the video that was made to commemorate the world’s longest daisy chain?”

Jim’s eyes brighten.

Bingo.

He seems to forget that I could easily destroy any chance he ever had of procreating when he blurts, “Holy shit! You don’t say! You’re that bitch who fucked—” He is interrupted by Luke smacking him on the back of his head hard enough to make him grunt. “Yeah, that, fool. Don’t go all crude now. Simone hangs with famous people, you know, rock stars and shit. Just last week she was clubbing in Aspen with

Tommy Lee. You don't touch a woman like that! And you don't talk about her like she's yesterday's trash. Now, you say you're sorry!"

"Sorry." He does as he's told, looking sheepish, and I wonder if he is even twenty-five. "I don't suppose I could get your autograph?"

"No." I shake my head, admonishing him, "Now why don't you boys go find some other bar to be loud and obnoxious in?"

I release his balls and give both him and Luke a shove toward the door before taking my beer. I watch to make sure they've taken my advice before going back to the table. I arrive at the same time as the appetizers and find myself in the middle of a debate about how the porn industry contributes to the victimization of women. I pull my hoodie back on, pushing my arms into the sleeves and pulling the hood over my hair, trying once again to hide the fact that I am a girl, or sexy.

Thankfully, the food quiets the table for the length of time it takes for the first round of bangers with chips and tortillas with spinach dip to disappear. My reprieve ends as I grab the last handful of golden fried chips.

"You totally disgust me." Geri leans across the table, pointing a finger at me from the hand-wrap she has around her beer. "Don't get me wrong, I love you, but what you do...it's just gross." She smiles and I know she is trying to goad me into a fight, even if it is friendly verbal sparring. The problem is that the more Geri drinks, the more vocal she gets, and I do not need the entire bar crowd hearing us fight over the fact that I am a porn star.

"You know, Geri, I won't be offended because once, I was just like you, having all manner of puritanical prejudices trapped inside my head. I'm not going to apologize for who I am or what I do." I'm smiling, laughing really, because the difference between her and me is really as close as one person stepping in and changing your life...by changing how you think. For me, it was Simon.

I look at Geri, seeing her as a beautiful woman, even though every man at the bar would disagree with that statement. Sure, she's butch, and brawn, but she glows with an inner beauty that is spellbinding. I pull my eyes from her, trying to keep it from being obvious that I'm staring at her. Of all the girls at the table, I know her least, and I hate that, but there has always been a barrier between what could be a better friendship. I don't try to overanalyze it.

It would be simple if it was just my profession and, though I'm not sure when my job started disturbing her so much, I know that the tension was there before her irritation at what I do for a living. That part has only recently gotten worse, seeming to make the divide between us worse. I don't back down, though, despite my desire to be better friends. "I'm. A. Porn star. Geri. Deal with it."

Angry, she sputters, though the verbal sparring has only just begun. I can go all day. Nothing she can say will be anything I haven't already heard. No judgment will be too harsh, because I've already judged myself harder than anyone possibly could.

“Did you just call me puritanical?”

“Prejudiced is what I heard,” Tina goads her, winking at me.

“Puritanically prejudiced.” I correct them both, lifting my whiskey. “Here’s to prejudices!”

She gasps and then starts laughing. She pulls me into a tight hug. “I hate what those men do to you!”

“You just wish you were the one doing—” I stop myself mid-jest, seeing her eyes go wide, and realize that I have both shocked and hurt her with my words. I regret that last shot of whiskey, the one that was one too many, the one that gave me the insight that she might just have a crush on me. Thankfully, she recovers quickly. Leaning in close to me, she whispers into my ear, her voice seeming like liquid sex, her breath warm on my cheek, sending a teasing chill down my spine. “Someday, beautiful, I may just try to change your stripes.”

We make brief eye contact before she turns to the others and lifts her glass in a toast. “To someday.”

For a moment, I’m dazed, watching her, wondering if she’s pushed our friendly flirting up a notch. My heart pounds a little faster at the thought, but I don’t dwell on it because everyone is lifting their glasses and we all toast and drink. Tina immediately pours us another round.

I lift my glass. “We are strong women who won’t apologize for who we are!” It is our rallying cry because we are a diverse group, my girls and I, and there are so many reasons for us to all despise each other, but we don’t focus on our differences, we focus on our similarities. It’s how we’ve remained friends for six years. Two glasses join mine. “No apologies!”

We all look expectantly at Geri and reluctantly she lifts her glass. “Strong women.”

I make a face at Geri and mouth, “I love you.” I couldn’t be so open if I ever thought for a second that she really meant what she’d said, about wanting to change my stripes. She was just playing, teasing...

And if it’s a little crush, that’s okay—she’ll get over a little crush.

But then, out of the clear blue, she asks me a question she’s never asked me, actually none of the girls have ever asked me. “Are you seeing someone?”

“S-sorry?” My heart skips a beat or maybe two...

Suddenly, all three of them are looking at me.

“You know, dating?” she says. “Are you dating anyone? You never bring anyone with you on Friday night.”

It’s true, I never have, although often Meg or Tina will bring along someone new. Geri, I remember, used to have a friend who came with her the first few years I sat with them. It had seemed serious, but no one ever mentioned it when she’d stopped showing up. I bite my lip before answering, “I don’t date.”

“Ever?” Meg demands, looking at me over her glasses. She sounds appalled, perhaps even more shocked than when I first told her what I did for a living.

I smile, asking, “Is that so surprising? That I don’t date?”

Geri narrows her gaze, accusing, “There’s that *man*...you still see him.”

“Simon?” I say, chuckling. “Actually, no, I haven’t seen him in years...intimately that is... and besides, I don’t think you could actually ever call what has happened between us *dating*.”

All three of them stare at me, their doubt obvious on their faces.

“What about that rock star?” Meg demands. “The one with all of the tattoos.”

Now that makes me laugh because I love Tommy like a brother and we tend to get a little crazy together when we’re in the same town. Like the Fourth of July bash in Aspen—it was crazy and, as such, the paparazzi had a field day. And we both pandered a little, him licking the top of my breasts and me none too discreetly trying to find out if the rumors about his girth and length were true. But it was just fun and games. Really. “You honestly read the tabloids? And believe them?”

She shrugs unabashedly.

“No,” I say, still laughing. I shake my head, letting my hair fall forward, hiding my blush, although I’m not sure why I’m so embarrassed by the fact that I’m not dating Tommy Lee or any of the other celebrities I often socialize with.

Geri narrows her eyes. “Is it because your profession gets in the way of real relationships? It’s just hard to find someone willing to overlook that you do porn?”

Wow. That was harsh. I feel a need to assure her that I get asked out, I get asked out plenty, and I’m just seriously not interested. “Guys ask, but dating is such a bother, isn’t it? I mean, there are only two real reasons to date—you’re either looking for a fuck or you’re looking for a friend. And, not to be rude, but I clearly get enough sex on the job and I have the three of you for companionship. So, I’m good.”

“What about love?” Tina asks.

“Love?” I consider it for a second before asking, “Seriously?”

They all look at me intently, waiting for my answer. I shrug and take a long swallow of beer. “Yeah. *That*. Highly overrated I think, especially in the context of my life.” I roll my eyes. “This ain’t no fairytale, ’cause you three would make horrible fairy godmothers.”

My cell phone vibrates again. I hit ignore.

“I’d be a good fairy godmother,” Meg announces.

“You wanted to fix her up with Sheila!” Tina accuses, making Geri choke on her beer. Geri demands, “Sheila? You wanted to fix her up with Sheila?”

Sheila! That was the name of the woman Geri used to date.

I find I am suddenly interested, which is strange because I never pay attention to any of the women who have come and gone over the years. But Sheila was different. A mental picture immediately forms in my head of the perky brunette who wore her hair in a short, messy, spiky style. I remember she always rode separate from Geri, always arrived on her Harley, and always seemed like she had a chip on her shoulder the entire evening...and if memory serves...that chip was because of me. “Sheila hated me!”

“Oh, no, Sheila had it bad for you!” Meg whispers and Geri narrows her eyes at Meg, saying loudly, “Sheila did not have a hard-on for Simone! She was trying to make a point.”

“Yeah,” I say. “That she hated me!”

“That wasn’t it,” Geri whispers, shaking her head. “That wasn’t it at all.”

I am suddenly very curious, because I do remember the last Friday night that Sheila was actually here, because I remember that it got ugly, really ugly between Geri and Sheila—Sheila accused Geri of being in love with someone else—then Sheila never came back.

My cell phone vibrates again and I scream into the mouthpiece without putting the phone to my ear, “Would you leave me the fuck alone?” I hang up on him without even having heard his voice.

“Simon?” Geri asks, catching my gaze. I nod in answer, hoping I’m hiding all emotion. I am shocked by the expression that crosses her face, even though I’ve always known that she holds him with fairly high distaste. She doesn’t even try to hide her feelings. “Anything I can do?”

“Buy another round?”

“Sure thing, beautiful.” She yells the order to Sandy, who announces, “Already on it!” and starts to pull drafts. Geri squeezes my thigh under the table and asks softly, “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

I shake my head, gratefully grabbing one of the shots off the tray when they arrive at our table with the beer. Then I methodically down each of the three shots intended for the rest of them.

“Are you okay?” Meg asks.

“I’m fine.” I say, my face crumbling and it’s only then that I realize how fine I’m really not. I shake my head, refusing to say the words out loud. Simon’s request was too unreasonable...

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Tina says. “If you don’t want to...but it might help to tell us about it.”

I tilt my head, giving Tina a hard, challenging stare. “You really want to hear this? Because it involves work...you know...the place I have sex with men on camera—”

I feel the shuffle of feet under the table as either Meg or Geri kicks her under the table.

I wink at Tina, saying harshly, “I didn’t think so.”

I don’t want to think about what retirement would mean. Or that I have been asked to retire because I am suddenly too old to be considered sexy. I stand, shaking my shoulders and jiggling my breasts, demanding, “Somebody dance with me!”

Chapter Four

The girls glance around the table at each other, making it painfully obvious that I have made them uncomfortable. *Damn it, do I really care what they think?*

“Fine. Don’t dance with me. I’ll dance by myself.” I stalk away from the table, realizing too late that the pub is too crowded for dancing, except at the very edge of the stage and that’s where I head. I throw myself into the rhythm, my body moving the way it wants to. I am still hidden beneath my hood, but that doesn’t keep the members of the band from noticing me. I blow them kisses.

The lead singer calls out my name and holds out his hand to me mid-song. What can I say? I never know where I’ll bump into a fan...but then, maybe it just means that I’m at O’Leary’s *a lot*.

Three men step away from their partners long enough to lift me onto the stage. I do a quick bump and grind with the lead singer before stepping off to the side to give him room to do his thing. The stage lights are hot and blinding, but I don’t care. I want to move, I want to dance...I want to feel young and sexy. I slide off my hoodie, letting it hit the stage, I kick it aside and dance. I toss my head and lift my arms high. Looking up at my hands, I watch my fingers dance against the bright rays of light, liking the way my silver bracelets glint with sparkly flashes when the spotlights hit the metal. I undulate belly and hips...dancing...dance. Dance!

I am so drunk.

A man I’ve never met before jumps onto the stage and starts dancing in front of me, shadowing my moves. I don’t care. I don’t encourage him. I just dance, feeling the pound of bass in my chest and the swirl of my brain as the shots take hold. The man grabs me, pulling me close as his body pumps against my thigh. His erection is obvious and I’m annoyed by him.

“Stop!” I pull away, jumping off the low stage. I don’t consider that he’ll follow me, but then he’s right behind me, pulling me against him.

I rub my forehead, suddenly too warm and too dizzy. He doesn’t release me, instead he laughs and gyrates against my thigh. “Please—”

“I think the lady asked you to stop.” Geri is suddenly there, separating the man’s hold on me with a mean grip on his ear. I think for a moment that it will come to blows, but then he realizes that Geri is a girl and he backs away. “Fucking bitch.”

Geri puts her hand on my elbow, asking softly, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

She turns to walk away, but I grab her shoulder, as much to stop her leaving as to steady myself. It takes her a long second to face me. I don't have to wonder what she sees. Me. A mess. Man-magnet. Porn star. I know I disgust her, but she cared enough to rescue me...

"Did you come over to dance with me?" I ask, swaying on my feet but squaring my chin in challenge. I'm vaguely aware that my words slur. "I want to dance!" I shake my booty and jiggle my breasts in demonstration, almost falling over in the process. She pulls me closer, holding me tight so that I won't fall down.

I hear her whisper my name into my hair and it has a pained sound to it.

I pull back to gaze into her eyes, but her face swims in front of me. It seems so important that she not walk away.

"Dance with me? Please?"

"One dance." She looks over her shoulder at the playing band and it is only then that I remember I am standing right in front of the stage, all eyes on me. "But not here. I'm not really the center-of-attention kind of girl." The music is still loud and fast, but as she holds me, I realize I don't want to jump and bounce, I just want to stay where I am, safe in her arms. With her arm slung around my shoulders, she pulls me to the center of the dance floor. Then we are dancing...together. I sway against her easily. I would have never dreamed that Geri knew how to dance.

"Thank you," I whisper against her neck and then the tears start falling. I have enough mind left to realize I am soaking the shoulder of the white cotton T-shirt she is wearing and smearing black streaks of mascara on her shoulder to add even more insult. I apologize too many times until she finally tells me, "Shut up and dance." I'm not offended, I know I'm drunk and slightly hysterical.

She pulls my hips into hers, leaving her hands at my waist. I loop my hands around her neck.

We dance and I try not to stare at the way the fabric molds around her small breasts, barely an A-cup, though she wears an athletic-type jogging bra to try to hide them. I love the way she looks and, even more, I love the way it feels to be held in her arms, which surprises me. I guess my inhibitions are lower because of the alcohol. At least that's what I tell myself when I start to wonder what it would be like to kiss her. We sway together for another selection, but then it becomes painfully obvious that I can barely stand.

"Can I drive you home?"

I nod.

"I'll have one of the girls follow us and drive your car home for you."

I nod again, barely standing. Out on the street, the cooler night air revives me a little. She helps me climb in and I apologize as she slides behind the wheel to drive me home.

"No worries, beautiful."

I'm glad she's driving once I realize that her Jeep is moving and I don't even remember sliding into the seat.

“Will you tell me now what is going on?”

I shake my head stubbornly.

“Look, something’s obviously wrong and if it’s something I can help you with...”

I remain silent, heartbroken and too obstinate to share my grief.

She strokes my hair as she drives and tells me, “Whatever has happened, I’ll listen. I won’t judge. I know I’ve been hard on you, but I promise, if you’ll share this with me, I’ll keep my damn mouth shut.”

I can’t say the words *I’m too old to be a porn star* or even *Simon wants me to retire*, so I sit in silence, hot tears running down my cheeks.

We arrive in front of my house faster than I think we should have and Geri waits for Tina to pull my car into my garage before pulling into the driveway. I see Tina run by the vehicle, blowing kisses as she climbs into Meg’s Beamer. I didn’t realize we were all coming up the mountain. “Are they coming in?” I ask.

“No, babe, Tina’s beat and Meg’s trying her damndest to get ready for that Sacramento art show she’s doing next month, so early night for everyone.”

“You too? Or will you come in?” I ask. “I really just don’t want to be alone right now.” And as much as that is truth, the greater reality is that I just don’t want her to leave.

She looks at me gently before nodding. “I’ll come in for a minute.”

A moment ago, I was asleep in the car, the whiskey making me sluggish because I wanted to forget the last forty-eight hours. Her quick assent wakes me up and I find myself growing nervous as we approach the front door. I fumble for my keys and drop them twice before she grabs them and unlocks the door for me. “I should go, Simone. It’s late.”

“Stay with me,” I beg, clutching her arm, feeling the strength of her muscles. “Just until I pass out or fall asleep, whichever comes first.”

She sighs, but follows me in, closing the door quietly as I stumble through the house, not bothering to turn on lights because, even in the dark, I know my way to bed. I hear the locks slide into place and then a solid thump and her curse before the hallway light flashes on.

“You okay?” I call out.

“I’m fine,” she answers from right beside me. I jump, not understanding how she moved so quickly, so quietly. “Are you okay?”

The room is dark, the only light coming from the hallway. Enough light to tell when I look down at myself that I’m having an issue with my hoodie. One arm is half-in and half-out of my sleeve, the fabric caught at the wrist where I tried to pull the tank top over my head. “I can’t get my shirt off.”

She chuckles and tugs my hands free. “I never knew you were such a lightweight.”

“It’s the water. I usually drink a glass of water between every round. I pace myself.”

“Huh,” she says like she’s never realized that before. “No water tonight?”

“Uh-uh,” I answer. “I wanted to be numb.”

She smiles and pushes my hair out of my face. “How’s that working for you?”

“Good. I can’t feel my face. I have to pee.”

Her arm loops around my back and she lifts me as I try to stand, helping me the twenty-odd steps into the master bathroom. I fumble with the button fly of my jeans, finally giving up. I start pushing the almost-loose-enough jeans over my hips. “I could piss myself in these ridiculous things.”

Geri helps. It’s embarrassing and humiliating as she adjusts my clothes so that my bare ass actually connects with the toilet seat with no stray clothing in the way. After I pee, she kneels at my feet and pulls off my shoes and socks. “I’m sorry.” I tell her.

“I’ve been drunk, it’s not a crime.” She helps me stand and step from the jeans, leaving me standing in my bra and panties. “Do you want to shower before bed?”

“Not a good idea.” I immediately regret my words when a dark shadow crosses her face. “I’d slip and kill myself.” I amend, walking toward my bed, weaving as I go. “Better to wait until morning.”

She nods and helps me to crawl under the sheet and blankets, tucking me in tight, kissing me on the forehead. “I’ll go.”

I grab her wrist. “Don’t go, I’m not asleep or passed out.” I scoot to make room. “Lie down beside me?”

She sighs and I wonder what she’s thinking. I watch her in the light cast from the hall as she kicks off her shoes and lies down on top of the comforter, still wearing her jeans and T-shirt. She crosses her arms over her chest, looking hideously uncomfortable.

I reach out and wrap my arm around her midriff, spooning against her side. I close my eyes, feeling her stiffen. My buzz is just faded enough to realize that she is miserable. “I’m sorry. I know I’m repulsive.”

She rolls onto her side, facing me. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m making you uncomfortable. You can go.”

“No, Simone. Really, I want to stay.”

I look into her face and her eyes glow with sincerity.

Her hand reaches up to stroke my cheek. “I just wish there was something I could do or say. I’m not very good at comforting people. I’m not sure what to do...especially since I don’t know what is wrong.”

“Just hold me while I sleep. I don’t want to be alone.”

She wraps her arm around me, pulling me closer. “I can do that.”

I’m glad it’s dark, because it makes me brave enough to ask, “Do you think I’m sexy?”

She goes still next to me and it is a long moment before she whispers, “Yes.”

“Do you think I look old though? Like...so old that I just can’t pull off *hot* anymore?”

She snorts. “Babe, if you were any hotter, I’d be engulfed in flames right now.”

Her answer makes a sob catch in my throat. She rolls to face me and asks quietly, “Will you please tell me what is wrong?”

In the darkness, I find her hand and pull it to my hip. Using my hand to guide hers, her fingers slide over my bare skin. I expect the heat, I don’t expect the jolt of sensation her touch brings. I know I shouldn’t be doing this. Geri and I are friends. I’m crossing a line. I can’t stop myself. “Do *you* want me?”

Geri pulls her hand away and, with a swift move, rolls me onto my side so that I am facing away from her, but her body cradles behind me, hugging every curve. With her arms and legs, she traps my arms and legs so that I can’t move. “You’re drunk, Simone, and we aren’t having this conversation when you won’t remember it in the morning.”

Chapter Five

I awake tangled in cool sheets and still wrapped in Geri's arms. The sound of her soft, steady breathing is comforting and even though the room is as pitch black as last night, I know it is morning and I am surprised to find that she stayed all night. She is still on top of the covers, still completely clothed. I wonder for a second if I wished she would have just slipped out and saved us the awkwardness this morning is sure to present, but as I watch her sleep, I realize I'm glad she stayed.

Using the remote, I lift the blackout shades, just enough to allow in some light. I could probably open them all the way, because it is overcast and gray, but I don't want to risk waking her. I study her face in the morning light. Her eyes are so exotic and I've never asked who is responsible for the slanted lids, the ultra-thick lashes that fan over her cheekbones. Her mother? Her father? Though her eyes are closed, I know the exact shade of golden amber that makes her exotic eyes even more extraordinary.

She is absolutely beautiful.

Sure, I've had that thought before, but it has always embarrassed me. I think it is because I've never seen her wear makeup and the word has always seemed too feminine a word to describe her—but in the soft gray light of morning, I decide that beautiful is exactly the word. Her nose and high cheekbones sport a sprinkle of freckles I'd never noticed before because they are so light. A small, darker mole dots to the right of her upper lip, a beauty mark that begs to be kissed. I try not to move, try not to wake her, as I study her mouth, wondering why last night's drunken fascination has carried over to today. Has she always had such a kissable mouth and it took getting really drunk to realize it? I bite my own lower lip, telling myself to *stop it* because I could ruin a wonderful friendship in just a matter of seconds.

"What are you thinking about so hard?" She startles me and catches my gaze. Her lips curl into a half smile. "You are looking way too serious this morning. Hangover?"

I find I can't look away from her eyes because they are suddenly more interesting in the morning light. Her irises are flecked with a molten brown. "I was just thinking that I've never kissed a girl."

She pushes up on one elbow, gazing down at me, looking suddenly intrigued. "Never? Not a single girl-on-girl moment in all of those movies you've made?"

I shake my head. "Not a single time."

"No bi-curiosity in college?"

I laugh. "No!"

"Damn. I guess you really are straight."

I bite my bottom lip, whispering, “I guess so,” thinking I should shut up now before I say something I’m really going to regret. “So, why do I want to kiss you?”

Her right eyebrow arches. “Do you?”

I nod. “You intrigue me. I haven’t thought about it in a long time because we’re such good friends now, but that was the impetus the first time I introduced myself at O’Leary’s. You were loud and confident and stunning. And your eyes are nothing short of exotic.”

“I have my mother’s eyes,” she says and it seems like a confession rather than a detail. “She’s Vietnamese, she still lives there.”

My eyebrow goes up and I am even more fascinated, but I don’t ask. I don’t push. It seems Geri is not the type of person to share family details lightly. I make my own confession in a soft whisper, “I watched you for an hour from across the room before I actually walked over. I assumed you were a lesbian and wondered if kissing a woman would be the same as kissing a man.”

“Huh.” Her gaze turns hungry. *That look* I know, realizing that it is the same on a man or a woman. “I’ve never kissed a man, so I’m no good for an answer.”

“Never?” I gasp.

“Is that so hard to believe? Am I missing something amazing?”

I duck my head. “I’ve shared a few extraordinary kisses in my day.”

She lifts my chin, holding it, and reclaims my gaze. “I don’t know how that can be possible since you’ve never kissed a woman.”

I shake my head, knowing that she is about to remedy that even before she leans in. My breath catches and I find myself not breathing as her mouth moves closer. Her lips hover over mine, teasingly close. She asks softly, “Can I be your first?”

I whisper, “Yes.”

Our lips barely bump before she pulls away to look into my eyes. I think she must be checking to see if I’ve changed my mind. I haven’t. I hope she hasn’t. My lips turn up in a soft smile, encouraging her, and that’s all it takes for her lips to move into mine. Her mouth is softer than I expected, her bottom lip feeling surprisingly fuller. Her mouth opens slightly and mine follows along. Her tongue teases my bottom lip, calling my tongue out to play, and before I know what has happened our mouths are locked, our tongues dancing against each other. Her kiss seems to speed a straight line down my spine to my pussy and it registers in my brain once again that I want her.

I have no idea what I’m doing; I’m out of my league here.

She chuckles.

“Did I say that out loud?”

“You did, but don’t worry. I have some experience if you’re sure you want to do this.”

I nod but then I check myself. I really am about to ruin everything. “I can’t do this.” I keep my eyes closed.

“No worries. You did get my hopes up for a second though.” She strokes my cheek just before I feel her weight shift on my bed. She whispers, “I’ll let myself out.”

I hear her walking away. I count each step as she moves down the staircase.

Damn, damn, damn! Please don’t leave!

She has to go! I’m being an idiot!

“Geri, wait!” I jump out of bed and chase after her, stopping at the landing to look over the side into the foyer. She has just opened the door, but when she hears me call her name she looks up. “Wait,” I say, racing down the steps. “I want to explain.”

“You don’t have to explain,” she insists. “I get it, you’re straight.”

“No. I mean, maybe.” I stop in front of her, hoping she isn’t as confused as I am. “No! I mean, I want you...I just can’t have sex with you. I don’t want to hurt you or ruin our friendship by rushing into something that neither of us is ready for. If we ever had sex, it would have to be for the right reasons.”

She leaves the door open, but turns to face me. Cool air raises goose flesh on my arms and legs and I wrap my arms around my middle to cover my exposed skin. “What would be the right reasons?”

I smile. “It would be easier to tell you all of the wrong reasons.”

She smirks. “Okay, tell me all the wrong reasons.”

“Sex might feel better for a minute, but it won’t fix my problem. I can’t ruin years of friendship over a few minutes of naked just to reboot my self-esteem. Simon made me really sad yesterday and in the past I’ve used sex for all the wrong reasons, like when I’m hurting emotionally, but sex isn’t going to cure what’s wrong.”

“So, what? You fought with Simon and because you still have it so bad for him, you won’t give anyone else a shot?”

I snort. “I’ll admit that my head is seriously messed up when it comes to matters of sex and relationships because of Simon and that’s why I don’t date. Ever. But I don’t have it bad for him.”

She lifts her brow, doubt evident in her eyes.

“I don’t want to be with him,” I insist. “Once, but not anymore.”

She nods, seeming to accept my answer. She slides her fingertips over my shoulder, teasing my flesh, making me step closer with no more invitation than that single stroke. Her gaze draws me even nearer. “So, maybe sex isn’t a cure for whatever happened yesterday, but for now, I could at least take your mind off the drama. I’m pretty certain of my ability to make you forget what happened altogether...if just for a little while.”

I roll my eyes. “Still, sex...I can’t ruin our friendship over something so insignificant.”

“Wow. I’ve never quite seen sex as insignificant, but clearly, being a professional, you do have more experience.”

Ouch. I understand that her attack on my career is a reaction to my rejection. “You’re right. If I wasn’t a professional, I might be able to relax and enjoy the sexual part of relationships, but as it is...sex just seems like work...I feel nothing.”

“You felt nothing upstairs?” Her hand goes up to my cheek and she holds my face as she leans in tentatively. I meet her halfway and when our lips touch, it is with gentleness that I have never experienced when kissing. Without thinking, I start to kiss her back, enjoying exploring her lips, her mouth. She teases my bottom lip playfully and it sends a shockwave of need through my body. She pulls away just a little. I wrap my hand around the nape of her neck and pull her into my mouth, kissing her hard and deep. Her fingers weave into my hair at the base of my skull and she pulls me back and gazes deep into my eyes.

I want her.

“Nothing? Huh.” She kisses the tip of my nose before turning and walking to her Jeep, leaving me stunned, not sure what just happened...knowing only that my heart is about to pound through my chest and the ache in my heart from losing my job just multiplied by a hundred because I feel like the best thing that might have ever happened to me in this life just walked out my door. I watch her as she drives away, her Jeep making a wide arc in the driveway to turn around so that she can drive straight out onto the road, a steep incline on a wide curve that would make it too dangerous to back into. As she pulls out, Simon pulls in, and I start to wonder if my day could get any worse.

I stay in the threshold, waiting. It doesn’t seem to matter that I am wearing only my bra and panties and, as he approaches, he doesn’t even raise an eyebrow. With a heavy sigh, I go back into the house to retrieve a robe from the bedroom. When I come back down, he is sitting on my couch, looking anxious. As way of explanation for his unexpected arrival so early in the morning, he says, “You wouldn’t answer my calls.”

“We have nothing to discuss. I’m not retiring,” I say lightly as I take the last two steps down the staircase.

“The production company isn’t renewing your contract, Simone, no matter what you say or do.”

I sit in the chair opposite him, glad for the chair, because my world suddenly tilts on its axis, making me dizzy. I swallow hard, meeting his eyes. “Then why are you here?” My tone is icy and my entire body has started to tremble.

“You left before I finished yesterday. The production company wants you to retire from acting, but I want you to stay in the business. I have a business proposition for you.”

I start to tremble harder, not wanting to hear anything he has to say.

“You’ve already agreed to go with me to Tokyo to jump-start the Asian startup—”

I cut him off. "So, I'm too old and repulsive for the American market, but Asians love old chicks, is that it?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not talking about acting, your on-film days are over. I have a bigger proposition for you."

I close my eyes to keep from puking. I am really being blackballed. My mind starts racing, thinking of all the production companies that I could go to. Someone will hire me. *I'm Simone*. The thought makes me slightly less panicked and I look at him with a smirk, telling him tartly, "Wet City isn't the only adult industry label."

"If you think they will still want you in three years, that's your prerogative, but I'd like you to hear me out."

Three years. Three years. The clause in my contract that limits my ability to work for any other adult-industry production company for three years glares at me from a memory cell in my brain. I read it, I agreed to it, I never gave it a second thought. I was going to be Mrs. Simon Kramer, I wasn't going to be acting my entire life. What would it matter? I didn't want to do this job for anyone else except Simon...

So, why am I considering it now?

Oh God.

I think about the money I have in the bank, my investments. Clearly, I don't need to work...

I shrug, trying not to show him the panic filling my guts. "Then I don't work. It's not like I need the money, and really, there is a ton of other stuff I could be doing with my time."

Ton of other stuff? Where did that come from?

"So, really, there isn't any reason for you to be here. You should go."

He stands. "Hear me out? I have a very generous offer for you."

I look up at him and sigh. "What?"

"Wet City Media doesn't have anything to do with the Tokyo studio. Tokyo is all me. I was tired of having a board of directors telling me what to do, so I'm bankrolling the whole thing. I am AsiaFlixxx."

"So, the three-year clause doesn't apply to Tokyo?"

"You aren't listening, Simone. I don't want you to go to Tokyo as an actress, I want you to go to Tokyo as my business partner. Fifty-fifty, you and me."

I look at him with a blank stare and then all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, his edginess the last few weeks, the sudden decision by the board of directors to can me...he needs a cash roll...and he doesn't want to go to Wet City for the money. Or maybe the board of directors already told him no.

Shaking my head, I snort, but there is no humor in it. "You want my money."

"This is an excellent opportunity."

"Or a big risk," I say, a troubling thought nagging at the back of my brain. "Who put the idea into the board's heads that I was too old? You?"

“It wasn’t like that, Simone. Yes, I need an investor, and you are in a position that you could be that person. And if you do so, you stand to make a lot of money...but you also have an insight that I don’t have. You’ve made us both very wealthy because when you are on camera, it seems real. You have a rare talent. Just look at this as a change of roles. Come to Japan with me. Be my consultant.” He leans forward, taking my hand, and the instant sizzle that goes up my elbow reminds me of the chemistry we once shared. I pull my hand away. He tilts his head at me and smiles, but I don’t believe it. I remember all the times past that his smile has misled me and manipulated me. *What is it about this man? Even when I want to kill him I want to give him the few remaining moments I would let him live to fuck me one last time.*

“Once I had the opportunity to be with a woman who would have honestly loved me and I blew that. I’m an idiot. I want to spend my life with someone who gives a damn about me and, once upon a time, you did. Give me another chance. I love you.” He swallows hard and licks his lips, his eyes boring into me with a new intensity that makes me nervous. “We could start over with this trip. Me and you. Say the words. Be my companion—”

“What?” I choke on his words. *Consultant? Companion? What happened to partners?*

Angry, I stand and push him toward the door. “Get out! You orchestrated this entire thing, didn’t you? Ruined my life so you can offer me something new and exciting?”

He backs toward the door, his hands lifted. “It isn’t like that.”

“Oh, I think it is exactly like that.”

“Just think about it, Simone. That’s all I’m asking.”

I keep walking forward, he keeps backing up, until finally, he is just through the threshold. I slam the door in his face. How did I ever think the man was anything but evil?

Chapter Six

I am still shaking, still seeing red as I walk into the kitchen for a glass of water. I don't get a drink. I pick up my phone and dial Geri. I'm not even sure what I'm doing as the phone starts ringing. She won't answer...I know she won't, because she's like that. Stubborn. She answers on the fifth ring. *Oh shit. Now what?*

"I'm sorry." I say, not even bothering to say hello first. "This morning didn't go so well and I don't want to leave things as they are right now."

"I know," she says. "I was going to pull back into the driveway instead of leaving, but then *he* showed up."

"Yeah, that." My voice bristles angrily.

"So, your mood last night was all about him?" I get the feeling that she thinks I'm lying about us no longer being involved.

I sigh, trying to wrap my head around what to say. I know that Geri really hates Simon. "I really don't want to talk about Simon, or my problems at work, I just called because *you* are very important to *me*. And I really wish I hadn't stopped kissing you this morning."

Okay. I said it. Now what?

"Do you mean that?" she asks softly.

"Yes, I do."

There is a long silence and I am just getting really uncomfortable when she asks, "Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

Like a date? I long to ask, but I don't. I'm just happy I get to see her. I answer with an enthusiastic, "Yes. Do you want me to meet you at O'Leary's?"

"I was thinking someplace a little quieter, off our beaten path, if that's okay with you?"

When she suggested Maconochie's, a pub outside of town that I'd never heard of before, I still saw O'Leary's in my head, but as I arrive in Maconochie's parking lot, I realize that they are as far removed from each other as night and day. I tilt my head when I arrive, because I'm not one-hundred-percent certain that I'm at the right place. The signage says that I am, but the building looks more like a hunter's lodge than a pub. Actually, it is a log cabin, granted a very large cabin, two stories, stone halfway up the façade,

rough-hewn wood on top, and an age about it, like it has stood in the same spot for over a hundred years, maybe two hundred. The parking lot is almost deserted, surprising for a Saturday night but then it is fairly off the beaten track. One thing is certain. It is her Jeep I pull up beside when I park.

Climbing from my car, I see her, standing on the wide porch. Deep shadows had kept her hidden until she stepped forward and I can't help smiling when she lifts her hand.

I lift mine and crunch over the gravel parking area in my three-inch heels, hoping not to twist an ankle. I feel overdressed. The flowery sundress and strappy sandals suddenly seem too date-ish. Of course, she's wearing jeans. But, as I step closer, she looks perfect. She's wearing a Ralph Lauren black polo—an easy tell from the bright red embroidered number two on the right chest and dueling ponies on the left—and black leather shoes, both of which scream of newness. *She dressed up too.* The thought makes me smile. Maybe it is a real date then. *I wish I knew.*

"You look amazing," she says as I climb the three wooden steps up to the porch. I smile. She looks amazing too. She's naturally taller than me, but with my heels, we are the same height. She is lithe, lean, and powerfully confident. She is, without a doubt, a beautiful woman, although she exudes a certain sense of masculinity. Her amber eyes light up when I tell her, "You look very nice yourself."

As I draw closer, her scent surrounds me. "Mm-m. You smell nice, too."

She ducks her head, blushing. "Thanks. It's Safari."

She opens her arms for a hug and I don't hesitate. "Wow. Safari doesn't smell that wonderful on me."

"It's Safari for Men," she admits, squeezing me before letting me go.

"Well, I think it's outstanding! You should wear it all the time." I laugh. "I had no idea you were such a Ralph Lauren girl."

She rolls her eyes. "I have my designer moments."

I bump shoulders with her. "Designer moments look *very* good on you."

We stand on the porch looking at each other and I start to feel self-conscious, thinking maybe I should have worn my hair in a ponytail instead of down. I shouldn't have worn makeup. And the dress? *Way over the top.* Clearly, I have no idea what I'm doing.

Awkwardly and belatedly, she pulls me by the hand to the front door. "I'm glad you agreed to dinner. I love to come up here, but it seems I need a special occasion for an excuse."

"Well, thank you for inviting me."

She opens the door for me and ushers me inside. A hostess stands ready to direct us to our table, which is on the back side of the cabin. A huge window bank overlooks the forest and, as I take my seat, I realize that we are perched on the side of the mountain, overlooking a deep gorge. A narrow waterfall is visible on the far side. "Wow. Now that's beautiful."

I look up to see that Geri is smiling.

"What?" I ask as she sits down across from me.

"I'm glad you like it. That's all. I'm always just a little more comfortable when I'm surrounded by nature, and I wanted to bring you someplace where I knew I could be relaxed."

"With that view, it's going to be hard to stay uptight."

She laughs. "You? Uptight?"

I laugh nervously. It's my turn to blush, realizing just how tensely I'm holding my shoulders. It seems absurd that I'm so nervous. We're just two friends having dinner. *Dinner that is feeling more and more like a date.*

It's the ambiance of the room I decide. Very romantic.

It dawns on me that the entire room is lit only by the candlelight coming from the center of the table or by the lanterns hanging on the wall. "God, it's beautiful here. Rustic elegance?"

She laughs. "Something like that. I've always imagined the kitchen as having authentic wood stoves."

"You think?"

She shrugs.

"Huh," I say, at a loss about what I should say, not wanting to talk about what happened before, having no expectations about what could happen from here...

Geri orders first and I am surprised that she orders their vegetarian special for both of us. Geri isn't vegan, she isn't even close to vegetarian, so I think it is sweet that she deferred to what she believed I would like on the menu. The special is a mushroom fricassee over a crisp puff pastry that turns out to be amazing and I don't think anyone would see it as a sacrifice.

Geri is talking about her last business trip and what an adventure she had. She asks a question, but I miss what she says because I'm so worried about whether this is or isn't a date...

I catch her gaze and realize that she has asked me a question, and I have no idea what she asked. *Oh hell.* "Excuse me?"

"I said, maybe you could go with me sometime."

Before I can answer, she teases with a wink. "Or are you too girlie to camp?"

Either the breathtaking view or the way Geri's face glows in the candlelight as she talks about her job and how much she appreciates that she can be outdoors so much of her day makes me boast, "Oh, I can camp." Then I immediately regret it, because I haven't camped since I was a fourth-grade girl scout.

"Then I'll look forward to it. Sharing a sleeping bag with you would be very enjoyable."

My thoughts freeze at her flirtatious comment. *She's flirting?* Further proof that this is a date. *No, she's testing the waters—and quite boldly—to see if I'm interested.* I find myself aching to do more than flirt. *Why does this have to seem so hard?*

Our gazes catch for the hundredth time in an hour and it seems like I should have something witty or charming to say, but I can't even seem to make a single flirtatious comeback. A strange silence falls over the table and I feel like our almost date is in peril of reverting to a dinner between friends. Thankfully, the

waitress arrives with our coffee and dessert. It is a yogurt parfait, layered with raspberries, blueberries, crunchy granola clusters, sunflowers, and honey. As decadent as it is simple—as was the entire meal—I can see why Geri feels this is a special occasion place. I want to come all the time now that I know it is here.

I notice that we are the last diners remaining and, when I look at my watch, I can't believe the time. We've been talking and dining for three hours. She takes the hint. "It's getting late."

"Yes, we should probably go before they throw us out." I laugh.

She takes my hand across the table. "I am so sorry about the way things went at your house. I'm an idiot."

I shake my head, now wishing that I hadn't been so skittish then. If I'd have just let things progress, instead of freaking out. "We don't have to talk about it. Just forget it."

"I can't forget it. I was an ass. I'd like another chance."

I tilt my head. "Another chance?"

She leans forward and whispers, "To make love to you."

My mouth drops open, but no words come out.

"I reserved us a room." Her hand closes over mine. "But if you say no, that's totally okay too. No pressure."

No pressure? "You reserved us a room *here*?" I manage to squeak.

I start shaking and I hope she doesn't notice. I want her, desperately, but the fear that made me stall before is still there. I don't want to ruin our friendship. And honestly, I don't have a clue about how to even go about making love to a woman. *What am I thinking?*

"We should go," she says. "I didn't mean to rush you. I can be so rude and inconsiderate sometimes. I didn't mean to imply..." She pauses, embarrassed, and I think of how pissed off I'd have been if any of the men I ever dated pulled anything as presumptuous. Not that I'm above having a little first-date sex, just don't presume I'm easy, which I am fairly certain is the word she's trying to not use, which is so incredibly ludicrous on so many levels, considering my occupation. She settles on, "...anything."

"I want you to rush me." Her eyes twinkle with renewed hope and she smiles as I admit, "I am so turned on right now just knowing that you planned everything tonight for us to be alone together. Please just take me upstairs before I lose my nerve."

Chapter Seven

We're really going to do this. Looking at her, a king-size bed between us, I still don't have a clue, but I'm happy I'm here, I'm happy she's here...and I'm really, really happy she's done this before. My doubts are gone. It is probably insane, but I don't want to think about whether our friendship will survive, or if I am here for the right reason, or if she is here for the right reason. All I know is that I want her to kiss me again.

Together, we turn back the bedding. Our eyes lock over the exposed sheets and I hold my breath, waiting for the panic to fill me. It doesn't. I love the way she looks at me, her hunger laid wide open for me to see. I've glimpsed it before at O'Leary's, seemingly many times over the years, but I've always shuffled the thought to the back of my brain to the place where all things that make me uncomfortable get buried. Tonight, her gaze doesn't make me uncomfortable, it makes me want her.

"I'm terrified," I admit.

She laughs, walking around the bed to stand beside me. She rubs my shoulders. "Just relax. I'm the experienced one here. Remember?"

She kisses me gently and I tremble against her. She pulls back from the kiss. "Don't be afraid of me." I press my lips back into hers, answering only after I kiss her. "It's not you I'm afraid of."

Her hands roam over my back, finding my zipper. "This is the moment I help you take your clothes off."

"Uh-huh."

She unzips and, as an afterthought, unties the halter at my neck. The dress slides between us, exposing one slow inch at a time until it is pooled around my ankles. I step free and kick off my heels, leaving me suddenly several inches shorter than her. She smiles, and as her eyes look down at me, taking in all of me, her eyes widen appreciatively.

I'm wearing a lace bra and panty set, the bra a halter-cut. Normally, in a halter dress, I wouldn't bother, but I dressed for this evening intentionally...hoping...really hoping that one of us would maneuver us to this point. I dressed knowing I wanted her to see me wearing pretty, lacy underthings. I catch my reflection and admire how the lace panties mold around my ass and how the shades of bright orange lace and fuchsia ribbon contrast perfectly against my freshly tanned skin. I catch her looking appreciatively too.

"You are just too damn sexy, it's no wonder men around the globe are jacking off to your videos."

I freeze, but then I see the twinkle in her eye. She's teasing. *How totally unexpected.*

“Smart-ass,” I grumble, but then I’m smiling because I feel good, content, and that isn’t something I’ve ever been able to say about being in a bedroom with someone, knowing that sex was imminent.

Smiling, I banter back, “Don’t forget women too—lots of women buy my videos.”

“Oh, I have no doubt.” She bites my shoulder, just a nip, but I squeal anyway, then I’m rubbing my face into her neck, nibbling her, kissing her. I untuck her shirt, pulling at the fabric. I want her out of her clothes. I want to be naked beside her.

“Uh-uh, not yet,” she says. She sits on the mattress and pulls me down onto her lap. I sit stiffly until she pulls me against her. “You have to relax, beautiful, or this is never going to work.”

I close my eyes and let out the breath I was holding, slowly my muscles give and I lean back against her. She kisses the back of my shoulder. “Isn’t that better?”

I nod, keeping my eyes closed, trying to not think too hard on the fact that I have never had sex with a woman, or that I have no idea how to have sex with a woman. How different can it be? *Oh God*. Her touch jars my thoughts, making it impossible to think...or worry.

Wordlessly, she skims her fingertips over the top of my thighs then gently pushes my knees apart. As her fingers massage the soft skin on the insides of my thighs, she teases me to aching need with an expertise that puts most of the co-stars I’ve had to shame.

“God, I want you,” I tell her, arching my back and pushing my hips into her pelvis.

“You’re going to have to do better than that, sweetheart. Tell me you want me to make love to you.”

“Yes,” I hiss, craning my neck to offer her my lips.

She pulls back, teasing, “Ask me.”

“Are you this obstinate with all your lovers?” I demand, opening my eyes and meeting her gaze. I get lost in the need I see trapped in the golden amber of her irises.

“I like to be in control.”

“You like to make your women beg,” I accuse, feeling my eyebrows crease in frustration. I do not want this to start feeling like a role, or rather, I don’t want to start acting like I’m in a role.

“Sometimes.” She smiles and it is devastatingly wicked. “Under the right circumstances.”

I sit forward and her movement follows mine so that we stay molded together. Sexual tension stronger than anything I have ever felt sizzles between us as she puts her hand on my shoulder, turning my body to face her. I lift my hand to her face, and cradle her cheek in my palm. *That* felt like a role. *Damn it!* I let out a long exhalation. Looking deeply into her eyes, I ask, “Will you make love to me?” *Still a role, except my body is trembling.*

Her gaze is piercing. She asks softly, “Why?”

I tremble harder. *What is wrong with me?* “I’m terrified,” I admit. “I’ve never felt *this way*...with anyone.”

She lifts her eyebrow. I spill my guts. "I dated before Simon and even though I wasn't a virgin, the back of a Chevy with an adolescent boy doesn't compare to what I feel right now. And with Simon..." I shrug. "Sex was sex. Amazing. Physical."

"You aren't convincing me that we should be doing this," she says, not pushing me away, but not holding me close anymore. I snuggle into her, inhaling her scent. I kiss her collarbone and then trail kisses up her neck to the spot behind her ear...and sniff...losing myself in her scent and the heady need that fills my being. Not just my body, but my mind...my soul.

"You make me want something I've never wanted from anyone. I don't even know how to explain it. But you soothe me. You soothe my soul. Maybe it's because you're a girl and I'm changing teams, or maybe I was never a member of the straight team to begin with and I was just too stupid to realize it, but I do know one thing most certainly. I want you to make love to me, and not because you are a lesbian, but because it's you. I want *you* to make love to me, Geri."

Her mouth closes over mine, kissing me hard and deep. We are both panting when she pulls away. "I've waited a long time to hear you ask me that."

Her hand slides behind me to unsnap my bra and, with some very smooth maneuvering, she pulls the fabric free. My breasts spill forward and she catches my right breast, holding it, seeming to weight it in her palm before twirling the nipple between her thumb and finger. She pinches harder than I expected, drawing a soft moan to my lips. "Do you like that?"

"Yes." I arch back against her. She palms both of my breasts, squeezing them simultaneously then, finding both nipples, pinches them, pulling them to hard peaks of need. My pussy clenches and I know she feels me fidget on her lap when she chuckles, obviously delighted. She pulls them harder, stretching them out. "Oh God!" I grab her hands, not to stop them, because she isn't hurting me, but to feel her hands beneath mine, driving my flesh crazy.

"Take off your clothes," I say.

"Uh-uh. I'm making love to you. My clothes stay on."

My lips part to complain but she grabs my chin and pulls my face around to meet hers. Her mouth closes over mine, stopping anything I would have said and, strangely, my body responds to her refusal to take off her clothes, enjoying the way her jeans and polo feel stiff and new against my skin. Just the fact that she is dressed and plans to stay that way makes me hotter, needier. She eases back against the bed, and drags me with her. It is a strange, highly erotic sensation, lying on top of her body so that my back is against her front. Her hands roam over my breasts, over my stomach. She teases my ribcage with her fingertips and I cry out with need.

"Geri?" I twist my neck to try to see her face. She silences me with another kiss and I moan into the hot, damp cave of her mouth.

Anxious, I try to wriggle my fingertips under the elastic band of my panties, but her legs scissor around mine, trapping my legs as she catches my wrists. She pulls my hands above my head and holds them there. "Impatient much?"

"I've never seen much point in foreplay."

"I think, after today, you'll have a new appreciation." She threatens ominously. "Now, leave your hands above your head no matter what."

I start to argue, but she stops me with a look. I lie still, waiting for her to do whatever it is that she is going to do so that we can get this show on the road. My mouth smirks and I try to hide the fact that I am finding humor in the *dominant* role she is assuming. I squirm beneath the tight cage of her legs, my pussy tightening. I push my ass into her and arch my back.

"You really can't stand it, can you?"

I laugh outright before asking, "What?" Like I really don't know what she's talking about.

"Relaxing, enjoying, and accepting the pleasure that comes with slowing down."

I look at her with a blank expression that makes her laugh.

"We have all night," she promises, running her hands over my thighs, stopping to cup my heated mons with both hands. She possesses a powerful sensuality that thrills my body. "Hundreds of men have told you that you are beautiful, filled you with their dicks. You probably don't even remember half of them," she whispers softly as she finds my clit through the soft lace covering it. Not wanting to ruin the moment, I don't agree or disagree.

She leaves one hand rubbing my clit through my panties, while the other keeps traveling so that her fingertips can turn my face to hers. "You'll never forget me."

I have no doubt.

She kisses my cheek as she rolls, taking me onto my side so that she can scoot out from under me. She positions me with a pillow behind my head and rises over me, propped on one elbow. She looks at me, running her hands over me as she looks. "Do you remember what you said to me the first time we argued about what you did for a living?"

"I'm sure I said a lot, probably too much," I admit. My throat tightens with need and desire. I'm mesmerized by the changing expressions on her face as she looks at me. Her gaze holds mine for only a moment before traveling along my face, over my shoulders, before lingering over my breasts, which seem to tighten and tingle in response to her scrutiny. As if called, her lips drop to suck each in turn, pulling them into even tighter buds.

Her eyes lift back to mine and I find myself again staring into the brown-amber-gold-flecked irises that seem as rare and beautiful as exotic gems. "You said that you didn't date because 'What would be the point? Does an accountant want to come home to more spreadsheets?'" We all laughed, but the way you said

it made me so sad, because I knew that no one had ever made love to you the way you deserved to be made love to. That was when I knew that I wanted to be the first to truly make love to you.”

Our gazes remain locked as her lips tease a path from my breast to my navel. I lick my lips when she asks, “Am I too late?”

But no words are forthcoming. What am I supposed to say to that? She knows Simon and I have been intimate, and there were the others I used to try to erase Simon from my mind. Once I would have argued that Simon made love to me, but being here with Geri now, feeling the heavy desire for her that I feel...I’d be less apt to call what Simon and I shared *love* merely because I now have a different reference point.

I shrug.

She snickers, her mouth suppressing a grin. “Your eyes tell me I’m not. So, if you don’t mind, I’m going to make love to you now and I’m going to take my sweet time about it.”

My lips part, gasping as her mouth finds the sensitive dent beside my pelvic bone. She licks and sucks, tickling, making me writhe beneath her as my stomach, and every muscle between her mouth and my womb, tightens. She makes me ache, needy to be filled and quite unsure whether it is pleasure or torture that she plans to use to fulfill her threat. True to her word, she takes her time, seeming to kiss, lick, nip every exposed inch of flesh above and below my lace panties, landing finally at the juncture of my thighs.

Her tongue teases around the elastic leg band and I think surely she will rip my panties off now...but she doesn’t. Her mouth moves to cover my mons and her breath exhales in a hot, steamy tease over my covered clit. I shiver and she hums with pleasure at my response. Her tongue dips out to lick my needy flesh through the sheer lace, finding the sensitive tip of my clit without any effort at all. The sensation blows me through the roof. My fingers dig into the sheets as I try to stay connected to the bed. “Oh! Christ! Some warning would be good,” I say as I try to squirm away from her searing tongue.

She growls or chuckles. I’m not sure what sound it is that comes from her throat, but it is obvious she isn’t letting go. She laves me with her tongue through the lace and the sensation is pure ecstasy...and pure torture. I scream, I pant. The thought runs through my mind that this is too intense for foreplay, because isn’t foreplay a warm-up?

I am surprised by her level of expertise, knowing just how to touch, just where to touch to make certain that she draws my agony to an excruciating summit.

“Please, Geri!” I cry out. “Is this where you want me to beg? Because I’ll beg.”

Geri chuckles and this time I am certain she is laughing at me.

Her breath is warm through the lace as she asks, “Is this what you want?” and pushes the edge of my panties aside with gentle fingers. She exposes me fully to the heat of her breath, then just a soft flicker of tongue over my clit that makes my back arch and hips lift in answer. I hiss, “Yes.”

Her mouth comes away from me and she sits back, looking at me—at all of my female parts at the juncture between my legs—that *look* is enough to send me over the edge.

“Geri?” I growl.

Her liquid amber gaze meets mine and her smile is pure evil when she says, “It’s too early to beg.” She dips her head and runs her tongue the length of my labia, ending with a quick, hard flick of tongue against my clit. Pleasure? Pain? My brain can’t decide because she is licking the length of me again. This time she flicks my clit twice. “Oh God, Geri!” I demand desperately. “Please!”

I elbow up, half sitting, half reclining, watching as she does it again...so intent on pleasuring me, torturing me.

“I need you,” I say, but I don’t have a clue what I need. She isn’t a man...no dick in sight...but I know for a fact that, if she can get me this worked up, she can finish me, and that’s exactly what I demand. “Finish me!”

Her eyes roll up and she smiles. She doesn’t stop licking, doesn’t stop teasing, but manages to smile just the same.

I squeeze my eyes tightly closed, trying to be silent. I don’t want to beg, even though just seconds ago, I promised I would. Begging is what I do at work, that high, keening pitch that makes me want to puke because it is so false, such a lie. Usually, I’m not even close to orgasm when the cue to beg is given, but the men buying my movies eat it up, loving it, wanting more of that pathetic sound to come from the back of my throat.

For Geri, I whimper and moan. Strangely, I don’t hate it that I do.

She shifts her weight and I am surprised to find her pushing her fingers inside the leg of my panties. I feel the slide as her fingers find the dampness sloshing from inside of me. I cannot remember ever being this wet without lube. Lots and lots of faux fluid is always flowing on set.

There is nothing fake in my reaction to Geri. This fluid is mine, she did this to me.

I watch as she draws a damp finger to her mouth to taste. She moans with pleasure, like she is tasting the sweetest, most expensive chocolate ever created and the sound breaks something inside of me. I swear I hear it pop, like an explosion of breaking bone, and then tears are falling over my cheeks as emotion from somewhere deep inside me, hidden and secret and lost, crashes over and through me, wrecking me.

Her fingers slide slowly through my wetness as she watches my face. My eyes close, hiding me from her gaze. I can’t watch her watching me. I’m embarrassed that tears are falling over my cheeks. I push into the solidness of her fingers as they slide over my labia. It seems she is enjoying teasing me, because she giggles softly. I really don’t want to beg. My lungs feel like a million pounds in my chest, a lump in my throat bigger than my fist, as I ask, not beg, “Put your fingers inside of me. I want to be filled by you.”

I feel her acquiesce, sliding a finger in, maybe two.

I look at her through squinted eyes. As much as I needed to hide a moment ago, I now need to see her, and so I watch her through my fringe of lashes. She is fuzzy and distorted, but also so beautiful, I can’t take my eyes off her.

Her fingers enter me...one, two, three. I seem to swell around her as she thrusts in then massages the exact spot over my g-spot that is guaranteed to make me explode. How did she know?

Her mouth sucks my clit with the same rhythm that she uses to knead me on the inside, drawing my pleasure to a tight point, but not letting me fall, not yet. She stretches and thrusts, massages and twists, wrapping my insides in thick pleasure, bliss too substantial to ever find release from. I gasp and cry out, my hips bucking, needing her fingers deeper, needing something for my clit to grind into, more solid than her tongue, which she keeps flicking over my clit with precisely spaced taps. She pulls me higher and higher. I am screaming when I fall. Screaming as I fragment and shatter into what feels like a million pieces...

I keep my eyes closed as I listen to her move around the room. The bathroom light is turned on, she pees, running water and the lights are turned off. I must be alive, *I must be*, but I am not certain how I ever survived the orgasm she gave me. I feel like a bomb exploded deep inside of me, leaving me traumatized, but not in a bad way—this was good. This was amazing.

Unexpectedly, she brings me a glass of water and I sit up, accepting it, pleased by her thoughtfulness. “Thank you.”

She sits beside me as I drink and pulls her fingers down a tendril of my hair, saying, “Thank you,” as she drops a kiss on my shoulder. Our eyes meet over the glass and the moment feels like it could go awkward quickly. I lower the glass to look at her fully. She is still completely dressed, minus shoes.

“Am I going to get to see you naked now?”

She tilts her head and I can see she is uncomfortable. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

I frown. “I don’t understand. What we just shared was amazing. Did I—?”

She puts her fingertips to my lips, to silence my insecurity. Her fingers smell of soap...and faintly of me. She kneels in front of me, taking my hands.

I watch her face as she struggles with what she wants to say until she finally says, “This is the hard part for me. I’m not very good at relationships because I have a hard time sharing parts of myself.”

I bite my lip, listening, not interrupting. “I don’t relate very well to my body and that has caused me to have a lot of issues. It usually takes me so long to share the weird bits of myself that whoever I am dating loses interest before we get to the part where we’re equally naked.”

I do interrupt. “But we’re friends. And I think you are beautiful...I don’t see any weird bits.”

“Ah.” She smiles, but it is sad, or forced, or a combination of the two that makes me feel a strange sadness, watching her struggle. She taps her head. “The odd bits are in here. I have a few self-esteem issues that tend to ruin relationships for me.”

“You fooled me,” I say. “I see a very confident, very sexy Geri when I look at you.”

“You didn’t say woman.” She looks at me and there seems to be a glimmer in her eyes that wasn’t there a second prior. “You said Geri...a very sexy Geri...instead of a very sexy woman. Why?”

I sigh, thinking that maybe I screwed up. I have no idea what I'm saying or thinking. "You feel very masculine to me, sitting here, like this. I keep thinking that I should be able to reach between your legs and find a dick. So, yes, you are sexy as hell, but woman didn't quite fit...and I didn't want to say that you appear to be a very sexy, confident *man*."

She smiles. "Geri is okay."

Standing, she pulls my hand to her crotch. I am surprised by the heat rising from her center.

"It feels that way to me too. Sometimes, I think that I should have a dick. Sometimes, not often, I'll *pack*. I didn't tonight, because you're such a sweet, straight girl and I didn't want to freak you out."

I would have thought I would have noticed *that* over the years.

"If I was going out with a girl who could accept that sometimes when I go out on dates I enjoy a little gender play, someone who can accept me as the big, bad dyke that I am," she says sarcastically, laughing at herself and thereby making the moment a lighter one, "I would wear a harness and a strap-on."

I bite my lip to keep from interrupting, it seems her confession is hard enough without my comment. With her head ducked down, like she's embarrassed, she sits beside me. She doesn't look at me, but does tease her fingers over my thigh. "Strapped on, I would use her like a man would—if it would increase her enjoyment as well—and most of the time I can orgasm that way because the harness rubs my clit just enough while I'm thrusting, and of course there's the mental part too."

Blushing, she finally meets my gaze.

"I wouldn't have been freaked out," I say. "I'm not an innocent. I work in the porn industry. I've *seen it all*."

"Maybe next time then." She winks.

"I'll expect it," I say, making her laugh, and just that quickly the awkwardness dissipates.

Readjusting to lie on the bed beside me, she ends up stretching out, curling onto her side to face me. I fidget around to mirror her. Her hand caresses my arm. "Just the same, I didn't want to use you tonight. I wanted to make love to you."

"Mission accomplished." My lips twitch. "But now it's my turn to make love to you."

She tenses.

"Just a little?" I ask, rubbing my hand over her jeans. "I've never been with a girl before. I just want to explore you a little."

She looks unsure, but she doesn't stop me when I slide my hands under her shirt to feel her silky smooth skin. She is so *not male* but I don't say so. She trembles when I run my hands over her ribcage. *I want to see her*.

I lean over her, kissing her the way that she kissed me. My kisses follow the trail of my fingers as they seek upward, pushing the edge of her shirt as they travel. I reveal one inch of her beautiful flesh at a time. I look at her face to make sure that this is okay and I see that her eyes are closed. It makes me wonder if

they're closed with pleasure or whether she's hiding from me. The shirt is pushed above the sports bra that hides all of her femininity from the world. I kiss the line of flesh at the edge of the elastic band, making her shiver. Slowly, hoping she won't stop me, I lift the edge of her bra above her breasts, letting them spill out, such small, perfect breasts, barely rounded at all, but rounded enough for me to kiss the soft swell of them. Her nipples are large, larger than mine, and I can't deny the lure of them, so I take one of her nipples into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it, sucking lightly. I bite her softly and I hear her sharp intake of breath in response.

"Is this okay?" I ask.

"Yes," she whispers, swallowing hard.

I go to her other breast, giving it the same treatment, drawing a soft moan from her throat that makes my insides do a happy dance.

"Exploring you is fun," I announce with a giggle.

"You do realize you are killing me?" she says, opening one golden eye to look at me.

"Good," I say. "Because you *destroyed* me."

She tugs at the hem of her shirt. "That's enough exploring for one night."

"I want to explore all of you."

She shakes her head. "Next time."

I curl around her, happy with the promise of next time. "Snuggling is okay?"

She nods. "That I can do."

I'm not surprised when she leaves the bed long enough to turn off all the lights. In the dark, I hear her undressing. I hear her shirt slide over her head and then the zipper of her jeans. When she slides under the sheets, her bare legs rub against mine, leaving me wide awake and totally turned on. I want her. I want to touch her and kiss her and lick her. I want her to scream out my name, but I settle for spooning against her, feeling that she has left both her bra and panties on. I decide morning will be soon enough to challenge her boundaries.

Morning brings a new disaster.

She is awake, showered and dressed before I even realize it is morning. She sits on the bed and kisses my cheek. "I hate to do this, but I have to go."

"Go?"

"Business. In British Columbia, to be exact. It's fairly urgent, or I'd put it off..." She kisses me on the cheek quickly and opens the door to go. *She's really leaving. Why didn't she mention this last night?*

"No, it's okay," I say. "I understand."

But, left alone in the hotel room, I don't understand. I don't understand anything. I had sex with Geri. *I had sex with a girl.*

Chapter Eight

I close my eyes against the beautiful azure of the Sea of Cortez. This is my hiding place, my villa on the sea, although I keep telling myself that I'm not hiding. I'm reevaluating. That sounds so much better, to be here taking account of my life to this point. Certainly not pouting because I went from the sexiest woman in America to a dried-up, washed-out, over-the-hill porn star in the space of a conversation. And definitely not because I had sex with a girl and it confused the hell out of me.

I am not old!

I am not a lesbian.

So here I am, in Cabo San Lucas, baking in the sun, thinking too much, and mourning my loss of self because I don't know what else to call it. Without even looking, I spray oily passion-fruit-and-coconut-scented SPF 30 over my skin.

I'm not hiding.

I might be a mental breakdown waiting to happen though.

It might be easier if Simon weren't calling me every hour on the hour. I think he must be desperate for the money. It's merely inconvenient for my brain that his every message says the same thing or a variation of the same thing. *I love you. I'm falling apart here, not knowing if I am ever going to see you again.* Each message ending with the plea, "Call me."

I've wanted him for so long—and there have been a few *almosts*—but then he always backs away...and I can't trust him to not back away again. I'd be crazy to call him.

Geri.

Now, that's a ridiculous thought and one I keep having over and over. It's probably best she left when she did, the way she did. Abrupt, but it saved so much awkwardness. What isn't good is the fact I can still smell her, taste her, *feel* the way it felt to have her lips pressed against mine. It makes no sense that I want her as desperately as I do...I am not a lesbian!

I think about the first time I saw her, sitting with the girls, and the instant attraction. I wanted her. For a second, I mused on the question, "Does this mean I'm bi?" But the thought flitted away and I haven't considered it much since. I guess the question deserves a second look, because obviously, I'm attracted to Geri...

I close my eyes, thinking about all of the women I've ever talked to, all of the women who I've had the thought *my God, she's gorgeous*. I've never considered approaching any of them. *So why Geri?*

Why now?

A sudden breeze ruffles the leaves of a clump of palms far to the right, startling a dozen small sea birds from their roost. And I open my eyes to watch their flight over the gently lapping waves. I replay yesterday morning in my mind again and again. I know I'm not in love with Geri, but I feel like I'm falling in love with Geri. I'm intelligent, smart enough to know that it's just projection. Because I am acutely aware of the years I have wasted believing that if Simon continued having sex with me, it meant on some deeper emotional level that he was in love with me. *I am such an idiot.* Wouldn't you think that being a porn star for twenty years would convince me that sex and love have absolutely nothing in common? Sex is sex. I try to remember love. What did it feel like before Simon got in my head and messed things up?

I keep hearing my grandmother's voice asking me, "Is the money worth it? Is the *man* worth it?"

I snort. Gran didn't think any man was worth anything. She barely tolerated my father and he was her son. She definitely wouldn't understand that, if Simon loved me, yes, any amount of pain or heartbreak would be worth it. How can you explain to someone that love would be worth everything?

On the teak side table, my cell phone rings and I jump, grabbing it quickly to read the Caller ID and hating how far my disappointment drags me under when I see that it isn't Geri but Simon. Why did I even look? Why am I upset that Geri hasn't called...and even more upset because Simon won't stop calling?

I'm fine. *I'm going to be fine.*

I lay the phone back on the table and put my teak lounge in a more upright position. I think too much and end up staring at my toes. My French pedicure is chipped and I have fine white sand sprinkled between my toes. I rub my hand over the smooth wooden armrest of the chaise I'm lying in and think that it is the exact same chair I was lying in the last time he came to Cabo to drag me back to Seattle.

Has it really been ten years?

"You look like a girl with quitting on her mind." His voice had startled me and I'd jumped a little, which had made him laugh.

"Not really," I lied. I'd actually been thinking I'd wasted enough time moping around waiting for him to fall in love with me and that I should run as fast and as far away from him as I possibly could and never look back...so I bought an oceanfront, two-story, stucco villa. I'd decided to never go back.

"You're hiding in Cabo."

"Can't a girl just be in need of a little fun in the sun?" I'd asked, trying to avoid a confrontation until I'd figured a way out of my contract. "You have realized that Seattle is a pretty dreary place to live, right?"

"You've lived in Seattle a decade already. I think you're acclimatized to the clouds by now," he'd argued and I gave it right back to him. "No, three hundred days of rain a year is not something people get used to, it's something they endure. So, what brings you to Cabo? Afraid of losing your biggest star?"

"Nah, I have a contract. I'm here because I miss you."

I'd known he was lying, but had chosen to let my heart believe. With a shaking hand, I'd picked up my frozen drink with too many bright, colorful umbrellas leaning against the rim and batted one out of the way so that my lips could find the straw. Nonchalantly, I'd informed him, "I've only been gone four days."

"It's been a lonely four days."

I admit it, I was easy then. My heart wanted to believe, so it fell for his every line, flipped over his every smile, and I chained myself tighter to his lies. "So does that mean that you are going to spend the next four days on the beach with me? Because I'm not coming back."

"Not even if I beg?"

"Not a chance." I'd pursed my lips and taken another long draw of the icy, too-sweet drink.

"Then I guess I'm yours for four days."

"Really?" I'd bounded out of the chaise, bowling him onto the sand, straddling him. I'd pushed open his suit coat and started to pull off his tie. Sand flew everywhere.

"This is a three-thousand-dollar suit," he'd complained.

"And you wore it to the beach?"

He'd grabbed my face and rolled me onto my back, "I've missed you."

My heart smiled.

We had sex in the sand, which turned out to be every bit as erotic as Hollywood would lead you to believe—and twice as messy—then within hours we were in the air, flying back to Seattle, with his promise that this time we could make it work.

I frown at the memory. It had been a ruse and I'd been too blind and too dumb to see the truth. I didn't want to see the truth. *So why am I seeing the truth now?*

I imagine him showing up again. I imagine him begging me to go with him to Tokyo. I imagine him getting down on one knee and proffering a diamond ring... I fall asleep imagining how many ways I can tell him to take a hike.

Day two in Cabo and my mood is worse. I'm afraid that it is because Simon hasn't shown up. I want to feel wanted and needed. I want him to tell me that asking me to retire was a mistake. I want to be strong enough not to cry every time I think that I might just never see him again. I don't bother going to the beach, deciding I don't have the energy to drag myself any farther than my villa's infinity edge pool to lounge in the sun after a sleepless night spent tossing and turning.

I feel like screaming as I hide behind my big, square-framed sunglasses with the extra-dark lenses to hide the puffiness of my red, swollen eyes. Baking in the sun, lying to myself that it doesn't matter if I am ever loved...not by Simon...not by Geri...and, let's face it, really, who would be capable of falling in love with me anyway? I gave up my right to love when I chose this immoral path of self-destruction.

I gave up any right I had to marriage and babies when I signed that first contract and started my career. Facing the real reason I've tried so hard for so many years to be the best porn star in the world was so that I could stay near Simon. I've waited two decades for Simon to fall back in love with me, but it hasn't just been that I wanted Simon to love me. I wanted the dream. I wanted a family. I wanted a baby. And somewhere in my messed-up head I decided that if he could be a producer of erotic films and a father, he wouldn't take issue with me being a porn star and a mother. I mean, who else in their right mind would want me to be the mother of his children?

And it's certainly too late to be worrying about *that* now.

A stream of photos runs through my head, celebrities in their forties recently in the headlines who have given birth. Halle Berry, Julia Roberts, Naomi Watts. I think for a second that I could have a baby. *If I wanted to.*

I am insane.

I can't have a baby...can I?

Yes. I. Could. If I really wanted to. There is absolutely no reason why I couldn't have a baby. And, with today's technology, I don't even need a man to make it happen. *Oh shit. Do I want a baby?*

Day three in Cabo I throw my cell phone into the ocean because I can't deal with one more call from Simon and no call from Geri. After such a beautiful night with her, I can't believe she really isn't going to call. *God, I'm such a fool.*

Day four in Cabo I use the villa's landline to call Geri because I have to hear her voice. I've started to believe that the moment we shared was purely a hallucination, but she doesn't answer her cell and I don't have any other number for her while she is away. I'm pissed as hell that she hasn't called, but then it dawns on me that I am repeating history. First Simon, now Geri. Convincing myself that I am in love, but the person is a completely unacceptable choice—Simon because he's a misogynistic bastard and Geri because she's a woman. I mean, even if I'm bisexual, can a relationship between women ever really stand the test of time? And not to be rude, but I really love cock...and she doesn't have one.

I close my eyes, remembering the intimacy we shared. I didn't miss having a penis in the room that night. I snort at the observation. *This isn't helping!*

Day five in Cabo and I don't even make it downstairs. I've decided that I do want to have a baby. I don't need a man in my life. I don't need a woman in my life. But I do want what I have never had the

opportunity to have...a child. Maybe I am seeking the holy grail of relationships—unconditional love—or maybe I am finally acting on the desires that propelled me to stay in Simon's life as long as I have. I've always seen myself having his baby. But, after four wakeful nights, I had an epiphany.

I. Want. A. Baby.

It doesn't have to be Simon's. I crawled from the bed to in front of my computer to do some online research. There is sure to be a fertility clinic in Seattle, which means my baby could be as close as the nearest sperm donor.

I am consumed by my new desire to have a baby, and the more I research, the more excited I'm becoming. And nervous. Am I really thinking I want to have a baby? And I'm terrified because the answer is a very big *Yes!* even though not everything I read online is encouraging. I find a lot of scary information related to pregnancy post-forty, which leads me to track down the best fertility specialist in Washington, Dr. Abram Jefferies. I manage to secure an appointment for Monday, thanks to a cancellation and my well-timed phone call. I decide to look upon the serendipity of the moment as a green light.

I hang up the phone and take a new interest in the thumbnails listed on my computer screen, the week-to-week development of a fetus from just a few cells to birth. I click on one and gasp at the image of a four-week embryo. I click another and another.

"Miss Simone?" I glance up from the computer screen where I've been staring at the perfectly formed body of a sixth-month fetus and find the villa's maid waits patiently in the doorway of the office. I answer, "Yes, Esmeralda?"

She is older, mid-to-late sixties, and tends to hover, mothering me a little too much, fretting that I may not survive this latest emotional collapse. I expect that she needs another assurance that there is absolutely nothing I need her to do for me. "I'm fine."

"There is a gentleman caller."

Gentleman caller, my ass. *Simon!*

I nod at Esmeralda, closing the lid to my laptop. No need for anyone else to see that I am researching my fertilization options...

I'm still wrapped in the floral silk robe that I threw on when I climbed out of bed, but I don't take the time to dress. Barefoot, I walk quickly down the hallway and almost run down the stairs, my heart pounding through my chest, though not for the reasons of the past.

I'm furious—and for the first time in fifteen years, I'm embracing that fury.

I see him standing in the foyer, so nonchalantly, so self-assured. So damn cocky.

"I'm not having sex with you," I tell him. "I'm furious with you."

"I didn't handle things very well, and I apologize, but not taking my calls? Really, Simone, that is a level of immaturity I never expected from you." He steps closer, attempting to close the gap between us. I cross my arms and tap my foot impatiently.

"I'm sorry I didn't handle it very well when I asked you to retire."

"You should be sorry." I am not going to make it easy for him to ask me to come back. I knew he'd ask. I am *the face* of Wet City Media.

"Well, I am."

"Good."

He lifts his brow and takes a step forward. "I need you, Simone." He puts his hands on my shoulders and gazes deeply into my eyes.

"You need my money...for AsiaFlix...you don't need me."

"You're wrong about that," he insists. "I got another backer. I'm here for *you*."

I narrow my eyes, wanting so desperately to believe. Where his skin touches mine, I feel like I am being pulled forward by a magnet. He dips his head and I know what is coming next because a thought floats through my brain. *This is wrong*. But then, his lips hover over mine and I inhale his scent—expensive cologne, cigarettes, and coffee. It feels like an insane déjà vu...and it is...because we have been here before. Maybe not exactly here, not in the foyer, but here, in Cabo, when he came to take me back to the studio.

He kisses me and I kiss him back and a surge of lightning goes up my spine. *If I am a lesbian, this wouldn't be happening*.

His tongue sweeps inside my mouth and for a moment I forget every argument why I should be pushing him away. In his arms, I feel safe and I can forget how mad I am at him.

I push his jacket off his shoulders.

My robe drops between us and he closes his eyes before lowering his mouth to take my nipple between his lips. He sucks then bites.

Bisexuals are attracted to both men and women.

"I don't need foreplay," I insist, wanting to forget the night with Geri, wanting to forget that it felt different than *this*. I unbuckle his belt and open his pants, sliding my hand into the waistband of his white cotton underwear to find him already hard and ready. "Just fuck me."

I don't have to ask twice. With a growl, he lifts me and as I push down the barrier of his white cotton briefs and wrap my legs around his waist, he thrusts, sinking home. I let out a sob as emotion rolls through me. He crushes me between his body and the stucco wall of the foyer.

He thrusts to my cries as I release the anguish that is all tied in a lump in my middle. This is sex. Just sex. Rutting. Nothing. I am as detached as when I am shooting a film. Penis. Dildo. Vibrator. Does it matter?

Oh God.

Geri...

I wasn't detached with her. Emotion was attached to each lick, each kiss, each bite...

I'm a fucking lesbian.

It all makes sense now. Why I didn't date, why I was hidden in the shadows of the high school halls. Watching. I wasn't watching the boys, I was watching the girls. The girls were sexy, enticing, interesting. The boys were just wallpaper. As an adult, I haven't dated...

I've worked.

I've pursued the white picket fence and baby dream with Simon starring as the lead role, but he is just wallpaper.

I scream, reaching for the pleasure I know I can find in his thrusts, trying to block out Geri's beautiful, exotic eyes. I hate myself for opening to this man...again...and realizing it's a deep need seated in wanting to be loved, regardless of who I am or what I've done. With despair, my body shudders and shakes with relief as my orgasm washes through me. Simon continues to hold me while I sob, my arms and legs wrapped around him, long after he has gone soft inside of me, because I finally know what I want. I figured out the answer to my own personal happiness and it may just be too late.

I'm a lesbian.

I'm in love with Geri.

I'm a porn star.

Geri hates the porn industry.

My life led me to her, but she doesn't want me because of who I am.

Facing the irony of my life makes me want to vomit, especially when Simon puts me down on my feet and his warm come drips down my thigh.

I bend and pick my robe up off the cool tile while he adjusts his clothing. I can't look at him. I disgust myself. I pull on my robe as I cross to the other side of the foyer, putting distance between us. I want him gone. I want him out of my house. It is horrible enough thinking that Geri hasn't called because of what I am. Porn star. Slut. Disgusting. Am I trying to prove it to myself that I am not worth loving by repeating history with Simon again and again? I really am some kind of freak. "I want you to leave."

Simon's lips twitch, like he is suppressing a laugh.

"I know I instigated this." I wave my hands in front of me to emphasize *this* without having to say it out loud that we had sex. Again. "It's my fault."

He does chuckle at that.

"And now, you assume that after we have sex, I'll follow you back home because I always follow you back home. We can't keep doing this."

"What this?" he teases.

"This." I point between him and me. "This isn't a healthy relationship."

He closes that gap between us and pulls me into him, squeezing my ass. "You feel healthy."

“No! Not this time.” I push against his chest, trying to escape. “I should vow to hate you all of my days for what you have done to me. What you keep doing to me.”

He laughs. “What I’ve done to you? You’re a very wealthy woman, I hardly think you should hate me for that. And, if you remember, you came into this business quite willingly.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not talking about making me a porn star, Simon. You broke my heart. You shattered my illusions of love.”

“Love is a highly overrated commodity,” he tells me, his face lowering to kiss me. I slap him. Slap him hard enough that my palm stings and my eyes water. “Get out, Simon. I’m not playing this game any more.”

He looks stunned. I honestly think he didn’t see that coming and why should he have?

“Announce my retirement. Do whatever you have to do to wrap up my career. I’m done. I’ve been done for a very long time...I just wasn’t paying attention.”

He steps back away from me, rubbing his jaw, which I’m pleased to see is blazing bright red. He mutters around his hand, “That’s going to leave a mark.”

“I hope it does!”

His eyes narrow as he watches me, unsmiling. “I don’t want to leave it this way, Simone. Tell me what you’re thinking. What’s going on in your head?”

“Does it matter? You’ve never cared before.”

He crosses his arms and leans against the cool, white stucco wall. “That’s harsh. I care very deeply for you and what is going on in your brain tends to affect both of us.”

“Us?” I square my jaw and press my lips together in a tense line. “There is no us. Especially after I retire.”

We stand there, staring at each other long enough for me to get uncomfortable, but not long enough to soften my resolve.

He whispers, “Talk to me. Tell me what’s going on. I really am worried about you.”

My shoulders slump and I try to rally against the coming assault, but when he looks at me with concerned eyes, I want to believe so badly that he really is worried. It proves I haven’t learned anything. No matter how many times he uses the same tactic, no matter that now I can see straight through the bullshit. I want to believe his bullshit.

“Miss Simone?” Esmeralda announces from the doorway. “I placed a pitcher of iced margaritas on the veranda for you.”

“Thank you, Esmeralda.” I dismiss her with a nod and watch as she disappears back down the hall before turning back to face Simon.

Simon lifts his hands up in mock surrender. “I promise I won’t try anything. I just want to talk...old friend to old friend.”

How can I argue against that?

I lead Simon out onto the covered veranda. Ceiling fans rotate overhead, stirring the air, but a real breeze would be even more welcome. It's very warm. Hot. I don't envy Simon in his long sleeves, tie and suit jacket. Maybe his discomfort will lead to his quick departure.

I pull a chair away from the table and sit. He takes off his jacket and rolls up his sleeves before sitting. I don't feel sorry for him and I especially don't ask if he'd be more comfortable inside.

"Why do you always go south?"

"The heat reminds me of home. I find it comforting," I answer. "Why do you always feel a need to stalk me?"

"I'm not stalking you. I'm purely selfish. I sleep better when I know you are safe and sound in Seattle."

"Right." I shake my head at his flimsy excuse and take a sip of my drink, humming with appreciation because Esmeralda makes the best margaritas I've ever had the pleasure of drinking. Her secret is agave nectar. I keep sipping, watching Simon over the rim of my damp glass. He looks out over the pool to the sandy beach and calm sea below. "Why are you really here?"

"I need you to come back to Seattle. There are papers that need to be signed, a final show to be taped...and a retirement party to attend."

"Fine."

"No argument?" he asks me warily. "Why the change in heart?"

I smile. "Vanity, Simon. I'm a woman. I didn't want to face the fact that I'm old, undesirable—"

He coughs and shifts in his seat. "You are far from undesirable."

"But I am forty-four," I admit. "Men want to see perky, twenty-something girls playing volleyball naked. They want to see girls who look like they are twelve with their shaved mons and underdeveloped bodies." I pause. "There will always be a market for the buxom blonde..." I point at my covered breasts through the gap in my robe and smile idiotically to illustrate the point by exposing my perfect, not sagging, not surgically enhanced double-D's, "...but I don't want to be pushed to the MILF section, or worse. I'd like to leave while I still look good...and while I still have enough life left in me to do something else."

He sighs and nods. "So your mind is made up?"

"Book the retirement party," I say enthusiastically.

"And one more set?" he asks. "We'll make it special, an anniversary slash retirement special."

I nod. "One more and that's it. I have a life to get started."

"You seem awfully excited to do something else." He frowns, thinking too hard. "What's going on? Are you considering another studio?"

"Oh Simon," I sigh. "Believe me when I say this. I am finished. The best years of my life are in front of me."

“You mean your time working for me hasn’t been the best years of your life?”

“I had fun. I had a good time most days.” I laugh. “Hell, what other job promises orgasms as a perk?”

“And amazing health insurance.” He chuckles.

I smile and lift my glass. “To happiness.” Then take a long swallow of the cold liquid.

“So, what are you going to do after your retirement?”

I look away shyly, blushing, as the thought of a rosy-cheeked infant fills my mind.

“What?” he cajoles curiously. “Not even a hint?”

I sigh, rolling my eyes, but then succumb to the temptation to tell somebody what I’ve been thinking. “My biological clock is ticking. I want to have a baby.”

His jaw drops and I believe it is the first time I’ve seen Simon speechless. He stutters a second before he actually forces out the word with a gasp, “Baby?” And then he explodes. “You can’t have a baby!”

“Excuse me?” My smile disappears.

“You’re a porn star, Simone.”

“I’ll be retired before I ever give birth, I assure you.”

“Your insurance coverage covers abortions. There’s no reason for a hasty decision here,” he rambles. “Damn it! Who the fuck is the father? Never mind, it doesn’t matter. We could narrow it down, but it really doesn’t matter.”

Narrow it down? The list of possible fathers? I tilt my head, deciding that he is the emotionally unstable one at the table. “I’m not pregnant! I said my biological clock is ticking. I said I want a baby.”

The relief that crosses his face is unbearable, making me sorry I thought I could talk to him about it. *Why am I such an idiot when it comes to this man?*

“You’re not pregnant?”

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

“Thank God,” he says. Reaching across the table, he pats my hand. “This is a tough, emotional time for you, babe, I get that. Don’t be too quick to jump into any life-changing situations. It wouldn’t be right.”

I bristle at the thought that, because I’m a porn star, he thinks I’m not good enough to be a mother. “You do realize that my being a porn star embarrasses you more than it does me, right, Simon?”

He looks flustered. “That’s crazy. I absolutely love it that you’re a porn star,” he leers.

He squeezes my fingertips. “You know when all of this began, I thought you’d see a few years in the bright lights, I never in a million years thought I’d have to wait two decades for you.”

I sit, stunned. He looks out over the ocean. “I think you are the only woman I’ve ever really loved and it’s taken me a long time to figure that out. So let’s forget all this baby talk and focus on us.”

His gaze travels back to my face and I snap my mouth closed, not sure what to think or believe. My heart races, wanting his words to be truth, but my brain, on overtime, refuses to let me believe, reminding me of all the other promises, all of the past false starts.

He leans across the table to kiss me and I let him, but I feel detached, watching myself. I feel like I do on a shoot when I am analyzing how the shot will look and correcting each pose. It dawns on me that I am thinking quite clearly, logically, and what I don't feel is what I should be feeling in this moment. His mouth moves over mine with an expertise born from years of perfecting his craft and it makes me feel absolutely nothing.

When he finally pulls away, he gazes longingly into my face. "I do love you."

I watch him and decide his words sound like a rehearsed line. He looks at his watch and says, "If we leave now—"

"Not we, Simon," I interrupt him, delivering my own lines with forceful intent, hoping I get through my whole speech before chickening out. "*You*. You catch the jet. You fly back to Seattle. You finalize all of the plans for my retirement party. I am staying right here for rest of this week."

He looks dumbfounded for a second, but recovers quickly, pulling a blank mask into place. He pushes his chair away abruptly and stands. "You honestly don't want to come back to Seattle? Because I'm a busy man, Simone, I can't lie around a pool all day, waiting for you to come to your senses."

"Does coming to my senses include giving up my plans to have a child?"

He looks incredulous. "A baby is a deal breaker. Definitely. I can honestly say that there is no baby in my future. So, if it's me and you..."

I nod, also standing.

His face turns softer when he thinks for a moment that he has won. He thinks that I will beg him to wait for me to grab my bags, but I surprise him by crossing my arms and standing my ground. "I guess it's a good thing that I've taken the last twenty years to figure out how to live without you in my life."

His entire face goes red.

I feel detached as I watch him storm into the villa. *He's leaving*. I should be sad, but I feel such a relief that it is over and I realize with sudden clarity that it finally is over. I have released myself from whatever it was that bound me to Simon Kramer.

I hear his car door slam and I cover my mouth with a shocked gasp as my knees go out from under me, sitting me down hard in the chair. I can't tell you how long I sit like that...numb, my hands still covering my mouth in shock. A while. Long enough for the sun to set and the deep purple shadows of twilight to settle around me.

I do eventually blink back into awareness and realize that I'm not sad. Honestly, I feel nothing and it feels exactly the same as the last twenty years has felt. I close my eyes, realizing that there is one exception. Geri. Even if it was for just one night, I felt something...

Idiot! I have to stop this! There is no Geri!

Chapter Nine

First stop stateside is Dr. Abrams and, as I arrive in the parking lot, jetlagged and scared to death about what I am about to do, I wish I was back in Cabo. I think I could hide there forever, not making decisions, not worrying about relationships, just floating on the high brought on by sun and salt water.

The doctor's waiting room is packed and it makes me a little claustrophobic. Who knew that getting pregnant, something I've always considered a natural occurrence that happens when you don't take steps to prohibit its happening, so often requires medical intervention for its success? At least I'm not alone in the unhappy uterus department. I don't feel like such a freak of nature now.

The longer I sit, watching couples go in together, I realize that I am the only one here alone and I am a spectacle. I don't mind the staring, I've gotten used to being stared at over the years. It's the alone part making me nervous. I am alone. I will be raising this baby alone.

As the clock ticks, the thought becomes more and more terrifying. I am white-knuckled anxious by the time my name is called. I hurry to the nurse's side, ready for the next stage of sit and wait, because isn't that always the way of it? Sit in the waiting room. Wait. Get called into the examination room. Wait longer...

What I am not prepared for is to be led to the doctor's office, where he sits behind a large cherry desk, a huge bookcase lined with thick medical tomes behind him.

He picks up a manila file, my file I assume, flips it open, scans a page of notes, and closes the file, all before he actually meets my gaze.

"Ms. Sinclair." He says my name and I wait for something more...but there is nothing more said; so after a long uncomfortable pause, I assume that that was his way of saying hello. I follow suit, saying, "Doctor."

Even before he says another word, the expression on his face turns my green light yellow...

"Ms. Sinclair, I don't want to dash your enthusiasm, I merely want to caution you, and I am certain that you have probably put a lot of thought into this decision. So here, we decide to become partners in the venture of creating your baby. My part of the process is to fertilize your eggs." He sits behind his long cherry desk, wearing his white lab coat with his name embroidered in red on the left side, his hands are folded over his stomach. He exudes cockiness...and boredom. I wonder how many times a day he gives this particular sales pitch. "And I want to assure you that I am an expert. I can fertilize eggs all day long. Now, your job of course is a bit more complicated, but has absolutely nothing to do with skill. Your job

rests with your uterus. So, in essence, your uterus must fall in love with one of the fertilized eggs I implant and allow that egg to hang out there for nine months. After reviewing the file your gynecologist sent over, I'm not convinced your uterus is ready for that kind of a commitment. It also seems you have extensive scarring along your fallopian tubes and that is traditionally where fertilization takes place."

I sit on the edge of my seat, wringing my hands, focusing on the tall, full bookcase behind him, trying so hard not to meet his eyes, because if I do, I might cry. I bite my lip, waiting for him to say more. He doesn't. I finally meet his gaze. "So, what are you saying, Dr. Abrams? No?"

"I'm saying that I wish you had come to see me ten years ago."

I can't hide the disappointment in my voice. "So you're saying you won't even try."

"I'm not saying that at all, Ms. Sinclair. I'm trying to prepare you for failure. I'm trying to make you realize that a lot can go wrong. I don't want you to get your hopes up, because this will be a long process."

"I don't understand."

"Time, Ms. Sinclair. I can fertilize your eggs every single month and try to convince them to implant and, eventually, odds are one of the eggs will implant and you will become pregnant. The question is, how much available time do we have left? A perhaps better option for you would be in-vitro fertilization, which bumps up your chances for success significantly, especially in your case, since the fertilization would take place in a lab and not your body."

"So we should do that then?"

"I believe it is your best option, but it isn't without some risk, the most likely being a multiple birth."

"Twins?"

"Quite possible."

That's fine," I say, adding nonchalantly, "Twins run in my family."

He flips through the file, saying as if he is checking through a list, "I see. Mother, nephews." He looks over his glasses. "We would want to limit your live births to two. It's much safer. So you will need to go in understanding that if more than two eggs implant, we would want to remove those over two."

"But if you only put two fertilized eggs inside of me...then there wouldn't be a problem."

"Unless one or both divides. Then there is the potential for two sets of identical twins and we would need to remove one set."

"Oh." My stomach rolls with the thought.

"We can limit that chance by keeping your fertilized eggs incubating in the lab slightly longer, using a blastocyst transfer instead of a three-day transfer. In the package of information you take home today there will be directions explaining every step of the process and what to expect." He barely takes a breath before continuing, "I will do everything I can to not only ensure your pregnancy, but a healthy pregnancy. A single live birth would be our first choice since our concern above all else is your health, and the fact is,

pregnancy is high-risk for an older mother. There can be complications, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, and then there is also the health of the infant to consider when an older mother is involved.”

I nod, having read all the horrible outcomes that are possible. “Birth defects?”

“Sure,” he answers nonchalantly, making me feel that those fears are perhaps exaggerated, but then he asks more seriously, “Will you be able to abort this baby at ten weeks if you find out that it is severely flawed?”

My mouth falls open and I realize that I hadn’t really thought that part through. “I don’t know.”

“In that case, will you be able to commit the rest of your life to raising a severely handicapped child if you choose to not abort? And the child’s health is only half of this question. If you die giving birth to your child, not likely, but possible, do you know who you would ask to raise the baby?”

My eyes go wide with his last question.

“I understand that it’s a lot for you to think about and I will understand if you decide to take this no farther than this initial consultation, but in case you do decide to go the route of in-vitro, I’m going to go ahead and get you going on some prenatal vitamins.”

I watch him write a prescription for vitamins, and take the slip of paper.

He opens the information package and shows me several pages that are important if I decide to go the in-vitro route, directions for how to monitor my fertility levels, and guidelines for when to call the office. “The direction card will tell you when to schedule your appointment for the first series of shots.”

“Shots?” I ask, trying to pay attention.

He nods. “The hormones to prepare your uterus.”

I nod.

“Ms. Sinclair.” He stands, holding out his hand. “I will do everything in my ability to achieve a successful pregnancy.”

“So, when can we start?”

“So, we’re going to make a baby? You don’t want to go home and think about it?”

I nod. “I’ve thought enough. I want to get started...immediately.”

“Great! The first thing we need to do is have you fill out a sperm donor request. On that form you will get to request exactly what you see as the most important qualities of your donor—hair color, eye color, height, race, nationality, even religious preference.” His smile doesn’t waiver as he launches into what I now know is the script part that he probably says a hundred times a week. I know it is a script, because although he pauses periodically to highlight certain points, his breath is measured, controlled, and he gets out all the words without thought. “What I will send home with you today are a few prescriptions so that we can start suppressing your natural cycle and medical science can go about taking control of everything your body does.”

“How do you feel about needles?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, but grabs his prescription pad and scribbles his name. He hands me the first, a standard oral contraceptive, which confuses the hell out of me because I thought the goal was to get pregnant. He writes a second and scribbles his name.

“I’m writing this for Lupron, a low-level estrogen. You will wait until you have taken two weeks worth of the contraceptive and then you will start injecting yourself with the Lupron once a day for three weeks. In a moment a nurse will demonstrate what you’ll need to do.” He glances up and passes me the piece of paper. “If you are squeamish, you may want to ask a friend or someone you trust, normally I would suggest your partner, but I understand that there is no partner involved?”

He had to rub it in just once that I am alone, didn’t he? I square my shoulders and lift my chin. “Don’t worry, I’m not squeamish.”

He smiles. “Good, good. Now, there are some side effects, including fluid retention, headaches, and hot flashes, but don’t worry unless they become excessive. In that case, call and we’ll determine if anything unusual is going on. I want to see you in four weeks.”

He gives me a look of encouragement. I try to not appear too nervous. I decide I’m not doing a very good job of that because he says, “Don’t worry, your uterus is in good hands.”

I barely squelch my snort of laughter.

His smile widens. “Finally, a smile. I thought I was going to have to break out the big, red rubber nose.”

He’s been trying for humor? Maybe dry, English humor...

“You are going to have to relax, Ms. Sinclair. That is your only job and if you can do your job, I can do my job, and a baby will happen. But stress, anxiety...those factors can inhibit my job, making success harder.”

I release a heavy sigh and try to relax.

The nurse’s brief introduction to how to give myself an injection is a momentary distraction from the bottom line, followed by racing as quickly as I can to the parking lot, where I vomit in the grass median beside my car. A few minutes later, I manage to climb behind the wheel and buckle up before I start bawling. It seems like I’m spending an exceeding amount of time in my car crying. For someone looking for the best parts of life, that seems ridiculous, especially considering I hadn’t cried in over a decade until I started this search...

Can I do this?

Can I really do this?

A week later, I am still moping and worried that I may not be able to have this baby naturally. Even if Dr. Abrams bypasses my fallopian tubes, and even if we wait long enough to make sure there is only one

baby...and that it is not genetically faulty...what if the egg doesn't fall in love with my uterus like he said? I fill the scripts and start taking the dosages, but also start researching adoption options because I really can't face *complete failure*.

When the doorbells rings, all baby thoughts stall. I answer the door and Geri is on the other side of the threshold. I'm struck speechless for several seconds while she stutters over excuses and apologies for not calling or coming over sooner. I save both of us by saying, "I've been out of town too. Please, come in." I look in the hall mirror and really wish I hadn't. Ponytail, no makeup, ancient shorts and an old T-shirt that doesn't color coordinate. *Oh hell*.

"Where did you go?" she asks.

"Cabo San Lucas." I lead her into the living room and she sits on the sofa. I take the chair opposite, pulling my feet up into the seat. "I have a villa there so that when I need to escape the crazy or do some serious thinking, I can get away."

"Cool. Wow." She sounds surprised. "I rarely ever get south of the border. My adventures always seem to take me north. Maybe you can take me sometime. I'd be up for some fun in the sun and there are some amazing eco-tourism opportunities there."

"Really?" I smile. *Really?* I feel like I'm dreaming. "I'd love that."

"Me too." She pauses, waiting for me to say something, but now I really don't know what to say because what I planned to say—I'm really glad you are here because I really like you—sounds so high school and the follow up line to that—I want to get to know you better—just seems so ridiculous. Then there is also the paranoia that she hasn't called because I'm a porn star and because she is too disgusted by that fact to want to see me again. *But she's here now, so what does that mean? Was I wrong?*

"Did you know that there is the potential of spotting over eight-hundred species of birds there?"

I snort. "Really? No, I didn't know."

"Sure, they aren't all permanent residents, but during migratory season, it can get crazy." She nods, her eyes bright. I love it when she talks about nature, she absolutely glows with enthusiasm. I imagine her in Cabo San Lucas with me, but I don't see us lounging by the pool or even walking hand in hand down the beach. I see her taking me to all of the wild places, canoeing around waterways or hiking the inland desert, and I'm surprised to realize that it is such an agreeable thought. I'd love to see those places with her. I wish I was brave enough to put it into words.

"I should have tried to call sooner."

"It wouldn't have mattered, I've been ditching all of my phone calls," I say, not about to admit that every time the phone rang, I'd wished it was her.

"I still could have called. Maybe you would have listened to the message," she says, sounding frustrated. "I'm not very good *at this*."

"This?"

“Asking for a second date,” she admits, blushing.

Second date? Really? Oh shit. What am I supposed to say to that? “Tell me something first.”

“Okay?” She sounds uncertain.

“Do you have a hard time asking all women for a second date? Or just porn stars?”

She blushes eight shades of pink before admitting, “You’re my first porn star, and to be honest, since Sheila, I haven’t asked anyone on a second date.”

“If we’re being honest, do you think we ever get past the part where I’ve been a porn star for twenty years?” There is a long pause and I regret asking the question. I should have gone with *I like you*. But just as I get ready to say something else, something even more ridiculous than that, she says, “I admit that it’s going to be tough. I guess I’m just so set in my opinions—”

“Then why did you bother to stop by?” She doesn’t answer, so I keep talking. “Geri, I’m a porn star, soon to be retired, but that’s beside the point. I’ve had lots of men and probably a few women lust after me, maybe even jack off to my videos. That’s honesty. And that’s okay. I can take honesty. All I need to know is are we meeting to end our friendship or to expand on it.”

I hear her breathe out, like she’d been holding it in. “I’m here...”

I watch her face intently, waiting, wondering what the next words will be, but she stands. I think she is leaving but she walks over to me and kneels at my feet. “I’m here because I’ve compared every woman since Sheila *to you*.”

I look at her standing in my bedroom and it seems almost impossible that she’s here or that, three weeks ago, we’d actually been lovers. I feel shy and uncertain. I really don’t have a clue what to do.

I walk over to stand in front of her and pull at the edge of her T-shirt hem. “I want to see you. I want to see all of you.”

She smiles but it manages to look like a frown on her. “Are you always going to be so difficult?”

“Yes. If wanting to see your beautifully made body as bare as the day you were born is being difficult.”

She sighs, but it sounds like a sigh of defeat to my ears and I tug her shirt over head before she can change her mind. She’s wearing a black half-cami bra that seems very sexy, despite being frill-free and lace free. I run my hands up her flat, smooth stomach before teasing my fingertips along the bottom edge of the fabric...barely lifting, barely touching her breasts beneath the fabric, but it makes her shiver and her response delights me. I pull her bra over her head and she bites her bottom lip. Her breasts are perfect, dark areolas, wide nipples, a bare curve of breast.

I hold her gaze as I rub my hands over her small breasts, loving the way her large, dark nipples feel against my palms. “You are so beautiful.” I kiss her quickly, a quick peck meant to distract her from the

fact that my hands have dropped to her waistband. I manage to unbutton the button before she stills my hands and asks, “Aren’t you a little overdressed for this occasion?”

I smile, hoping it looks as naughty as I feel, promising, “As soon as I have you naked, I’ll take off my clothes.” I unzip her pants.

“Have I mentioned that I like to be the dominant one in the relationship?”

“You might have mentioned that.” I swallow hard, looking at her. “Have I mentioned that I’ve never made love to a girl?”

“I seem to remember—”

I interrupt her. “At Maconochie’s? That was *you* making love to *me*. Now, it’s my turn to make love to you. And since I’ve never made love to a girl before, I’m just going to treat you like a man. Is that okay with you?”

I think I have her full attention now.

I nuzzle into her neck, kiss her throat. She trembles against me and I cup her face in my hands, giving her my mouth, and she takes it, kissing me full and hard. This role she knows, knows well, and I let her take what she wants from my mouth, kissing me soft then hard, sliding her tongue into my mouth, then pulling, sucking my tongue into her mouth.

I slide my hands down her arms, then hold on to her wrists, pulling her with me until the back of my knees bump the bed. I sit, pulling my mouth from hers. She looks down at me. I let go of her wrists and slide my hands into her jeans from behind, cupping her hips as I brave a look into her face, catching her gaze. Her eyes glow with need and desire and I know it is taking all of her own resolve to keep from pushing me down, to keep from pressing me into the bed.

That is her comfort zone.

For a second, I wonder who was top in her relationship with Sheila. I can’t imagine the woman I met being topped at all, but perhaps she allowed Geri to top her.

She still holds my gaze and I don’t stop looking, especially when I start to slide her jeans over her hips, stopping just below her buttocks. I shift my gaze down because I want to see the reveal. I’ve waited so long for this (at least it feels like eternity). I expected boy briefs, don’t ask me why, but I did, and I’m not disappointed to find she is wearing black ones. I run my fingers down the front, feeling her bulge, knowing that she is packing.

She fidgets, whispering my name as I cup her *package*. I’m nervous and excited, wanting to see the strap-on she hides beneath the briefs.

I know she’s waiting for me to be freaked out, waiting for judgment...waiting nervously...and I wonder if this isn’t partly why she hasn’t called. She fidgets again. I press against it, pushing it into her, feeling the texture of it, not a hard plastic, but surprisingly lifelike. She gasps and I imagine that, by pushing, I am pressing into her clit. I press again and her knees tremble.

“You are so sexy, Geri.”

“You’re killing me, beautiful.”

“Hmmm,” I say, nuzzling my cheek against the warm, soft cotton covering her dildo. I slide my hand into the waistband of her briefs and tug, pulling them only as far down as her jeans, leaving both jeans and briefs tucked just beneath her ass. With my cheek still pressed against the dildo, I rub my hands over her ass, teasing her skin to goose bumps. I pull her hips forward, pressing my cheek harder. She moans, so I take that to mean that whatever I am doing is okay.

I promised to make love to her like she’s a man, and if she were a man, I’d take his penis into my mouth about now. Is that okay? “I want to take your cock in my mouth.”

I look up into her face to see her eyes roll back in her head, before she looks down at me. She swallows hard and doesn’t say anything, but, holding my gaze, she guides my hand to the dildo, which is trapped in place beneath a strap. She lifts and the cock pops free, locked in place and standing ready in her harness. “Condom,” she says, and her voice cracks a little. “Back right pocket.”

I feel around to the folded-down edge of the jeans, trembling myself as my hand finds the pocket and the condom. I hand it to her, not trusting myself at the moment to do it right.

I feel floaty and surreal as I watch her slide the condom over her cyber-skin dildo. I don’t wait, putting the bulbous tip in my mouth as she is still pushing latex. My mouth follows her fingers, drawn down the shaft like a magnet. The condom tastes lightly of strawberry.

I feel the cock slide easily all the way to the back of my throat and bump there. That’s the turn-on for me, feeling the cock on the back of my throat. I try to remember to press into her a little as I play, hoping that her clit is being stimulated too.

It isn’t long before she is pressing my shoulders back, following me down onto the bed. She places her knees on either side of my shoulders and repositions over my mouth. She enters me slow and steady and I feel every tantalizing inch as she slides it deep, filling me tip to base until it rubs the back of my throat again. I think she senses that I like that. Like that a lot. And I moan, encouraging her with the hold I have on her half-bare, half-jean-covered thighs. I guide her along in the gentle rhythm that turns me on as I pull her deeper, *deeper*, into my throat.

I close my eyes, relaxing completely, giving her permission with the tug of my hands behind her thighs to fuck me. *Fuck my mouth*. My reward is her gentle thrusts and the sound of both of us moaning.

I slide my hands up her body, feeling the gentle curve at her waist before trailing higher to feel the delicate ripple of her ribcage. She trembles beneath my touch as I tease my fingers slowly back down again. She is so soft, so curvy, so very different than a man. I have no point of reference, other than seeing her thrust, my hands rested on the curve of her hips is the most erotic sight I have ever seen. She pulls back, pulls out, before I really want her to, but her gaze is liquid heat and need and I know that she wants to fuck for real now.

“Lie on your back,” I say. “I want to ride your cock.”

She rolls over, lies down. I crawl between her legs, pulling her jeans and her briefs all the way off and tossing them aside onto the floor to join her shoes. I don’t know when she stepped out of her shoes. Her socks are still on. I leave them on, liking the way she looks lying on my bed, wearing her socks, strapped on, the pink dildo standing at attention. I think my recent epiphanies have changed me, or at least what I’ve always considered erotic, sensual.

I pull my Mr. Smiley Face T-shirt over my head and she smiles as my breasts spring free of the fabric. I’d forgotten I’m not wearing a bra.

“I like the T-shirt. It’s cute.”

“I think I’ve had it since Junior High.”

“Big tits on a little girl.”

I tilt my head. “I barely remember being a little girl and I got my boobs in third grade.”

“I’m still waiting to grow boobs,” she says and that surprises me. I shimmy out of my shorts, revealing that I also didn’t take the time to pull on panties after my shower. I toss everything to the side, crawling up over her, until I am straddling her with her cock rubbing against my belly. I lean forward, taking her by surprise when I fill my mouth with her breast and suck hard on her nipple. She gasps and I wonder if sucking nipples is taboo.

I flatten out on top of her, partly holding her down as my mouth closes over her other nipple, deciding it needs equal attention. I suck, soft, hard, then lick, a quick tease, making her nipple bead into a hard point. The soft sounds she makes let me know she is enjoying my attention. I love playing with her breasts and take my time massaging each one, squeezing, rolling them beneath my palms, and I think driving her perfectly insane, if her reaction is any indication. Her hands fist into the sheets.

Sitting back, I pinch both of her nipples at the same time, a hard pinch.

“Oh!” She tries to struggle up, but I pinch again, going up onto my knees, angling over her standing-at-attention dildo-cock. When she sees my intention, she stops struggling, stops moving, barely breathing, even though I am still holding on to her nipples with my fingertips.

The head of the cock touches my pussy and I drop, letting it hit home and fill me in a fast, slick slide. Fully seated on her, I rock, pushing in, rubbing her until she moans, rubbing me until I can’t take it anymore, and within too short a time, we are both coming, fast, too fast, and hard, like teenage boys. Our sounds of pleasure come out growled, mine in higher pitch, hers a barked scream, and together the sound is harmonic perfection as we orgasm.

I close my eyes, wanting to hold on to the moment, but she forces me to open them when she commands, “Look at me.”

I do and the look I see on her face brings me to tears...tenderness, need...something more than that, which I refuse to consider. She pulls me down into her arms, whispering words meant to make me feel safe, wanted, cared for.

“You are so precious to me. I wish you knew how much I care for you.”

Her words make me cry on her shoulder and she lets me, not commenting, just holding me and repeating the words meant to make me feel good, but she doesn't say the only words I want to hear. *I love you*. Obviously finding love as a lesbian isn't any easier than finding love with a man.

Chapter Ten

My final shoot is today. I am both dreading and looking forward to it. I woke up remembering the other reason I don't date...why I don't have sex outside of work. It makes me remember that sex is more than two bodies joining just for sport or entertainment. What I feel while I am with Geri touches me deeper than skin, more intimately than mind...it is like our souls dance. I close my eyes, trying to not cry, wishing I'd known what intimacy could feel like...before Simon. I sigh heavily at the thought because I don't wish that, I don't wish I'd never experienced him. But now that I have experienced her...

Sex is magical.

I feel like an idiot. What if it is all a lie? Even before we had sex, I was hoping this relationship could be *the one*. Why am I so desperate for love?

Why can't she just say *I love you*?

It's been three days since Geri showed up on my doorstep and she hasn't left yet. That means something, doesn't it?

There is something seriously wrong with me. Not because she's a woman, but because I feel like I'm already *in love* with her. It feels like a repeat of the biggest mistake of my life—Simon—because I fell in love with him instantly and look how that turned out.

I want to believe that my reaction to Geri is nothing like my reaction to Simon.

For one thing, I'm thinking clearly. I know I cannot alter my life course for this woman. I regret not telling her about the appointment with the fertility specialist. I think I should have mentioned it. Surely over the course of the last few days the topic should have come up. I tell myself it is for the best that I haven't said anything, remembering Simon's reaction.

It's kind of like not mentioning that today is my last shoot when I left this morning. If I'd have mentioned that I was going to be filming, it would have ruined last night...*and this morning*...and both romps between the sheets were mind-boggling.

I close my eyes, thinking about how wonderful it is to be made love to by her.

I have learned to be sexy, I know I'm desirable, but I've never felt loveable. Yet, when she makes love to me, I feel sexy but also loveable.

Oh, I'm not going to deny the sex, the sex is great, the sex is amazing, the sex is consciousness-altering. I try to honestly believe our relationship isn't just about the sex, but then I immediately remember how it felt to be touched by her and my every nerve becomes aware.

I'm still not convinced I'm a lesbian though.

She probably thinks that I'm at the gym or the grocery, I didn't say that I am here, filming. One, I don't know how she'd react, and two, I don't know how I'd react if it went badly. I tell myself that it is my final shoot. After today, it's over, she won't have my career to object to.

I don't think that that part will matter if she finds out. I think she will be angry and hurt, maybe even betrayed. But, damn it, this is my job!

The shower room is steamy as I take one last look in the mirror. I toss my still-damp hair, drop my towel and shake my boobs. I can barely see myself through the fogged surface, so I swipe my hand across the glass, taking inventory, and find that on a purely physical level I'm not bad for forty-four.

At least I'll be going out on a high note and not a low note. Before my trip to Cabo, I feared retirement. And since? I can see a life beyond the cameras. I look in the mirror and try to see myself as a mother, not a porn star. The thought makes me smile and laugh. Blowing myself a kiss, I rewrap in my towel, ready for makeup. Ready for my final performance!

"Whoa, beautiful, not so fast!"

His voice startles me and I pivot to face the man behind the deep, heavily accented voice, breaking into a huge smile when I see that it is Hans, dressed as a janitor, complete with coveralls and an embroidered name patch that reads, "Joe".

I gasp, seeing the cameraman standing behind him, realizing immediately that the production company is going to make good on their promise that I will go out in style. He is already filming, no script. *Let's do this.* Today is the twentieth anniversary of my very first shoot. I was twenty-four, and Hans was my very first co-star, and in that scene, he played the janitor and I was the startled young co-ed.

He looks good, as good as the last time I saw him. He's incredibly sexy and his charisma is bar none, although there was nothing besides our sex scenes between us. He was a kind and patient teacher, and his being extremely hot hadn't made the job of getting naked with him any harder.

I bite my lip, remembering the hard, six-pack abs he used to boast and wonder if he is still as fit and toned as he was twenty years ago.

"The showers are closed for cleaning, Miss."

Without a script, we're all just ad-libbing, but by now I know how the game is played. I feign shock and fear for the camera. "Oh! I'm finished. I just need to grab my clothes."

He takes the three steps forward to caress my face, "Not so fast, sweetheart."

He takes me by surprise, grabbing the towel and jerking it off my body. The original scene wasn't played roughly, but then porn has entered a new age. He grabs me in an arm lock, forcing me over the counter. From his pocket, he pulls out a rubber bit and shoves it between my teeth, fastening it behind my head. Then, with quick hands, he ties my upper arms, wrapping a length of rope above and below my boobs. I whimper with conviction.

“Turn around and let me see those tits.”

He slaps my breasts then chuckles. “Still firm after all these years. Nice. Very nice. It’s good to see you again, Simone. Miss me?”

I nod, unable to speak around the bit.

“I don’t think you have...all these years and not a single phone call. I’m crushed.”

He sighs, flicking my nipple. “I think I need to teach you a little respect.”

And just like that the scene is set. He now has a reason to punish me that the viewers will be able to identify with. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pair of shiny alligator nipple clamps, which have a mean bite when he attaches them to my nipples. I make noise around my bit, protesting as I try to back away, but my resistance is all for the rolling camera. In truth, I have been hot and horny since I turned and saw him standing there.

Okay, bisexual, not a lesbian...

I like sex.

I like all sex...

I don’t think Geri would want to hear me say that though.

Sometimes, little surprises like this one, the adrenaline rush that sets my blood pounding, remind me why I stayed in this business as long as I did. Every day is different. Different scene, different partner. Some better than others. Hans was always the best in my mind. We had a chemistry that was like electricity sizzling between us and if I had doubts about my new career path before Hans, after I had no more doubts. I would have revenge and *fun*.

But to my disappointment, not all scenes were as wonderful as that first. Believe it or not, the sex, the bondage, the filming...it can all get a little monotonous. I might even say that there were days I was bored by it all. Right now, this moment, I’m anything but bored. My blood is boiling and I can’t wait to see what he has up his sleeve.

I don’t have to wait long. He pushes me over the vanity and spans me twenty times, one for each year, then he pulls me up and tells me to crawl behind him as he leads me to one of the main stages. Crawling makes me angry. I don’t know how anyone sees this as fun...

I also know the camera loves my distaste, my irritation, the rebellion it catches in my angry stare. I crawl because this is my job. I crawl, realizing that this is the last time I will ever do this, making something come loose in my chest...emotion. Not freedom, not joy, and not sadness or fear about what comes next in my life, but definitely melancholy. *This is my last film day.*

On my hands and knees, I follow, my brain replaying scene after scene, co-star after co-star, it is almost like my life is flashing before my eyes, but before I can lose it completely, I find twenty men lined up and waiting.

I'm beginning to sense a theme here, a theme that makes me laugh, even though a single tear does manage to escape, running down my cheek.

As I watch Hans, I notice one of the cameras following him as well. He turns to pick up something off a rough-hewn table then turns back around and walks toward me, carrying a heavy-duty vibrator. I feel my pussy do a little happy dance on the inside and immediately become aware of the wetness between my thighs.

God, I've loved this job...

What does that say about me? I've blamed Simon, all along, displacing any shame or guilt...but the truth is...I've loved this.

Is that why panic is building in my chest?

Is that why I feel like crying?

Hans doesn't come through the lobby. I waited, wanting to thank him for joining me on my final shoot and apologize for not finishing. Instead, I find Joey, our producer, and ask him where Hans disappeared to. "Oh, I talked him into another scene." He laughs again before saying, "Allison."

So that's the way it's going down...my replacement.

I nod, having seen her before. I agree that she will do well. Cute, young, double-D on top, thin and lithe everywhere else it's important. She has a gymnast's body and finds contortions easy. I imagine Hans has her tied in a classic hog-tie as a warm-up.

"You can watch. Stage three."

"Nah, that's all right. I need to get going."

"Really, I *want* you to. Simon is tying the new scene to the end of your retirement video. You know, a theme deal."

"What theme? Out with the old, in with the new?"

"Something like that." He laughs. I don't find it amusing. "Really, just go in, give him a peck on the cheek and tell Allison *good luck*. We'll get the whole thing on film."

"Seriously?"

"Go, go!" He rushes me down the hall. "You look hot in that dress," he comments. "I cannot believe you're leaving us. I swear you have five more good years."

"Five? Really?" I ask sarcastically, widening my eyes as if I'm shocked that I could have that many. I catch sight of Hans. I put on my stage smile and get ready to enter stage left. The sooner I get this scene over with, the sooner I'm out of here.

He has her bent over a gymnast horse, fucking her hard. She is blindfolded and has a ball gag in her mouth, but she is making all the appropriate noises that mean she's enjoying Hans' skill.

Joey pushes me forward and I am just about to say my line *I just came by to say goodbye*, when Hans starts screaming and falls against the girl's backside, twitching, obviously in pain. I rush to his side. "Are you all right?"

"My back!" he grits out.

Joey and two cameramen race in to try to help him. "Don't touch me!" he screams in agony. The naked girl is making hysterical noises because she has no idea what is happening.

"What on earth just happened?" Joey demands. A cameraman answers smartly, "The old guy's back just went out, dude."

I see a very short career for our cameraman in his future.

I lean over Allison, touching her gently on the shoulder to calm her down. "Don't move, sweetie. Hans is having a bit of a problem." I squat in front of her face and lift the blindfold so that we have eye contact. There's nothing worse than being tied up, blindfolded, and not knowing what in the hell is going on around you. "Do you want me to release the bit?" I ask. "It might be a moment before the scene can start again."

She nods and I release the gag. "What the fuck?" are the first words out of her mouth and I wish I'd left her gagged.

It takes four men to help Hans dismount and back away from the naked girl.

A cameraman moves in, his heavy equipment balanced on his shoulder. Unbelievable, it's all being filmed. In my head I see the *leaked* video footage sprouting up on YouTube and blogs across the Net within hours. Simon appears on set just as medical assistance arrives for Hans. It is a painful moment for all of us, just watching them strap him to a backboard.

As many times as Hans has left me screaming, I don't think I ever sounded like *that*.

I watch them take him off stage. A camera moves in to tape a close-up of my face. I try to not react or change facial expressions, which is harder to do than I ever thought it would be. I let my gaze wander to where Hans is being treated and find Simon there as well. I watch Hans, he watches me, and the camera tapes it all. I can imagine the Howard Stern jokes and *Saturday Night Live* spoofs about geriatric porn stars in my head.

"Stop filming!" I demand. "Christ, can we have some respect? Hans is hurting."

Simon joins me and gestures with his hand to wrap it up.

"Thank you."

"No problem. It's becoming quite a circus event around here. I think I'm in dire need of a vacation."

"I just don't want Hans to be this week's spoof."

"I'll take care of it," he promises. "I'll clean up the whole thing and make you and Hans both look wonderful. There won't be a single reason for anyone to spoof anything."

"You better watch it, mister, or I might start thinking you aren't such a horrible guy after all these years convincing me otherwise," I tease.

"Oh, I'm horrible. That's why I can't keep a woman for very long. No stamina."

"The man I remember had stamina to spare." I say. "He was just impossible to get along with."

He grimaces and shrugs. "What can I say? I'm a dick."

I don't argue with him. I do nod in agreement and laugh. It seems like an easy moment between us, especially after the worry I've put into this last day of filming. We hadn't exactly parted on the best of terms, but then, over the years, we've had many angry partings and our friendship, if that's the right sentiment for whatever it is we are to each other, has survived.

I can feel myself starting to tear up, nostalgia, I guess. Or that's what I tell myself. It isn't because I'm afraid I'll never see Simon again. It's change. Everyone fears change...but not me, not today.

It's a relief. After so much worry about growing too old, I'm fine, ready to walk away from it, ready to start my new life.

"I guess this is it," I say and give him a small wave, keeping distance between us. But he doesn't allow it. He grabs me and pulls me into a hug. "We're good, right? Still friends?"

I look at him hard but assure him, "We're good."

"Great, so we're on for Tokyo?"

"We're back to Tokyo? Seriously? Did your financial backers fall through?"

He clutches his chest. "You hurt me."

"You honestly don't think I'm going...especially not as a consultant or a companion...because I was under the impression you were no longer interested in being *partners*."

"I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. Fifty-fifty. Me and you."

"Seventy-thirty, I run the show, you stay in Seattle." I wink.

He sighs. "At seventy-thirty, it's your baby. You'll need to leave in two weeks for prelims."

What? Really? I try my best to hide my shock while simultaneously doing the in-vitro math in my head. Vitamins for six weeks, birth control for four weeks, hormones for two weeks, ovulation and egg harvesting, minus two weeks down in the countdown because I've already been taking the vitamins and hormones for almost two weeks. Subtract two weeks before I leave, the two weeks in Tokyo...it will be fine. It will be close, but fine. His eyes narrow with concern, "Is something wrong?"

"No, no, I assure him. Two weeks in Tokyo for scouting and test screenings, right?"

"Three. Give or take."

"What do you mean three?" I panic. Three is not fine. Three weeks will mess everything up. "I'm in for two, Simon. So we need to get the pre-launch wrapped up quick."

"That will be up to you. I'm not going to be there. Remember?"

I have a moment's pause, it suddenly seems too much. What exactly did I just bargain for? He answers my unspoken question with a factor I hadn't planned into my baby-making calendar.

"After you get back, we'll run the numbers, but I'd say you better start making preparations to relocate to Tokyo."

Oh no, no, no, no, no, no. I wasn't born yesterday and I know exactly what Simon is up to. Distraction and manipulation. Does he really think that he can keep me so busy I won't even think about having a baby? What's it to him anyway?

Did I really used to be that easy to manipulate?

Yes.

And I suppose he'll show up once a month for a long weekend to make sure that he keeps *my attention*. Well, I've got news for him. The sex wasn't that great. But that little, mean voice in the back of my head reminds me that it was great enough to keep me at his beck and call for fifteen years. It's only been the last five that I broke the Simon addiction, and the first sign of emotional angst and I was all over him. *Dear God, I'm a sick individual.*

I sigh with a heavy heart.

I really shouldn't go to Tokyo, not if I really am that disturbed.

"Is everything okay?"

I nod. "Everything's fine." I give him my big, fake, on-camera smile. "Just working out the details in my head." *I'm only in for two weeks and then I'm home for hormones. I can fly back and forth if need be until after the in-vitro. And after? Babies are born in Tokyo every day. I can raise a child there as well as in the United States. Right? I will not let Simon mess this up for me.*

An angry voice in my head silences the rest. *Where does Geri fit in?*

Chapter Eleven

Stopping at a stoplight opens a floodgate of emotion. I don't know why, I just know that I'm sobbing when horns start honking behind me and when I look up I see that the light has changed to green. *What the fuck?*

I pull over to the side of the road, obviously I should have looked before I put the car in park, because if I had been paying attention, I would have noticed that I'd just pulled up beside an elementary school. The shrill squeals of small children actually make me look up and then I am watching them play. I release the steering wheel only when it becomes too painful to keep gripping it. My knuckles are white. I force myself to let go and look at my hands. My manicure was freshened this morning, as it is before every shoot. I have pampered porn star hands. I try to imagine what my hands will look like after I am a mother.

A mother. I look back at the children playing, trying to imagine that one of them is mine. The image doesn't form because Simon is already in my head, screaming, "A child is definitely a deal breaker."

Geri's face pops into my head, a memory I'd forgotten, right after the birth of her nephew and the pride that gleamed through her eyes as she showed off her brag book, page after page of drooling baby. I'd been repulsed. Maybe that's the problem, I don't really like babies...

Am I making a mistake?

If I really thought *that*, would the idea of going to Tokyo leave me filled with desperation that this trip may end any hope I have of ever having a baby? Why does every decision seem so dire?

I watch as a little girl goes down a slide and two little boys fight over a swing. I smile. Yes, the life I know has come to an end. I'm not a porn star anymore...and maybe that was the impetus for seeing the fertility specialist. But now, I am headed to Tokyo in a matter of days, which if successful will necessitate my relocation there. And still, in my mind, I see my stomach swelling with my child. *I want a baby.* I can make this work. *I can.*

Where does Geri fit in?

I cover my face with my hands and start crying, again, because I really don't have the answer to that question. A minute later, an hour later? The playground is silent and yellow school buses line an opposite curb. I decide I have to talk to her. I have to come clean about everything—my retirement, the final shoot today, Simon's offer to make me his partner in Tokyo and what that means, and my plans to have a child, through in-vitro or by adoption.

My knees quake all the way home. I'm terrified of having this conversation, but then I arrive to find her Jeep not in the driveway. Well, hell, a reprieve isn't the answer I was looking for. I want to get this conversation over and done. I want to know what she thinks, I need to see her reaction.

Inside, I find a note from her in the middle of the kitchen table. My heart sinks. I don't even want to read the note. I'm pissed off and crying when I finally dare to peek, certain that she found out I was shooting today and she left mad.

S,

I have to go out of town. Work. Sorry. I'd like to see you again when I get home. That is, if you'd like that too.

-G

Well, duh! Of course I want to see you! Damn it, Geri. Why didn't you wait for me to get home? Or call my cell? I guess I'll have to ask her that, when she calls. Forget that. I'll call her.

I grab my cell from my purse and see that she did call, but because it was turned off during filming and I forgot to turn it back on, I missed her call...thirteen times. I sigh, frustrated with myself. I dial her number, but the voice that answers isn't Geri, it's an automated responder. "The number you are trying to reach is out of the calling area. Please—" I hang up, more frustrated than ever.

I reread the letter. She wants to see me again, but there is no clue as to how long she will be away. A day? A week? I leave for Tokyo in two weeks. If she was going to be gone that long, her note would have said so, right?

Friday finds me watching the clock and counting down the minutes until it's time to go to O'Leary's. Although I'm miffed that Geri still hasn't called, it hasn't kept me from trying to call her—several times a day. She's out of the calling area. *Still.*

I convince myself that she will be at O'Leary's and I'm not prepared to find her seat empty. I have so much I need to tell her. But then I keep thinking that I shouldn't spring everything at once...

I walk cautiously to the table and Tina pulls me into a hug, telling Meg, "See, I told you she'd come. She wouldn't leave me solely to your company a second Friday in a row!"

I smile and hug both women, trying to act surprised, but not too surprised when I ask, "Geri isn't coming?"

They look at each other then back at me. Meg manages to ask, "Didn't she tell you? Last-minute deal. The owner of a huge eco-friendly tourism group in British Columbia is about to lose his shirt and everything else of any importance to him and he's asked Geri to bring her company in as a partner. So, right now, I'd say she's whale watching off the coast of British Columbia."

Tina adds, "We'll be lucky to see her before Labor Day."

“Wow.” *Labor Day*? For a second I get lost in the misery of not knowing when I will see her again, but then the businesswoman in my head charges to the front of my brain and suddenly I’m asking, “Is that a wise choice? Has she really thought this through? If he’s about to lose his shirt, she’d be insane to bail him out!”

Tina nods and Meg supplies the details. “We told her the same thing. She’s already two jumps ahead in the game. Seems he made some really bad investments, totally unrelated to the business, but using the business’s assets as collateral. His business is sound, actually from what Geri learned, it’s better than sound.”

“But, if he screwed up once, she really shouldn’t partner with him.”

“She has no intention of partnering. She went up there to buy him out,” Meg whispers and I’m not sure who we’re keeping the secret from. “Give me your cell, I’ll program in the landline number we can call if there are any emergencies here.”

I hand her my cell, wondering if *missing Geri* constitutes an emergency and also why Meg has an emergency number and I don’t. “But have you talked to her recently?”

“Not since early in the week. She called to say she was leaving and gave us quick details,” Meg says. “Didn’t she call you? I was under the impression you two were *an item*.”

“I keep missing her calls,” I admit, not volunteering that all thirteen of her attempts happened over the course of a couple of hours.

Tina lifts her glass. “So here we sit, not risking our necks on an adventure. Cheers to us. And cheers to her since she’s too busy having the time of her life to be here with us.”

Meg clinks her glass. “Cheers.”

It becomes evident that I don’t have a drink in hand and a waitress is flagged down to bring another round plus one. I hurriedly correct, saying, “Can you just bring me an O.J. on ice?”

“Orange juice?” Meg asks. “Really? Aren’t you taking your health kick a little too seriously?”

I smile and I know that my face is giving away more than I want it to.

“What?” Tina asks, picking up that a secret might be involved. “You’re up to something.”

“Well, I do have news.” I have a moment’s pause, thinking that Geri should be the first one to hear, but then I just as quickly remind myself that if she could go on an extended business trip without talking to me about it, I’ve wasted way too much time worrying what her reaction would be to a baby.

I sigh, weighing the decision of telling them everything with a lot of internal pros and cons. I decide that there is no sense waiting. “I’m seeing a fertility specialist. I’ve decided I want to try to have a baby.”

Both women’s jaws drop. Stunned silence is the reaction. I guess by now I shouldn’t be surprised that stunned silence seems to be the only reaction I’m going to get, though Meg finally manages to murmur, “Holy cow,” before taking a long swallow of beer, and Tina’s “Wow,” is totally inaudible.

Meg recovers first. “My God, did you swear Geri to secrecy, or what? I can’t believe she didn’t say anything about *this*.”

“You haven’t told her,” Tina states, not hiding the condemnation in her tone.

“You’re right. I wanted to be absolutely positive of my decision before I told anyone.”

“Huh,” Tina grunts. “So, I guess that means you’re absolutely positive. When are you going to tell Geri?”

I sigh. “I guess when I get a chance to talk to her, but it will be after the fact if she doesn’t get home before Labor Day. The first implantation of eggs will be in about a month.”

“Eggs?” Meg squeaks.

I nod, explaining, “I’ve agreed to being implanted with two eggs each attempt, even though the doctor wanted me to have four embryos implanted to increase the chance that one would implant.”

“Are you rushing things? Maybe you should slow down a little. Summers are always busy for Geri,” Tina defends. “She does run a travel agency. This trip is just a little extra insane—”

I lift my hand, stalling any further forthcoming excuses. “I don’t have all summer to make the decisions I have to make right now.”

“You can’t wait until she gets back?” Meg asks. “I kind of thought from what Geri said that you two are...together.”

“Huh,” I say. *News to me*. “Honestly, my decision to have a baby has nothing to do with Geri. Our dating has only been casual at best. The fact that the two of you knew she was going to be gone *months* and I didn’t just illuminates the truth for me. I’m not getting any younger and besides...”

Both women tilt their heads expectantly.

I shake my head and assure them that *it’s nothing*.

“Simone! You’re killing us,” Meg begs. “What else is going on?”

I’ve never been good at keeping secrets and I usually use my friends to bounce ideas off. “I’m leaving for Tokyo soon to spearhead the start of a new production company.”

Their reaction is predictable. They scream, “What?” at the same time.

I don’t leave them in the dark, I figure I might as well tell them everything. “I’ve decided to retire from acting...” I look at them both, waiting for their reaction, which is quickly ecstatic. Tina bounces quietly in her seat, clapping her hands, but Meg whoops and grabs me in a tight bear hug. “Yeah! Now you can get on with your life!”

Am I the only person on the planet who thought I was living before? I shake off the irritation and take a sip of the orange juice as soon as it is set on the table. Tina realizes the full impact of what I’ve said first. “Wait, this new production company is in the porn industry, isn’t it?”

I nod. “It’s what I know. I’m partnering with Simon to start up an Asia-based adult-film company.”

Meg and Tina share a look and both nod rapidly, like a nervous tic. I worry that they may be having a seizure, but then they are both talking too fast, and I can't separate who is saying what, but the gist of their message is that I should call the emergency number. Tina reiterates, "Now."

"Now?" I ask.

They both say together, "Now!"

I get my cell out of my purse and scroll through the numbers to find Geri's emergency number. I dial and a woman other than Geri answers. I freeze, stunned, and hang up. After several minutes of hyperventilating, I try again and listen to how the phone is answered and breathe a huge sigh of relief when my brain registers that it is probably a secretary answering a business line. "Could I speak to Geri, please?"

"I can take a message, but honestly, unless it's an emergency, she won't receive it until she gets back from the expedition."

"How long will that be?"

"Six to eight weeks?"

"Oh. Okay, thanks." *Two months?*

"Do you want to leave your name?"

Oh shit. Do I? I really don't know how Geri would feel about her secretary knowing a famous porn star was calling her. "No, that's okay."

"You didn't leave a message?" Tina demands.

"There didn't seem to be a point. Your Labor Day prediction seemed right on target."

"So, you're going through with this...without her opinion."

I laugh, not finding the humor. "Are we talking about the baby or my career move? Because for one, Geri has yet to discuss her business with me. She comes, she goes—"

Tina interrupts me, emotion rolling off her in waves. "That's not fair, Simone. Geri has worked very hard to get where she is."

Meg touches Tina's shoulder, trying to be a calming force, and even though I see the gesture and know our conversation could escalate into a fight fairly quickly, I can't hold back. "I've worked very hard too."

"I'm sure Tina didn't mean to imply you haven't," Meg soothes, but Tina is quick to say exactly what she's thinking. Head shaking, she demands, "Why are you doing this? Why are you trying so hard to ruin everything when something good is finally happening for you?"

My jaw drops. "Something good?"

Tina and Meg both realize that it's too late for an apology. The truth of how Tina feels is out and my feelings are hurt.

One week after Geri's disappearing act, I receive a postcard. It was written, according to the date she wrote on it, the day after she left.

S,

I can't believe the timing of this trip and I hope that this note doesn't take forever getting to you. I can't wait to see you again. I miss you already.

-G

"What?" I flip the card over, looking for more words, and find a picture of a whale leaping out of the ocean and over a kayaker who looks small and fragile in comparison. It's breathtaking and terrifying to imagine Geri kayaking amongst the whales.

I talk to the postcard. "That's it, G? Really?"

I poke the picture of the kayaker. "Because it sure would be nice to know what you are *thinking*! What you are *feeling*! Or exactly *when* I can expect to see you again!"

I reread the two sentences again. She wants to see me. *She can't wait to see me.*

And I realize that I feel exactly the same way. I'm suddenly glad for the trip to Tokyo. It will take my mind off of missing Geri. I can't imagine sitting around looking at four walls, waiting for her to get back into town.

Chapter Twelve

Tokyo shouldn't be such a culture shock, I mean, it is a big, noisy, modern metropolitan city and we have lots of those in the United States, and outside the city is a mountainous landscape similar to what I've just left.

Did I mention that Tokyo is the largest city in the world?

The subway lines are color-coded on my map and it should be easy to get around, but every time I face the trains, I feel like I've spent ten minutes spinning in circles and still haven't righted myself yet since the last one hour ago.

It isn't just the trains making me slightly insane. Cars and people and bicycles. The sudden impact on my brain is the noise level...followed by the fact that it really is a very clean city. But that was all overwhelmed by the number of cars, the vast number of pedestrians who are always walking, walking, walking, and the bicycles lined up outside of buildings.

In the first few days, I found that taking the alleys was so much more preferable to the main, heavily populated sidewalks, and so now, after studio time, I explore the parts of Tokyo that I suspect tourists never see. I find my way around with English maps and a GPS. I've gotten lost twice, both times walking, and found myself looking mostly up, probably why I got lost. Delicately painted paper lanterns line the streets, a stark contrast to the flashing neon that is everywhere. It is a clash of two cultures, one ancient, one modern.

There are familiar sights, like a line of Coca-Cola machines, but the other signs, boasting brightly colored calligraphy that is utterly beautiful, are for the most part, unreadable.

Everything and everyone is foreign to me and I find myself homesick.

Most days I'm fine, but at night, after the filming is done, I start thinking too much about the long-term and the commitment I'll be required to make if this company takes off. I'll need to relocate. I try to imagine raising a baby here, but honestly, trying to imagine living here even short-term is hard.

The cultural differences are so vast. And so many people. It doesn't help that I've always felt smothered by the crowds. But the hardest part, the worst part, is thinking about being here without Geri. Meg and Tina too, but mostly Geri, even though I've convinced myself that a relationship doesn't seem to fit in with the current reality. Her life is pulled between Seattle and Canada, mine, straddling an entire ocean with one foot firmly in Seattle and the other in Tokyo.

I find myself thinking about Geri. I wonder if it is normal to think about someone so much. I wonder where she is, what she's doing, and try to forget that there was a whale in the same body of water as that kayaker. *God, Geri.*

I cannot imagine not seeing her again. At night, I sleep and dream about her kisses. I really feel like if I miss out on this opportunity to be with her, I may never get another chance. I will not say *at love*.

No email. No phone call. Nothing from Geri. I can't believe that she is so remotely isolated that she can't call, or email...*or something.*

Damn it, she left without telling me she had to leave...

That doesn't seem to bode well for long term, does it?

And I left Seattle without telling her, not even leaving her a message on her emergency line.

The debate of are we in a relationship or not is an endless one in my mind. Better to not think about it. But then that is easier said than done.

Two weeks into filming, I decide that running the show is much more involved than being the porn star. Being a producer, the work is never-ending, and sometimes monotonous. There are only so many hours of watching back-to-back blowjobs that can actually lay claim to being entertainment value. Still, I'm enjoying myself immensely. I have a hand in everything from script to wardrobe to casting.

My biggest problem with adjusting has been the cultural differences, especially when many of the women, who really are of legal age, but because of their Asian petite stature and unbelievable cuteness, look younger than even the youngest-looking adult actresses back home. It makes me nervous, watching them, thinking that men are going to watch them and want them because they are so frail, so petite, so youthful. And the innocence factor is further pandered to by the many scenes involving knee socks and shiny, patent leather shoes. The knee socks are tough to take, though they seem to be worn regardless of whether meant to complement a schoolgirl's plaid skirt and white blouse or to strike contrast to the woman's frail nakedness. It's cultural, I remind myself. *It's okay.* Why do I have to keep telling myself that this is okay, if it is?

That is the grinding part for me. The bondage is fine. I love the rope and the manacles and the stretcher bars, mostly because they aren't being used on me. I've learned a new appreciation while here, especially for the rope bondage. They call it Shibari and it is an art form. And honestly, from a purely aesthetic view, it is lovely to see a naked woman bound. I *get it* now, here, I didn't before.

Then there is the sheer workload. Jetlag is killing me, at least that is what I tell myself, because I'm tired and cranky. Production is way off schedule and I know how easily time could get away from me, every day has a new distraction, a new problem. It doesn't help that nothing has gone right on set all morning.

My email today held two posts from Simon, required appearances and social engagements that I would have to attend to fulfill my contractual obligations with Wet City. And there was one post from Dr. Abrams' office with date confirmations for the necessary appointments to *make a baby*. The first, for tomorrow, will have to be rescheduled, which frustrates me, because I really thought I'd be home by now. I'm not sure what will happen if I reschedule everything, essentially delaying every step by one month...and will I even be able to keep to the new schedule once it is in play? I really want a baby, the question seems to be how to fit making that baby into my life. *Preliminaries should not be taking this long.*

I try to remain open-minded during each scene, even when two baby octopuses are carried on to the set. I grab the translator by the collar. "Please tell me that isn't lunch."

"Not lunch, for the next scene."

He points at page four. I look at my page four, seeing nothing about octopuses on my page four. I do have a notation though, *manacle play*, circled in bright red ink.

"No, Ken." I call him Ken because his Japanese name is unpronounceable and to keep from repeatedly offending him, we each took nicknames—he Ken, me Barbie. He thought I was hilarious. He assumed our nicknames allude to the fact that I look like Barbie, but no, he really does look like the Ken doll I had when I was twelve, his hair lightened from his natural black to a shade that is an auburn brown, but it is the hacked cut that is wild and messy that makes him uniquely *Ken*. I was glad when he had the good humor to go along with it, because I couldn't spend two weeks trying to pronounce his name and doing a horrible job of it.

"Bondage next. Right? Manacles?"

He laughs so hard his cheeks spot red and tears leak out as he doubles over. "Bar-bie! *Ha, ha*. Not manacles, tentacles."

One of the models squeals and I turn around in time to see an octopus tentacle wrap around a nipple. My jaw drops. I thought I understood our many cultural differences, but I was wrong. The two models giggle delightedly, each taking a wiggling octopus in hand and I turn away, because I really don't want to know what they plan to do with them. One of the girls screams and I turn back, imagining the worst, blood and guts, but no, the octopus has merely gotten overly curious and has the suckers from one of its tentacles attached to the back of her neck. When she pulls it free, there is a line of dark red marks on her neck. *Octopus hickeys. Great.*

I sure hope the cameraman got that shot, because hiding those marks will be impossible.

My cell phone rings and I see that it is Simon. *He always has such perfect timing.*

He is yelling about the budget and delays before I even get out a decent hello. Then he tells me to plan on staying two weeks longer than originally anticipated. I don't think, I quit, and it has absolutely nothing to do with knee socks or octopus. I regret my words as soon as they are out of my mouth. I could take it back, I could cite hormones or a short temper.

“Baby,” he says and my short temper spikes.

“Don’t you dare *baby* me. Production is down until you or someone to replace me arrives. None of the delays are my fault and the budget was impossible to start with.”

In a condescending rant, littered royally with curse words, he cites hormones, PMS, and female hysteria as reasons why he should have never entered into our arrangement in the first place. He then tells me I will be in breach of contract and that he will sue me for any losses he incurs over delays due to my failure to perform before hanging up on me.

I tell myself that *I don’t care, I really don’t* as I walk away from all of it. Even knowing a lawsuit may come of it. I refuse to admit that I was enjoying my role on the other side of the cameras, because I need to be home. If I don’t go home now, I won’t. I will be here a decade from now thinking about the day I almost decided to have a child, the day that fate dangled a relationship...

I breathe a contented sigh and relax for the first time in two weeks.

Back at the hotel, I grab my bags, which don’t require packing, because I have yet to unpack, and call for a shuttle. It doesn’t matter that I don’t have a flight, that I may be stranded at the airport for hours or days. *I won’t be on the set.*

I close my eyes, waiting for the panic to hit. It doesn’t.

It is only as I’m leaving, pulling the door to my hotel room closed, that I see the flashing red message light on the phone on my nightstand. Against my better judgment, I go back into the room and listen to my messages. There is only one and it’s from Geri. “I know you are probably pissed as hell that I disappeared off the face of the earth for almost four weeks...” she pauses, “I really suck at goodbyes. I hope it’s okay that Meg gave me this number.” She pauses and this time the pause is ridiculously long. “I went a little crazy when she told me that you’re in Japan...and that you’re having a baby. Jeez, Simone. I’m going nuts here. Will you call me?”

My hand is shaking so badly that I have to have the hotel operator deal with the international connect. I close my eyes when I hear Geri’s voice saying hello.

“You have no idea how good it was to hear your voice.”

There is a long silence on the other end of the phone and then I hear her laughing, followed by a loud, “I was afraid the first words out of your mouth were going to be how pissed off you are at me.”

“No, that would be my second sentence. Do you know how pissed off I am that you didn’t tell me you were leaving?”

“I’m sorry. If I could do it over again, I would have waited for you to get home and taken you with me. Every day I woke up alone in British Columbia I was miserable.”

I sigh. “I’ve really missed you.”

“So we’re okay? You still want to see me again?”

“Definitely.”

Roxy Harte

“I can be in Tokyo tomorrow.”

Wow. That was unexpected. “Don’t bother, I’m trying to get a flight out tonight.”

“Honest?” she asks and I can hear the happiness in her voice. It makes me feel good. It makes me feel wonderful.

“Honest. I’ll see you soon.”

Chapter Thirteen

I realize mid-flight that I am actually going to touch down in Seattle with plenty of time to make it to my appointment with Dr. Abrams. Even though that little voice in my head keeps insisting that I should go home, meet with Geri, and rekindle our relationship...the other voice in my head insists that my decision to conceive has nothing to do with Geri and that I should just keep moving forward as if there is no relationship...

The truth is, after Simon's *deal breaker* reaction, I just don't want to take the chance. I don't want to be talked out of having a baby. And if anyone had the power to sway me, it would be Geri, and only because I want whatever is happening between us to have a chance. But not at the price of giving up on the dream of my child.

The waiting room is relatively empty, a surprise, but a nice one, and I am called back quickly for a vaginal ultrasound. Then, just as quickly, led to the doctor's office, where I find him sitting at his desk. We exchange banter about my trip to Tokyo, he asks me how I'm feeling and tells me everything is going well. He hands me a prescription. "This is for urofollitropin." His gaze catches mine and I realize this is the important part, not that all of the steps before weren't important, but this is *it*. "The chart says your last period started seven days ago, so I am going to give you the first injection now, to demonstrate how it is done. It is going to be a deeper, intramuscular injection, which, if you prefer, you can come into the office for once a day, but if you are comfortable you can administer yourself."

I hold out my hand. "I'll be fine."

He hands me the script and then lifts a pre-filled syringe. He shows me the different muscles I can use and then he picks a deep muscle in my thigh, one that will be easy for me to hit, and plunges the needle under my skin. It hurts like hell. After he withdraws the needle, he says, "Rub the area for a few minutes, it will help keep down the pain and swelling. As long as you follow the instructions exactly, everything will progress as it should."

Our gazes lock and I smile, feeling suddenly like a co-conspirator. "Because medical science is in control."

He chuckles. "Exactly." Then, more seriously, he adds, "See the nurse at scheduling, you will have several appointments over the next seven to ten days, several ultrasounds, all leading to the big event."

I'm nervous, but very excited as I head for the car...and the best part...I don't vomit with fear. *I'm going to make a baby.*

I feel powerful.

Seven to ten days...my God. Oh my God!

I start shaking, giddy with excitement, which is a lot better than bending in the weeds to vomit.

I am taking charge of my life and the direction it is going to take. *Wow.* I feel lighter than air, buoyant. Though, if I dwell on everything that could go wrong...

No, not today. I decide to only focus on the positive as I swing by the pharmacy to fill my prescription.

My cell rings as I climb back into my car. Caller ID identifies it as Geri and, for a solid second, I let it ring, thinking it might be best if the call went to voicemail. I shake my head, not understanding my procrastination. *I want to see Geri.*

I hurry to answer.

"Can I come over?" she asks softly.

I sit, idling in my parking space, thinking that it was probably a good thing I didn't try to drive because my thighs start shaking. Why am I so nervous? What is happening to me? It would be so easy to turn left instead of right onto the road that takes me up my mountain, so easy to say I'm not going to be home for a while. *Coward.* "Sure, I'll be home by the time you get there."

Pulling into my driveway, I see that Simon is already there, sitting in his car, waiting. I wish I would have kept driving past my drive and maybe he wouldn't have noticed me. But is there any sense putting off the coming argument? Better to get it over with.

I back in beside him so that my driver's side door is next to his. I roll down my window, he rolls down his. He speaks first. "You are not leaving me alone on this one. You knew going in that Tokyo was going to present cultural issues, but we..." He rephrases, "You. You stand to make a large fortune at AsiaFlixxx. I stand to make a good sum of money. And I cannot run operations in Seattle and Tokyo. I just can't do it. I'm only one man and I'm not as young as I used to be, Simone. So, no arguing, crying, or sex, I want you in the backseat of my car in ten minutes so that I can get you back to the airport."

"What?"

"The private jet is waiting."

I open the door and step out of my car. I don't miss his long, appreciative look at my bare legs. My skirt is short and flirty, a light yellow and blue floral expresses youthful innocence, the tight, vinyl bustier top, though pastel blue, is anything but innocent. Paired with four-inch heels, I turned a few heads at the airport terminal...and at Dr. Abrams' office. Simon's gawk makes me smile, you would think that he at least, would be immune.

I step around our cars, a rare, bright Seattle sun warming me quickly. "I'm not going back to Tokyo."

He climbs out of his car and moves faster than I have ever seen Simon move, pulling me into his arms before I realize his intent. He looks into my eyes, wrapping my face in his hands. "We're a good team,

Simone. It killed me to insist that you retire, but that doesn't mean I don't want to make sure you are well taken care of. I love you. Do you understand?"

I nod my head, but don't really understand, and then he kisses me, softly at first, then harder and more demanding. He pushes me back toward the house, still controlling the kiss, but I stop him, pulling away, and then I hear the crunch on cement as Geri's car pulls into my driveway. *Oh God! Did she see him kiss me?*

I think with the angle of the drive she didn't, but maybe... God, I hope not! I push against his chest, "Simon. No."

He tries to walk around me. "Whoever it is, tell them to go away. I don't want to see anyone but *you* for a few hours."

My jaw drops as he hugs me from behind and whispers against my face, "I want to make love to you, long and sweet. Hours upon hours. Then, on the flight back to Japan, I want you to consider marrying me."

My head spins. *Simon just proposed?*

I see Geri walking hesitantly up my sidewalk. From her expression and the way she's walking, I know she saw Simon's kiss, but then he also still has his arms wrapped around my waist.

Oh fuck! The day is getting better and better.

"I need you to go." I push back against his chest and he leans in to kiss me again.

"Baby, we're a good team," he whispers, holding my gaze. "I can't stand the thought of losing you."

Losing me? What? "Simon! Go," I say frantically, fearful that Geri will get the idea that I am seeing Simon. "Stop it! I don't want to hear anymore!"

Simon jerks back from me and I see that he had some help moving because Geri's hand is firm on his shoulder. "I think the lady asked you to leave."

"What?" he demands, turning toward Geri. Both of them bristle. "Who the fuck are you?"

Her eyes narrow and I watch her hand close into a fist. *Oh no!*

"I cannot talk to you right now, Simon." I grab Geri's hand and lead her down the sidewalk, me almost running, her following, leaving Simon standing in my entryway. I climb into her Jeep. "Please get me out of here," I say as she stands looking at me.

"I can make him leave," she says, her fist balled around her keys. She looks scary, tough, not an ounce of fragile, standing before me in jeans, work boots, and a Columbia polo. "You don't have to run from him." *She could take him.*

"Geri, no! We're just having a misunderstanding about who is responsible for doing what in Tokyo, that's all. I can manage Simon."

"I could tell by the way he was manhandling you."

"Will you please get in the car so that *we* can talk?" I ask. She looks over her shoulder to see that Simon hasn't moved. After a moment, she finally walks around the Jeep and climbs in.

The top is off the Jeep and the sun, which is an anomaly in this part of the country, heats my skin. Closing my eyes, I lift my face to its brightness as she starts the engine and peels out of my driveway. I've only ridden with Geri twice, the first time she scared me to death, the second time I was too drunk to notice her driving. I think today I should probably keep my eyes closed, because the steep curves leading down the mountain feel like a theme park ride as the wind catches my hair.

Her tires squeal as she takes a hard right, then the jeep comes to a sudden stop. I open my eyes to find she pulled off the main road and into a small, sheltered parking area, intended for hikers. We are less than a quarter mile from my house, yet I've never been here before.

It's beautiful, even sitting in the parking lot.

Moss grows thick on the sides of the trees and I feel as if I have been brought someplace ancient and forbidden. She turns off the engine, unbuckles her seat belt, and turns to face me. I turn to face her and am amazed at how really dark it seems under the deep canopy of trees. I tilt my head, taking her in. Her mouth is in a firm line and she's trembling. I think she would have enjoyed making Simon leave. *She would have enjoyed hurting Simon.*

I unbuckle and lean over enough to touch her arm, but I don't say anything. She doesn't say anything either. Instead, she climbs out of the Jeep and walks into the forest. Her hands are balled into fists.

"Well, crap!" I swear, hurrying to follow after her. My four-inch spikes make chasing her along the gravel and pine-needle-littered trail dangerous, making me wish I'd pulled them off in the Jeep.

I find her not far on to the trail, sitting on top of a weathered picnic table. Stepping softly over a thick layer of wood chips, I stop directly in front of her and gaze into her face, really looking at her for the first time since she kissed me goodbye. She looks exhausted and worried, two lines furrow deep between her eyebrows, she's tanned but also sunburned across the bridge of her nose, her hair is bleached even blonder by the sun. She looks like she was vacationing in the Bahamas instead of working in British Columbia. I reach up and touch her cheek. "I'm sorry. I had no idea that Simon was coming over or that he would be there when you got there."

"That's not why I'm upset."

"I should have talked to you before...about trying to have a baby—"

She presses her fingertips to my lips. "I'm pissed at myself okay? I've been mad ever since I realized that you left for Japan, with the intention of possibly relocating there. I don't know what I expected, but coming home to find you gone wasn't it."

"You're mad because I went to Tokyo on business instead of sitting around waiting to see if you would even bother to call me when you got back from *your business trip*?"

"Sounded pretty shitty in my head before it came out of my mouth too." She sighs then laughs and I can't help but laugh with her. This fight is beyond ridiculous.

"If I would have just done things differently there is a good chance you wouldn't have even gone to Japan. You could have gone with me on *my* business trip. We would have had the last month getting to know each other better."

I don't argue the point because I don't want the fight to start over again. "I think we've gotten to know each other pretty well over the last six years."

She tilts her head and nods. "There is that. I just meant I would have liked to have spent the last month getting to know you better naked."

I snort. "God, I've missed you. How did it go up north?"

She shrugs. "I wish I hadn't gone."

I pout out my bottom lip, "Didn't you get the contract?"

She sighs. "I bought them out. I'm the new owner of Eco-Spirit Adventures."

"That's good news, right?"

"It's what I wanted most a month ago." She strokes my cheek. I shrug, rubbing my face against her fingertips. "But now it means I'm going to be spending a lot of time north...at least for the first year or two."

"Oh."

"Are you going back to Tokyo?"

I don't answer. I don't know what to say. I need to talk to Simon. She takes my face into her hands and I freeze, caught in the intensity of her gaze. I know she's going to kiss me, and for a second I panic, worried about everything falling apart, worried about all the friendships I stand to lose if a relationship with Geri doesn't work out, worried that she won't understand the opportunity that Tokyo holds and the concern that a long-distance relationship couldn't stand up to all of the other stress and worried about what her reaction will be to a baby in my future. She must notice my fears, because she drops her hands and pulls away, not kissing me. She laughs hard and harsh. "God, that man really has his hooks in you, doesn't he? I thought...I was hoping you were over him."

For a second, I'm confused, but then I understand. "Simon? No. I am over Simon." I wave my hand dismissively. "I am so over him."

Her face furrows. "I don't understand then. What is it? What's going on? I was so excited that you were coming home. I thought you would be excited about seeing me."

"I am excited, Geri."

"Weren't you just with him?"

My mouth parts to defend myself, but I close it in a tight line to keep from saying anything at all. I swallow hard, my mouth going dry.

"I'm sorry," she says. "That was unfair. I believe that you weren't *with him*, but I'm still hurt that you didn't call me from the airport. I expected to hear from you hours ago. What was so important?"

I shake my head. It seems so stupid in my own head that I had to go to the clinic first. But I did. I needed to. I have to make sure that my plans don't get derailed by anyone or anything. I use the picnic table seat as a step and sit down beside her on top of the rough, gray table. "Fertility doctor appointment. We need to talk."

She nods and I take her hand, holding it on top of my lap. I tip my head up and look at the canopy of trees. "It is so beautiful here, so peaceful. I had no idea."

She nudges me with her shoulder and I look at my feet, thinking how visually interesting my rhinestone-embossed pumps look against the weathered wood of the picnic table. My brain shifts into producer mode. A scene unfolds neatly, involving a dark forest, rope, and an Asian girl, wearing very high, very sparkly rhinestone-covered heels, at the mercy of a masked man.

"You're avoiding."

"What?" I ask, jerked from the moment's fantasy.

"I'm feeling a little out of the loop."

"You're right. I've just been so afraid of what your reaction was going to be to my desire to have a baby. Sometimes I just want to go back to being Sarah, a normal woman with a normal life. I've always assumed I would have a child, the timing was just never right. When Simon insisted I retire from on-camera work, it seemed like the perfect time to focus on making my life whole."

She leans forward to kiss me, and our lips touch softly, but only for the briefest touch. She whispers against my temple, "I'm more concerned about your relocating to Tokyo right now than I am about your plans to have a baby."

She wraps her hand around the nape of my neck and pulls me in for a deep kiss. There isn't anything slow or soft about it as she takes what she wants from my mouth, her tongue sliding in to dance with mine. She leaves me breathless and weak-kneed, heart pounding and full of desire. My heart swells and bursts. *I want her. Only her.*

I can't explain it, because I've been with so many men, partners who never made me feel anything, except that momentary explosion of orgasm...a physical response that meant absolutely nothing at the end of the day. Her kisses make me want to cry and I don't realize that I am crying until Geri is wiping my tears away. "Baby, what's wrong? What is it?"

"I can't stand it," I say.

"My kisses are that bad?" she asks, and I realize she is teasing.

"You know they aren't," I say. I kiss her softly. "I don't understand why I have to cry every time you kiss me."

Her hands go up to my face. "Maybe because it's been too long since you've felt anything; maybe because you had to cut yourself off from emotion to be able to do what you were doing for a living."

She leans in and kisses me softly, biting my bottom lip, pulling it into her mouth to suck. When she releases me, I don't let her pull away, but kiss her in the same way, realizing what a turn-on it is to kiss her and to be kissed. And I realize that it's true, I haven't allowed myself to feel anything but the mechanics, and as I kiss her, trying to analyze how her kiss feels, how her lips move beneath mine, I can separate from the emotion, but only enough to decide that she is a damn fine kisser. Then she takes over, kissing me with a new, passionate earnestness, demanding with her lips and teeth and tongue, that makes me stop analyzing and start feeling. I pull away, gasping. "God, Geri! What you do to me."

She laughs and it is a sound of pleasure. I kiss her again just because it feels so nice to be kissing her. She slides off the picnic table and kneels between my feet on the weathered bench. "Lie back."

I shake my head. "What if someone comes?"

She smiles, laughing wickedly. "I'd have thought you were a daring kind of girl."

I lie back, seeing moss and tree bark and lots of green leaves. She leans over me and suddenly her face is in my field of vision, her golden eyes glowing. "I'm packing today."

"Really?" I ask enthusiastically, reaching between us to unzip her jeans. "Show me."

All thoughts of being discovered are forgotten when the bright red dildo pops out from between the zipper teeth. "Sweet." My fingers wrap around the cool rubber, which is surprisingly soft, rigid enough for insertion, but not hard. I pull her toward me by her cock. She pushes up my skirt and finds panties. Bending, she kisses the shadowed curve of my ribs, pulling the flimsy panties off in a smooth move.

My lips twitch. "Somebody has had lots of practice."

"Just lucky that time," she says.

She pushes over me, angling the red dildo. Her thrust makes me gasp as she fills me with one solid push. "Oh God."

"You think that's nice, put your ankles on my shoulders."

I do, thinking that my ankle-strapped, sparkly shoes against the tree would make a visually pleasing shot. The Asian girl and masked man scenario gets added to. Long pale legs, green canopy of leaves...

Geri thrusts.

I close my eyes, forgetting everything that was in my mind a second before. "Do it again."

"Like that?"

Definitely. The deep thrusts fall somewhere between pleasure and pain as need rushes through me, making me beg, "Please, please."

She plays with the rhythm, slow, slow, slow, *holy fucking Jesus, Geri*, fast, fast, fast. I moan, tossing my head, making sounds in my throat that are nothing like the sounds I normally make. It seems a bubble of emotion breaks in my chest and liquid ache spreads through me. I so want this woman. Not like Simon. *I need this woman with every fiber of my being to be complete.*

A sob catches in my throat and Geri assumes I'm coming.

“Yeah, beautiful. Give me that.”

She quickens her pace, her fast, hard thrusts feeding the emotion already weighing so heavy on my chest I can barely breathe.

“Look at me. I want to see you when you come for me.”

I open my eyes and get lost in the depths of hers as my soul seems to spiral free. “God, Geri, oh God.”

Chapter Fourteen

The production difficulties I had in Tokyo suddenly seem like a vacation in Disneyland as I find the frantic schedule of pre-implantation doctor appointments and porn star appearances that will herald the end of my career both mentally and physically exhausting. It's an intensely crazy few weeks, but then I'm standing at my retirement party—feeling bloated and hormonal instead of glamorous and sexy. It doesn't help matters that my girlfriend refused to come with me as my date. It seems equally intense and insane that I am now calling Geri my girlfriend, but as prophesied by Meg, we are an item. At least for all non-porn-star-related social engagements. So, for my big retirement party extravaganza, I settled for second runner up...Simon.

Luckily, he was counting on escorting me anyway. The ballroom is packed when we arrive and my arrival is not only noted, but I receive a standing ovation. I am taken aback by the amount of work that went into the event. Wall-sized movie screens float on either side of the room, one showing my very last film ever made, and the opposite one showing my very first.

Simon approaches, bearing two glasses of champagne. I decline taking any.

"Still on your health kick?" he asks.

"Still planning on procreating, so either way, alcohol is out of the question."

"Shh," he says. "That's an evil word around here."

"What?"

"Procreating," he whispers. "Don't tell anyone."

"Why?" I demand. Simon sets down both glasses on the nearest table and whirls me out onto the dance floor.

"Let's not ruin your career until you are officially no longer making us both lots of money, okay?" He pulls me in close, so that we are slow dancing with our bodies wrapped around one another. "The thought of your videos being run as MILF makes my blood run cold."

I laugh, but I don't mean it.

"Forget about babies for a while. I want you to take a trip with me."

"I don't have time for a trip. My eggs are being harvested early next week. I should be pregnant by Friday, if all goes well. And you don't have time for a trip either. You have Tokyo to sort out."

"AsiaFlix is temporarily on hold until we come to an understanding. Consider the trip an opportunity to come together on what we both want, what we both need."

I shake my head.

“Come on,” he cajoles, “I’ve always promised you that someday I’d take you to Europe and I promise we’ll do it right. “First class...Paris, Rome, Madrid... Tell me where you want to go. I’ll take you.”

“No, Simon. I know and you know that you have no intention of taking me anywhere except the airport and then something will come up and we will have to detour through Tokyo.”

“No, baby, you’ve got me all wrong this time.” He whirls me around the dance floor effortlessly and it is obvious we’ve done this together before. I think sarcastically that he is always waltzing me around. *In more ways than one.* The music changes and suddenly we are caught in a tango. Unfortunately, I love to tango and so I continue dancing, sashaying my hips, grinding, teasing. He grabs me and pulls me close, saying, “Anywhere you want to go, Simone. Anywhere.”

I shake my head, backing away, dancing with a naughty wiggle and jiggle.

“No,” I deny him. “You’re bad for me Simon.”

I’m still smiling when I say it though and so it takes the sting out when I add, “I always make horrible decisions when you’re around.”

He laughs, doing his own naughty wiggle and jiggle. “You’ve been saying that for twenty years, sweetheart, but over the long haul, I think you can agree that I’ve done more good for you than I’ve done bad.”

I slide close, wrapping my arm around his back. “We’ve made some money together.”

He lifts me, and with my legs wrapped around his torso, he twirls. “Oh, you crush me. Was it really just the money? I didn’t mean anything to you?”

I notice we have all but cleared the dance floor in our spectacle. I do a backbend, letting my fingertips drag the ground as he holds my crotch firmly to his waist. When I bend back up, he kisses me. I pretend to slap him and pull away. We know our dance roles well. He sits my feet back on the ground. I dance away from him, he chases me, catching my hand and twirling me back into his arms. “Just the money.”

We are both panting when he says, “Liar.”

The song ends and I kiss him, admitting, “Once, I loved you,” as applause breaks around us.

He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses it. “No more lies, Simone. You see right through me anyway. I need you. Tokyo needs you. Say you’ll go back and keep the ball there rolling until we can hire the right people to take over.”

“Simon,” I say beseechingly. I should tell him *not a chance in hell*. I should tell him *I hated Tokyo and the studio and the job*. Except I didn’t. “Eighty-twenty.”

“You’ve got it,” he says, and then an emcee, standing in the shadows, is demanding I make a speech.

As I stand on the platform, I have plenty of thinking-time waiting for the applause to die down and I try to decide what to say and honestly it isn’t that hard, because my speech won’t be long. Finally, silence

and expectation fill the room. I begin, "Twenty years ago, when I met Simon Kramer, I should have run screaming, but I didn't. Instead, I embarked on an adventure of a lifetime..."

I fill the room with laughter, using silly one-liners. "It's a tough job knowing that you have to go to work every day and face orgasm after orgasm after..."

And then I close with honesty. "Over the years, I have never regretted a moment, even though I have spent as much time loathing myself as celebrating my life. I stayed because I loved this man enough to believe him when he told me I was the best. And I think he loved me too, even though every time he talked me into staying, it cost him a little more in percentages. But now, it is someone else's turn to fill the spotlight, and I am going to go find what I've been missing out there in the real world while I was here, filming every man's fantasy." I don't mention AsiaFlixxx because no deal's a deal until the paperwork is signed and I really don't trust Simon Kramer any farther than I can throw him. I catch his gaze as I am leaving the stage and see he is wearing a cheesy smile. I'd like to think it's pride reflected in his face, but I know better, because I do know the man. He thinks he has me right where he wants me. We'll see.

As I start down the platform, a hand reaches for mine and I take it, trembling as I take the last three stairs. "You came!"

Geri smiles at me. "You are beautiful."

I twirl in my silver sequined gown. "Too glam?"

"Perfect."

I fall into her arms, not caring that a hundred flashes are going off as every camera at my retirement party takes my photo...kissing a mystery woman. Now that I have her here and trussed up in a tux, looking amazing, I want to be anywhere but here. "Do you want to dance? Or would you rather get out of here and make out in the back of the limo while we drive home?"

"Aw, shucks, that's not a fair choice." She tucks her hands into her pants pockets and kicks her right foot.

"I'm sorry, you just got here, that really wouldn't be fair to you. And you look absolutely wonderful..."

She grabs my hand and drags me toward the doors.

We are no more than tucked into the limo when she pushes my hair to the side and starts kissing my collarbone. "God, you made me hot tonight. When I saw you dancing with Simon, I thought I was going to lose it. I wanted to hit him so bad, but then I realized I really wanted to fuck you more."

She watched? I didn't know. "There's no time like the present," I say, hitching up my dress. She doesn't need any more of an invitation than that and drags her fingers through my ready folds.

"I wanted you the moment I saw you tonight," she admits, dropping to her knees on the floorboard. Her lips close around my clit.

"Oh God, Geri."

She hums against me.

“Are you packing tonight?”

“Mm-hmm.” Her tongue flicks my clit in rapid succession, lifting the intensity of my need. She slides a finger deep inside me, finding me wet, very wet.

“Ever fucked in the back of a limo, Geri?”

She lifts her head, looking sheepish as she answers, “No.”

“Want to?” I challenge.

She pushes over me. I wrap my legs around her as I unzip her pants, revealing the concealed strap-on. A little angling and she is inside of me, thrusting softly, not hard like in the forest on the picnic table.

“Harder,” I beg.

“Sh-h, not here.”

“Oh God,” I swear. “You are killing me!”

She chuckles softly. “Consider this foreplay.”

The night is made sweeter when we finally get to the house, our clothes and hair in obvious disarray as we exit the limo. She holds my hand as she walks me to the door. We don’t make it inside. She pushes me against the door, kissing me, filling my mouth with her tongue. I finger the waistband of her pants, digging for her cock.

“Not yet, baby,” she whispers against my face. “You need a little more warm up.”

“No fair,” I say. “I want to play with your cock.”

She laughs. “Patience.” Her fingers weave a trail up my thigh as she pushes me harder against the door. She enters me, first one finger, then two. I almost scream with need and urgency. She pumps me hard with her fingers, pulling from me a ready orgasm. I growl against her face, “I want your cock in me. Now.”

“You’re going to get tired of my toys—”

“Never,” I promise, sliding my hands inside her pants, ignoring the dildo as I push farther into her pants, finding her hot and moist. I tease her slit while she fumbles with my key. I slide a finger inside her as she pushes open the door. She pulls me inside and latches the deadbolt as the door closes behind us. I keep playing with her soft folds, fingering her wetness. I push her against the wall, giving her a taste of her own medicine. Wrapping my free hand around her ass, I plunge my fingers inside of her vagina. Thrusting. I rub her clit while I thrust, pulling her hips forward harder and harder, faster and faster with the rhythm...until she is screaming my name.

I hold her as she pants against me. “Didn’t I tell you that I like to be the dominant one?”

“You might have mentioned it,” I say against her jaw as I leave a trail of kisses.

“I don’t let anyone do that to me. I don’t like penetration.”

I still, barely breathing, hoping I haven’t crossed a line that I didn’t even know was there.

“But with you, it was different. I liked it,” she whispers, and I sigh with relief.

She pulls me through the house to my bed, where she pushes me back on the mattress and kneels before me, promising, “My turn,” as her head ducks between my legs.

Morning brings a reality check.

“I have to leave again.”

“When?” I ask with a pout.

“Soon, I’m going to be gone a lot the next few months. Come with me? You can show me what a great camper you are. We could kayak. I could teach you how to rock-climb.”

I really regret overstating my outdoor abilities. I make the excuse, “I’m scheduled for in-vitro in a few days.”

“You couldn’t put it off until fall?”

“No, I can’t put it off,” I say nastily and I regret the tone, because she doesn’t understand what I’ve gone through, which is my fault because I haven’t kept her in the information loop.

She’s quiet after that, withdrawn, thoughtful, and I hate it that she doesn’t share with me what she’s thinking.

An hour later, I know exactly what she is thinking when she storms into the kitchen with her laptop open and held against her hip. She puts it on the table with a thud. “Your limo driver is an asshole!”

I close my eyes, knowing this can’t be good. I walk over to the table and look down at what has her so angry. It’s a YouTube video. She has pushed play already and although the screen doesn’t show a picture, there is sound, a full two minutes of sound. I gasp. Then suddenly the video flares to life for the final thirty seconds. It shows me and obviously her, climbing out of the back of the limo, laughing, straightening our hair and clothes...and groping each other all the way to the front door where Geri pushed me back against the wall and kissed me rather passionately while maneuvering the key into the lock.

“Wow,” I say, thinking, *this is so bad* as I see her face go from pink to scarlet.

“No, not wow. I want his name. My lawyer wants his name.”

I try to pat her arm. “Is it that horrible?”

She looks at me like I grew an extra head...and maybe a few extra arms. “For you? No. This is marvelous. Free publicity. But for me? Yeah, this is a freaking disaster!”

I think she’s overreacting, but then she is leaving.

“Geri?”

I chase her to her Jeep.

“I have to go. Now. The business can’t take this kind of blow. I have to stop this from ruining my reputation and my company by doing some very fast damage control.”

This is bad.

It is three hours before I hear from her, but finally my cell phone rings and it is her. She apologizes for freaking out. “YouTube pulled the video and my lawyer is going to continue to monitor the situation, but I can breathe easier for now.”

She sounds more relaxed. My head is going to explode.

“Everything is going to be fine. You’re retired now and by the time I get back from Canada, Simone Sinclair will be yesterday’s news.”

Yesterday’s news?

I hang up the phone and I put my head between my knees to keep from passing out. It must be the hormones. I shouldn’t be so upset, but my heart is racing, my head pounding, and I feel like my soul wants to jump out of my body and...*run*. Thankfully, she doesn’t call back.

Unfortunately, she does show up on my doorstep before I have gotten over being mad. I meet her at the door. “I’m a porn star, Geri. You’ve always known that.”

“I’m an asshole.”

“Yeah, you are,” I say, going back into my house, leaving her standing in the doorway. That I expect her to follow me is obvious because I leave the front door open. I sit down on the couch and watch her walk toward me. I’m not expecting a grand gesture, but I do expect more than just an apology. My feelings have been hurt. I’ve been insulted.

She sits in a chair across from me.

“Simone Sinclair isn’t going to stop existing just because I’ve retired. If anything, my name is going to be bigger because I’ve decided that AsiaFlixxx is going to be marketed under the production house of Simon Simone Media.”

“What? I thought the Tokyo deal was dead.”

“Not hardly.”

“And of course his name comes first.” She snorts. “Why don’t the two of you just get married and call it a day.”

I think about his proposal. He wasn’t serious, and even if he was, I wouldn’t. “Why are you here? You made it fairly obvious that being photographed with Simone Sinclair, porn star, is the worst thing that has ever happened to you.”

“We weren’t just photographed,” she argues. “When our picture was taken at the party, I was fine. That video on the Internet was—”

“Explicit?” I offer.

“We were making out, we got a little carried away—”

“You shoved your fingers inside me and got caught doing it?”

“It was an invasion of my privacy!” she seethes, turning red in the face. “It wasn’t because you’re a porn star. I mean, part of it was. It still bothers me that you are, but I’m working on it, and it does help that

you are officially retired now. I know I can't expect you to hide the fact that you ever were, but maybe it can just be part of your past?"

I narrow my eyes at her, still mad.

"I want to be part of your life, but I can't be a part of your fame. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," I say.

And then I watch her drive away. I spend a long night alone, waiting for her to come back, or call, but she doesn't call me and I don't call her.

Finally, early in the morning, she calls me. She shouldn't have, because matters get a lot worse really fast. I ask her if she will come with me for the procedure and she tells me not to count on her because she has to leave soon.

"When?" I ask.

"Soon," she says.

I feel like I'm pushing for her to be part of this and that doesn't seem fair, but I can't seem to help myself, even though I know that she isn't having this baby *with me*. She really isn't even part of this. I'm pushing too hard because I can feel her pulling back.

Even so, I push harder. "I love you."

There is a pause and then she tells me that she needs to go. Did I really expect *I love you too*? I'm a fool.

I admit to Meg and Tina that we are fighting because, even though it is Friday and Geri is in town, she isn't at O'Leary's when I get there, and I feel like it is my fault. Our regular table is taken so we grab a booth in the corner.

At least Tina and Meg are excited about the upcoming event and want all of the details on my baby-making efforts.

"Looks like they can harvest my eggs on Monday," I'm telling them when Geri enters the bar, a wrapped box in tow. I smile, relieved.

"Did you see that?" Meg asks.

Tina takes the bait. "See what?"

"Her smile just lit up the entire room." Meg drapes her arm around Tina's shoulder. "Why don't you smile like that when I come into the room?"

"Hmm, maybe you don't try as hard to make me smile as Geri tries to make Simone smile."

"Yeah, yeah." Tina waves her hand at me, dismissing me, going back to her friendly banter with Meg. I keep my eyes on Geri. I just can't get enough of her when she's around.

She stops by the bar and orders a beer before coming to the table. She holds out the box and an orange juice on the rocks. "For you."

I frown, not taking the juice or the box, trying to remember why I'm so pissed off at her and growing more agitated because just seeing her makes me want to forget Friday night with the girls and go back to my house for some naked time.

She sets the juice and the box on the table in front of me and squats beside me. I meet her gaze, finding it harder and harder to scowl with her exuding major sex appeal.

"I'm sorry." She pushes the box closer. "Please?"

I open the box to find a big, brown, stuffed teddy bear.

I smile. She smiles. And for now, that's enough. I scoot to allow her to sit beside me.

When Meg and Tina go together to the restroom, Geri puts her arm around me and asks, "So, baby-making day is coming up quick, right?"

I nod, repeating what I told the girls earlier, "Tuesday, maybe Wednesday."

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

I nod. "I know I won't be the perfect mom."

She lifts my face with her fingertips so that she can look into my eyes. "You are going to be a great mom."

I shake my head with doubt, a drug-induced hormonal tear slipping down my cheek. I don't want to talk about having a baby or my ability to be a mother, I want to talk about *us* and why she didn't say *I love you* back last night. Instead, I say, "It's going to be hard to explain my choices to my child as I get older, but I hope my baby will grow up knowing how much I love him, so that when he is old enough to understand that I was once a porn star, he won't care."

"He won't care," she promises.

"Oh, he might. The rest of my family hates me because of what I've done in this lifetime."

"The rest of your family doesn't matter. Your family here, now, thinks you are wonderful, and we're all that matter."

My family here.

"God, Geri, I'm terrified."

"What can I do to help?"

I want to beg her to go with me, just to hold my hand, but that wouldn't be right. I want her to tell me she loves me, but I know she isn't ready. Half-seriously, I say, "Make love to me under the stars...make me forget that my life is about to change drastically."

"Baby, it's late. I've been packing all day for the trip—"

My head swivels to face her, my half-serious request suddenly causing my feelings to get hurt with full-on impact. She caresses my cheek and leans in to kiss me.

"I love you," I tell her and it stops her from kissing me.

She doesn't say it back and I pull away, getting more emotional with every breath. "You always say *Let me make love to you*. Are you really just prettying up *I want to fuck you*?"

"Let's go," she says and heads for the door, expecting me to follow. *Oh, I follow, all right!*

"If you don't love me then just say *I want to fuck you*. Do you understand?" Her hand closes over my mouth because I am creating a scene.

"Come on," she says, sliding her hand under my elbow. "I'm taking you home."

As soon as her hand comes away from my mouth, I demand, "Say it!"

"What?"

"Tell me I'm hormonal! Tell me I'm insane! Tell me you fucking love me! Just say the words once!"

"You are hormonal. You are not insane." She ushers me out into the humid night air. "And I wouldn't be here if I didn't care for you very much."

"But you won't tell me that you love me, will you?"

Her silence answers my question.

I sob all the way out of town and am staring despondently into the dark when Geri veers into the park and slams on her brakes so fast that my entire body is thrown forward, the seatbelt digging between my breasts. She unbuckles her belt and then mine. Even in the dark her eyes glow with emotion. Not anger. Maybe love. Just knowing she is full of emotion and I caused it is enough. Her hand wraps around the base of my neck and she pulls me forward, stopping just before kissing me, staring me down. Her gaze is so full of emotion that it hurts me to look at her, but I look and I keep looking because I want to remember this look in her eyes. When her mouth closes over mine, it is full of hunger and need, her lips crush mine and it hurts. I push my lips even harder against hers, hurting us both, and then our mouths are open and it feels like we could eat each other, like we could swallow each other whole.

We break away, panting.

She pulls me by the neck, dragging me out of the passenger side across her seat. I hit my knee on the gearshift. "Ow!"

She doesn't tell me she's sorry, she just keeps pulling me by the neck. We are face-to-face and she backs up, through the dark, into the forest. For just a second, I think this was a really bad idea, I shouldn't have pushed her so hard. And then she is pushing me up against a wide tree, the rough bark pressing into my back through my T-shirt and jeans. She presses into me, her body molding into mine, and mine molding into the tree.

She drops to her knees and unbuttons my pants, pulls my zipper, and then my jeans are down around my ankles and her face is buried against me, inhaling me. She pulls my thighs apart, making room, and then her tongue dips out and teases my clit. She pulls my knee up and my foot is pulled from my jeans. She

slides my leg over her shoulder and licks me deep, from back to front, the whole length of my slit. "Oh God!"

She does it again, and again. "Geri!"

She laughs. "Someday you are going to appreciate foreplay."

Her mouth closes over my clit and she sucks it. "Oh!" She slides her finger inside of me. "Please Geri, I know you're strapped-on, just give it to me. I want you to fuck me hard and fast."

She slides another finger inside, stretching me, filling me...finally pumping me until my orgasm squeezes her fingers. "Geri!" I scream and then she is standing in front of me, both of my feet back on the ground.

She kisses me, taking my mouth savagely, and I taste myself on her lips. She admits, "I'm not good at relationships. I never say or do the right things."

I pant against her, my mouth hurting.

"You're scared. You're hormonal. And I totally understand that." She holds my gaze and hers is wild. "You want assurances that I care about you...that I love you. I don't know that I do. I don't know that *this* is love. I know that Sheila accused me of being obsessed with you. She accused me of loving you, even when I thought I was in love with her. Love wasn't enough to keep me and her together, even though I said the words to her every day." She kisses me again, and this time it is soft, so soft, I feel as if she is memorizing my lips. I imagine that she is telling me goodbye. "I want to tell you all the words you want me to say, but I can't...not yet."

"Then why did you make me ask you to make love to me the first time we had sex?" I demand. "Why didn't we just have sex?"

She shakes her head, closing her eyes, not wanting to answer.

"Why, Geri?"

"Because I don't want it to be just sex with you!" she screams. "And that's what it feels like."

She drops to her knees. I lean back against the tree, the bark rough and painful against my skin, but that pain doesn't matter, because I feel like my heart has been ripped from my chest. My hands shake, no, my whole body shakes as I bend over to pull my jeans back over my hips. Geri is crying, but I can't bear to look at her. I step around her. She grabs my ankle. "I'll drive you home."

"No!" I seethe. "Just stay the fuck away from me."

It isn't hard to find my way out of the forest and, though it is a hike up the road to my house, I hardly realize I am walking. I can't believe what a fool I've been.

Chapter Fifteen

On Tuesday morning, my eggs are harvested, not a pleasant experience but survivable, and taken to a lab to be fertilized with the donor sperm. Dr. Abrams knows I'm upset, but I think he believes I'm nervous, scared, hormonal, which I am. I'm also disappointed and devastated by what Geri said in the park. I don't think there's any recovery from that. Not even Simon has ever been so cruel.

On Wednesday, the embryologist calls to let me know that fertilization has taken place. Seven eggs will be available to implant in three days, after each egg undergoes a cell test as part of the Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis. Since I'm over thirty-five, this test will reveal certain genetic conditions, including Cystic fibrosis, Down Syndrome, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, Tay-Sachs disease, or Turner Syndrome. I will also know going in the sex of my baby. I set an appointment time for Friday.

After hanging up, I freak out. I can't make the decisions I need to make alone. I call Tina, who after listening to my hysterics for five minutes, finally manages to get a word in. "They have to do what you want. If you only want two eggs implanted, they can implant two eggs and freeze the rest."

I hiccup back a sob. "Really?"

"I'm sure they may have mentioned that."

"They might have. I don't remember." I shuffle through a stack of papers as thick as a phone book looking for anything that says exactly that.

"You are in control. Just remember that."

I nod, feeling very out of control.

"Geri's just scared," she adds.

"We weren't talking about *her*," I say.

"That's what we should be talking about," she says.

"She doesn't love me."

"She said that?"

"No, she said it was just about the sex."

After a while, she says, "Words."

"What?"

"Geri hides behind her opinions, a loud mouth, and a lot of words when she's upset. Have you ever asked yourself why?"

I shake my head, remembering to say, "No."

“Just give Geri a chance to show you the truth of how she’s feeling. Don’t just hear what she says.”

“I don’t ever want to hear anything she ever has to say again. She hurt me too badly for that,” I insist.

Friday morning, Tina shows up on my front doorstep just as I am getting ready to leave for the clinic. “We don’t want you to be alone,” she says and I see that Meg is waiting in the car.

In the examination room, the three of us wait. Any moment Dr. Abrams will come in to place two fertilized eggs high in my uterus. My knees shake. There is a knock at the door and I think it will be the doctor, finally, but it isn’t the doctor, it is a nurse and she explains that Geri is in the waiting room and would like to join me.

I’m mad and sad and scared and uncertain about everything that is happening, but I am glad she is here and, after quickly assuring Meg and Tina that it is okay for them to wait in the waiting room, the nurse brings Geri in. She gives me a weak smile as she walks over to my side and kisses me on the cheek. “Is it okay that I’m here?”

I nod. She doesn’t mention what happened in the park a week ago or that she hasn’t called since. I’m not brave enough to say anything at all. I should be seething, but all I can think is that I wish she’d hold my hand.

Did Simon fuck up my head royally or what?

The problem is, I know what just sex feels like, and what happens between Geri and me isn’t that. Spiritual maybe...but not *just sex*.

Time ticks by with neither of us saying anything. I bounce on the paper sheet covering the examination table until Geri stands up and walks across the small room. I still, thinking she will leave, but she doesn’t.

“Wow,” she says, pulling a rubber glove out of a cardboard box and snapping it on her hand. She grabs a second, pulling it on too. She rubs her hands together...and that’s when I realize just how nervous she is too.

Yeah. Wow. I could know as early as next week whether or not one of the embryos attaches. I assume her wow was merely directed at the gloves.

She pulls the gloves off and shoves them into her front pants pocket, promising with a wink, “For later.”

“I wish they’d hurry up. I can’t take much more waiting,” I admit.

She rummages in a closed drawer.

“What are you doing?” I exclaim.

“Lube. *Hello*.”

“Put that back!” I tell her as I watch with shock as she starts to slide the lube in her pants pocket. “I’ll buy you lube! Why are you doing this?”

She laughs and tosses the lube back into the drawer. “Just checking.”

“Checking?” I demand, exasperated.

“To see if you’re going to be able to handle a ten-year-old.” She kisses my forehead. “You definitely have the *Mom voice* down.”

She rubs my shoulders. “Relax, beautiful. It’s going to be okay.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Faith,” she answers.

A quick tap on the door and then the doctor is there. I lie back with my legs spread on the doctor’s examination table and then he is approaching with the long needle that will be inserted through my vagina. Geri squeezes my hand. *Oh shit.*

I close my eyes and squeeze Geri’s hand tighter when I feel the doctor’s hand on the inside of my thigh. She leans over me, hugging me, her breath warm on my cheek as she whispers, “This is it, time to make a baby.”

“Now we wait,” the doctor says, finished with the procedure.

After he leaves the room, Geri and I look at each other. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” I giggle, then tease, “Was it good for you too?”

“Oo, baby.” She wriggles her eyebrows and I am so glad that she is here, even if she hasn’t called since the disaster in the park. “How long do you have to lie there?”

“Fifteen to twenty minutes. Not long.”

“Long enough,” she says and then her mouth is on mine, kissing me deep, making me moan. I push against her, asking, “Is this a little ridiculous?” I point at the paper gown, my feet in the stirrups.

“Kind of looks like a fantasy waiting to happen, if you ask me.”

“Geri!”

Her mouth closes over mine, making me forget my arguments, and when she pulls away, she whispers in my ear. “Let me love you a little on the day you conceive. I can’t provide the sperm, but if you let me, I can supply the love.” It is the closest she has ever come to saying *I love you*.

I nod, emotion clogging my throat, because everything has been so generic, so medical, and Geri’s warm hand in mine was the only thing that kept me from totally freaking out. Her hand goes to the neck of the paper gown, pulling it away from my body, ripping it off with a final tug. She trails kisses over my face, along my jaw, down my neck. Stepping back, she looks at me, lying naked on the long sheet of sterile medical paper, feet in stirrups. “Very sexy.”

I laugh.

“You think I could...?” She wriggles her eyebrows.

I hide my face, embarrassed.

“Oh my God, you’re blushing!” She pulls me into her arms, and we’re laughing together. “You’re just trying to distract me,” I say.

“How am I doing?”

“You might need to try a little harder—”

Her mouth closes over my nipple and sucks hard then bites lightly.

“How am I doing on that distraction?” she asks, sliding her mouth to the other nipple.

“Gonna have to try harder,” I say.

Her tongue slides down my stomach and circles my belly button. “Mmm, more?”

Every muscle in my body tenses, I want her so badly.

“We can’t,” I say. “We could mess up everything the doctor just did.”

A knock sounds on the door. *Oh shit!*

Geri bends and grabs the paper gown. I push my arms through the armholes just as the door opens. A nurse pokes her head in. “As soon as you are dressed, you can go.” She closes the door on us and, as soon as it latches, we fall into a fit of giggles.

“Contamination?” she demands.

“Doctor’s orders...no sex for two to three weeks.”

“I’ll be back in British Columbia by then.”

I nod, feeling tears well up as I ask, “When do you leave?”

She looks at the ground to keep from meeting my gaze as she admits, “Tonight, actually.”

I don’t ask how long she will be gone or, for that matter, if she wants to see me when she returns. I don’t want to push too hard for *a relationship*, because she keeps saying that she’s no good at them. Besides, I have a more important relationship in front of me. I’m going to be a *Mommy*.

“Thanks for being here today. You were a beautiful distraction.” I try to smile, but it falls apart and I end up crying in her arms.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “I don’t know how to stop hurting you.”

As I leave the office with Meg, Tina, and Geri, the doctor tells me, “Relax.”

Does he realize how impossible that is going to be?

Chapter Sixteen

I'm emotionally unbalanced.

I've done nothing but cry since Geri climbed into her Jeep and drove away from Dr. Abrams' parking lot. I assume she is in Canada by now, but I console myself that she was there to hold my hand during the implantation. That seems to mean something...even if I don't understand what. Does she love me and is just afraid to admit it? Or does she really, honestly believe that our relationship is nothing more than sex? *I can't believe that.*

What I feel for her seems too real.

And damn it if her rejection didn't come at the worst time. I feel so weak.

Especially when I listen to Simon's voicemail and he begs me to spend the weekend with him. I laugh. I should agree merely for the distraction from the countdown going on in my head until the day I can take the pregnancy test...it would be worth it just to see his face when I told him we couldn't have sex because I had freshly fertilized eggs floating around in my womb.

I think about what he said. "I love you. I always have. I always will." I force myself to remember all of the other times he has manipulated me with words.

I shake my head, disgusted with myself. Simon does not love me or necessarily want me...even if he has called every day since my retirement party.

I let his calls go to voicemail. I haven't told him about the in-vitro yet. I'm waiting for my pregnancy to be official and I really have no idea what I'm going to say to him when I do decide to take his call.

I know that a part of me clings to him because he is familiar, because we've been playing this game a very long time. A part of me is totally disgusted with myself for not telling him to leave me alone.

He'll hurt me again...and again. If I keep letting him.

I don't have to wait until the following Thursday to have my answer, because on Sunday morning, my countdown comes to an abrupt stop when I wake up knowing that something is wrong. I'm cramping and achy low in my abdomen. Going to the bathroom confirms it. I've started my period, the embryos didn't implant. I call my doctor's emergency number, not caring that I am bothering him on a Sunday. Holding the teddy bear that Geri bought me, I rock back and forth on my bed, crying, listening to the doctor as he reminds me that the procedure isn't always successful the first time.

"How long do we have to wait to try again?"

"Normally, I would say three or four months, but since we have several of your eggs frozen and ready, we can really proceed as soon as this cycle completes."

"Meaning?"

"A few weeks, but come into the office on Monday. I want to do an ultrasound, see what is going on, and we can discuss all of your options."

I hang up, no less depressed than when I called, but at least hopeful that I still have a chance. I decide to spend the day in bed, sobbing, letting go of the dream baby that I'd become so attached to in the few days I hoped I was pregnant.

Hours later, I awake to my brightly lit bedroom and my ringing bedside phone. I let it ring, but then it only starts over again. I answer and it is Simon.

"God, you sound awful."

"I feel awful, Simon. I'm not pregnant. I should be, but I'm not, because my eggs didn't implant and I'm pretty upset about that at the moment."

He sighs heavily into the phone. "Baby, I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. Why do you lie to me, Simon?"

"I'm sorry you are hurting. That isn't a lie. Do I wish you'd give up on this baby idea? Sure. I'm not going to sugarcoat it."

"Well, I'm not giving up on the idea of having a child," I say, forcing myself to sit up. I walk to the bathroom with my teddy bear clutched under my left arm and the phone tucked under my right ear. I have to shuffle the phone to my left ear to make pulling down my pajama bottoms with my right hand practical. "So, screw you. You have a son. You have no idea how it feels to be alone, completely alone."

"Can't I be enough for you? Wouldn't it be enough to watch each other grow old and spend our best years together? You wouldn't be alone. You'd be with *me*."

"Our best years?" I shake my head, not caring when I start to pee that he might hear.

"Our golden years."

I snort. "Simon, I'm hanging up now."

"Wait, wait, wait."

"What?" I ask, clearly exasperated.

"I need you."

I roll my eyes, letting silence fall between us.

"How soon can I get you on a plane to Tokyo?"

"I'm hanging up now." Wiping, I realize that I am no longer bleeding. Hugging the teddy bear, I allow myself to hope I am pregnant until it is proven otherwise. I also decide to call Geri and dial the number that Tina programmed into my phone in case I changed my mind about calling her. It is a land phone because cell phone reception in Sandspit, British Columbia is non-existent.

Still sitting on the toilet, I listen to the phone ring, and then I hear her voice. She says, "Hello," twice before I find mine and manage to say, "Hi."

"Simone?" she asks, before adding, "I hate to do this, but can I call you back in like five minutes? I was kind of in the middle of something and I really do want to talk to you, I just need a couple minutes so that when I call you back, I can focus on just you."

I think I hear someone else in the background, but I don't dwell on it. I tell myself that if she is with someone that someone doesn't mean anything. That someone isn't important. That someone is a distraction to help Geri forget me.

I decide that I don't want to be forgotten. "Sure, call me back."

"Great. Five minutes. Simone? I'm really glad you called. I'm going to call you right back."

I hang up, sighing, relaxing. Realizing I haven't relaxed since the last time I saw Geri. I've been uptight and tense, waiting for her to show back up in my life without any impetus from me. Life just doesn't work that way though, does it?

I check myself one more time to see if I am bleeding. I decide I'm not and then I decide I need to figure out how much blood there was so that I can tell the doctor tomorrow morning. I decide less than a tablespoon, just spotting. I hope that is a good sign. I hope that the next time I have to go to the bathroom, I'm not bleeding again.

I go back to bed, taking the teddy bear with me, and lie down, waiting for Geri to call.

She doesn't make me wait the entire five minutes. The phone is ringing before I even cover up. I get myself completely wrapped in blankets before I say, "Hello."

"Hi there, how are you?"

"Not a good question today," I say. "So maybe we can save that one for another time. Tell me about your new life in British Columbia, since that seems to be where you are living these days."

"Ah, I'm just here...chillin'..." I hear her trying to think of the best way to answer. "It's taking longer than I thought it would, trying to get operations running smoothly."

"Really?" I say.

"It's just, with the takeover, I'm trying to reorganize and fire as few people as possible."

"That's good, then." I snuggle up against the teddy bear, just happy to hear Geri's voice. I didn't realize how much I've missed hearing it until just now. Her voice is somehow comforting.

"It's beautiful here. I'd love for you to see this place sometime."

I smile. "That would be nice."

"Are you okay? You don't sound like yourself."

I start to cry. *Damn hormones*. "I'm fine," I lie, burying my face into the teddy bear.

"Talk to me...tell me what's wrong, honey, you sound so sad."

"I am, but that isn't why I called you. I want this to be a happy call. I just wanted to hear your voice." I don't say, *I was hoping if you heard my voice, maybe you'd want to come back to Seattle*. It sounds too pathetic to admit that I was hoping she'd miss me enough to want to come back. I was hoping she'd realize that she really did love me after all.

"You're crying," she guesses. "I'm sorry about what I said in the park. I shouldn't have said what I said and especially not the way that I did."

I shake my head, not willing to admit that I've lost her before I ever really had her.

"Are you there?" she whispers.

"We're still friends, right?" I whisper into the receiver, my voice cracking. "Because I've just missed you and I know that sounds really pathetic, but I have, and I can't imagine losing our friendship completely."

Silence meets my admission and I know it was a mistake I called her. Now I can be really sad on both counts.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you. Be happy in Canada, Geri." I hang up, not giving her a chance to answer. I really don't expect her to call me back immediately, but she does, and I really don't expect her to scream at me when I answer, but she does that too.

"Will you please stop doing that?"

"What?" I ask.

"Hanging up on me before I have a chance to say what I want to say?"

"I'm sorry," I say, crying harder, but trying really hard not to let her know I'm crying.

"And please stop apologizing!"

"Okay. Fine. You're the one who said that you felt nothing for me. That it was just sex for you."

"No, Simone. That's not what I said or what I meant to say. This isn't something we should discuss on the phone."

I nod. "You're right. It would be so much better to say it immediately after you give me an amazing orgasm." I hang up on her. *Why in the hell did Meg think I should call her?*

The phone rings again and I know it is her. I answer anyway.

"Stop hanging up on me!"

"Give me a reason to want to stay on the phone."

"I miss you."

"Great, you miss me," I say sarcastically.

"Will you give me a chance to say this the right way?"

I don't answer, allowing a heavy silence to fall between us.

"Did you ever think that maybe I'm as messed up in the head about relationships as you are? Because I am and I don't want to point blame at anyone for being the way I am. I just am. Sheila was always trying

to analyze me, telling me why I was feeling the way I was feeling, pointing at things that happened in my childhood to make me feel like I'm not one-hundred-percent girl, or one-hundred-percent boy, but some kind of unnatural freak in the middle. She had theories about why I couldn't commit to her, why I was infatuated with you... I just don't want to have to think so hard when it comes to relationships. *Love shouldn't be so hard.*"

"You're right," I agree. "It should be easy, unconditional, undemanding."

We're both silent after that. I close my eyes, realizing that as much as I wanted her body and her strength in my life, I'm not altogether certain that it was love making me pursue her. Did I need a Simon replacement? Or worse, was I just so terrified of raising a baby alone that I was trying to create something with her so that I wouldn't have to do it alone? *Oh God.* "I gotta go!"

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. Fine. There's something I have to do," I tell her in a rush. "Thanks for talking to me. I'll leave you alone now." I hang up and I don't answer when she calls back. Instead, I get out of bed and get dressed. I am not going to sit around waiting for a fairytale. I'm going to get back to living my life.

Chapter Seventeen

Simon sounds as surprised to hear my voice when I call him as Geri sounded when I told her I had to go. “Are you certain Tokyo is ready for Simone Sinclair?”

“Definitely.” I hear the hope in his voice. I knew it all along. He didn’t *need me*, he needed *me*...and in the end it is just remembering who you are dealing with that makes all the difference.

“I’m going to need a house, not an apartment, you are going to have to arrange transport for my Lotus, and I’m there as the co-owner and producer. I get to hire the directors, consultants, writers, and actors as I see fit.”

“Like I said, Simone, it’s *your* baby. How soon can you get your cute little ass to Tokyo?”

“I’ll let you know. I have a doctor’s appointment in the morning and my travel dates will hinge on that.”

“You’re still going to have a baby.” He makes it a statement, not a question.

“That’s the plan, Simon. Now find me a house in Tokyo as nice as the one I’m living in and I’ll let you know about my travel schedule tomorrow night.”

The official prognosis from the doctor is that it is too early to tell. I may have lost the baby. I may still have a chance at a successful pregnancy. I’ve been instructed to take a home pregnancy test on Friday and then another one every day for five days until I get a positive result or, at the end of the fifth day, it is determined by ultrasound that the embryos didn’t implant. I continue taking the progesterone to thicken the wall of my uterus. *Great, more hormones, more crying jags*. But at least the in-vitro hasn’t been ruled a failure.

As much as I want to drive home and crawl into bed with the teddy bear that Geri bought me, I don’t. There’s too much to do if I am going to move to Tokyo in a week and, regardless of my pregnancy test results, I am leaving here in seven days. My remaining eggs are frozen and travel between Tokyo and Seattle isn’t that difficult, so I can come back for the procedure. I’ll just need a doctor in Tokyo to supervise my hormone schedule.

Simon called to tell me that a real estate agent downtown is expecting me at noon to show me three choices. That gives me forty minutes to cross town.

I still can’t believe I am moving to Tokyo.

I can't imagine what has possessed me to choose this path, but it seems right, and I feel more powerful than I have in weeks. Taking charge of my life has made a huge improvement in my mood and honestly, I don't think I gave Tokyo a full chance before and maybe that was in part because I was so worried about Geri's opinion of me. Well, screw that. That's what I've learned in this mess.

Love is unconditional and undemanding.

Sure, there's always room for compromise, but I can't be someone I'm not.

It's raining cats and dogs as I drive from the doctor's office to the real estate office across town and I let out a big breath when I finally pull in to their parking lot. I look at myself in my rearview mirror. I look stressed. Deep grooves pressed between my eyebrows. *I'm not running away, I'm taking charge of my life.*

"I certainly hope that's the truth of it," I tell my reflection and then I race through the heavy downpour to the office, splashing through puddles, and really looking forward to living somewhere other than Seattle for awhile.

I fold my umbrella and place it in a caddy before holding out my hand to the agent, a petite Asian woman who appears stunned to meet me when I say, "Simone Sinclair."

"Cho Nishimura." She smiles and finally takes my hand. There is no trace of a Japanese accent and I wonder how many generations back her lineage goes in the U.S. "I'm a huge fan. Really. It is a pleasure to meet you."

I smile. It feels wonderful to be *Simone Sinclair* again. As I follow the woman to her office, I realize I never was very good at being plain, old Sarah.

"I only hope I do not disappoint you today."

"Uh-oh," I say.

"Mr. Kramer was very clear that you wanted a house, but in the city limits, you will find yourself more comfortable in one of the new high-rises, and they can be *very* accommodating."

I nod, but am far from enthusiastic. "I'm not sure I want to be in a high-rise. The possibility of earthquakes make me nervous."

"I understand," she says. "But really, with the new advances in construction, I think you will find that the high-rises are very safe. I have a report of the damaged areas from the last earthquake and I think you will see that most of the severe damage was in the older sections of town. Before the new building codes were in place."

I grit my teeth as she pulls up her computer screen. I hate to admit it, but as she proceeds with her presentation, I'm impressed with her thoroughness in easing my fears and pointing out the level of luxury and amenities offered by going new. It isn't hard to see why Simon sent me to her, she knows Tokyo. It turns out that her favorite apartment is also mine. By Tokyo standards, it is huge and is going to cost me a sizeable portion of my retirement money, but I stand to make it back within the first few years if Simon's predictions are on target. And since I can't have a house with a yard, I can at least have the one of the most

luxurious apartments in Tokyo. It offers a beautiful view of Tokyo Bay, a split floor plan with accommodations for a live-in housekeeper/nanny on one side of the living space and three additional bedrooms on the other side.

Cho also provided all of the information I would require to find a suitable nanny, get my driver's license, and rent furnishings. I hadn't considered what I would do with my house in Seattle, but Cho had an answer to that as well—temporary leasing as a vacation rental. All that I would be required to do would be to store my most valuable belongings, or have them shipped to Tokyo, and hire a management company.

"By keeping it temporary, you can make sure that it is available when you need it."

I nod.

An hour later, I am the lessor of a luxury high-rise apartment in Tokyo and lessee of a vacation home in Seattle.

"You will be very pleased with the view, location, and amenities," Cho assures me and I believe her. There is also a park, an international market, and an elementary school within a block's walk. Honestly, the floor plan sold it, everything else is just icing.

My next stop is a moving and storage company. They send me home with two crates for my international shipping needs and the promise of two men in two weeks to box and haul the rest of the important items into long-term storage. Of course, the main furnishings will stay and I hope I don't regret that choice, even though Cho repeatedly assured me before I left her office that the executive clientele who would be renting from me would take as good a care of my things as I would.

My final stop is the drug store. I'm not wasting any time. I buy seven pregnancy tests, one for every day of the week, my intention to use the first one in the morning.

But I can't wait that long and use it as soon as I get home.

Negative.

That's doesn't mean I'm not pregnant, I tell myself and then I crawl into bed, hugging the teddy bear, hoping like crazy that tomorrow's test result shows positive. I know, I know. I should wait until Friday. I can't...I'm just not that patient.

I sleep, waiting, hoping...and dream about my future in Tokyo with a new job and a baby to share my life with. I don't wake up until midday Tuesday.

I stumble down to the kitchen for something to eat, having not eaten since Saturday. I eat like I haven't eaten in a week and then I start to think about when my last meal really was, not Saturday, maybe the night before the procedure, because I only remember juice and water since. I open the fridge for more orange juice and think for a second that I hear a car in my drive, but know it must only be a car going around the curve beyond my gate. When I hear the doorbell, I jump, spilling juice on the counter.

I walk slowly to the front door and when I catch my reflection in the hall mirror, I almost don't open the door after all. But I do because I suspect Tina or perhaps Meg...

And then Geri is in front of me, pushing me inside, closing the door. My back is suddenly pressed against the wall and she is kissing me, hard, deep, greedy, hungry, needy, and I respond to her like I have every time she kisses me. I cry, but I manage to keep kissing her back. My mouth can't get enough of hers as our tongues collide.

"We can't keep denying this," she manages to say.

"I don't want to deny this," I promise her.

I roll over, waking with a start. I feel the bed beside me, it's cold...it was just a dream.

Just a dream.

I swallow hard, realizing how badly I wanted her. And how desperately I've been pushing her from my thoughts. If I don't think about her, I can pretend that none of it happened. I won't feel like my heart is breaking.

My feet and legs are lead as I walk down the stairs to the kitchen. I open the fridge and pull out the orange juice. I wait for the crunch of tires on my driveway, but there isn't a crunch. The only sound coming through the open window is birds. And rain. It's drizzling softly. Big surprise.

I fill a glass with orange juice and walk to the front door, open it and hope to see her Jeep. It isn't there. Defeated, I sit on the step and watch the rain, the birds, the swirl of tree leaves as the wind blows softly through them. The day smells like damp earth and I realize just how long it's been since I paid enough attention to my surroundings to notice.

I set my glass on the porch at my feet and stand, walking barefoot out into the soft rain, lifting my face to it. I start walking...through my gate...down the road. The hill is steep leading from my house to the park and although my house sits on the back edge of the park's boundary, the road winds a mile, maybe two miles to its entrance. It doesn't matter. I don't think about it. I keep walking, my bare feet hitting cool, wet asphalt...then the damp gravel of the parking lot...then the coarse mulch of bark and pine needles of the trail.

I'm drawn to the tree I leaned against when Geri made love to me. It looks exactly the same as a dozen other trees, but somehow I know which one it was.

Closing my eyes, I run my fingers over the bark and then I am hugging the tree, sobbing. Sobbing hard. Saying goodbye. I force myself to remember each touch, each caress, each sigh...and then her voice, "I don't want it to be just sex with you! And that's what it feels like."

Simon is in my driveway with a police officer when I finally come home. It is late in the day, almost dusk, and only the deepening dark under the tree canopy made me realize that I should go home. I knew it was raining, drips of water managed to make it through the thick canopy. I didn't know that it was pouring until I left the forest for the main road. I'm soaked through to my skin by the time I see Simon's car. And a police car. Simon is standing in my open doorway talking to a police officer when he sees me approaching.

He races to my side. Worry lines his face when he takes in my bare, dirty feet. “You scared me to death! What happened? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I assure him. It is obvious that I am not fine. And to think, it was only yesterday, or the day before, that I’d felt so powerful. I remember belatedly that I was supposed to have met Simon at four.

The officer is relieved that it was a false alarm. I’m glad my assurances that I am fine send him on his way, though he cautions me to be more careful.

Back in the house, sitting across from Simon, wrapped in a blanket with a towel around my wet hair, I tell him I am ready to leave for Tokyo, sooner rather than later. I need to work. I need to get my mind off Geri and off my baby worries before I have a nervous breakdown for real. I don’t tell him my concerns, but I know he knows that I’m at my breaking point.

“What can I do to help?”

I shrug, trying desperately hard not to ask him to make love to me. He still draws me like a magnet. Physically. But mentally, emotionally, he can’t be that man. And I need to try to stop forcing him into a role he can’t fill. I swallow hard, my throat and chest tightening. I’m trying to do the same thing to Geri.

Blinking back tears, I point at the empty crates in the dining room. “Cho Nishimura said to fill those crates with the things I absolutely must have in Tokyo...and what must go with me will not fit in two small crates.”

“What do you want to take?”

I stand, holding out my hand, glad for the warmth of his grip when he takes it and allows me to lead him from room to room, pointing out hundreds of mementos, awards, pictures, artwork, small pieces of antique furniture that I don’t want left to the mercy of strangers. “I know it’s just stuff,” I wave my hands around helplessly, “but it’s stuff I don’t want to leave behind.”

He slides his hand under my chin, tipping my face up, catching and holding my gaze. “You aren’t coming back are you?”

“Not for a long time, Simon. I need to make a new life and I can’t do that here.”

He nods. “Can you find what you are looking for in Tokyo?”

I smile and it is the first time I’ve smiled in days. “I’m counting on it.”

I watch Simon as he takes charge, calling Cho, calling an international moving company, calling so many people I lose track of what he is saying or doing and am left merely watching in amazement. After a half hour, he sits beside me, taking my hand. “All done. You’ll be stuck in a hotel for a week, but it is a very nice hotel, not in Tokyo, in the country. It’s a spa actually. And they will treat you like a queen there. You are going to feel like a new woman. By the time you arrive in the city, your apartment will be ready, furnished, staffed, and hopefully with all of your crates waiting for you to unpack. Unless you want me arrange that as well. I just merely thought you might want to choose where your art and personal photos and things go.”

"Yes, thank you, I would." I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"I've never seen you so overwhelmed. I'm worried, Simone." He squeezes my hand. "Is it because you want a baby so badly?"

I hold back tears. "That's part of it. And part of it is making a fool out of myself." I shrug. "I fell in love, but it doesn't seem to be reciprocated."

"The woman?"

"Yes, Geri."

"Well, she's a fool."

I laugh. It seems suddenly so ridiculous that he is telling me that Geri is a fool for not wanting me after I chased him for two decades.

"We're both fools," he amends.

"I'm glad you admit it. There is something else you can do for me."

"Name it."

"Stop calling me every hour on the hour to tell me how much you need me in your life. It's confusing, and right now I just want to focus on my new career and my new life. It's time *we* face facts." I say *we*, meaning I. "We haven't worked out particularly well as relationship material for each other in two decades, so suffice it to say that we are friends. Period."

"I do love you, Simone."

"I love you too, Simon, *as a friend*."

There is a moment's silence before he agrees, "I'd rather be your friend than not part of your life at all."

"Good." I hug him. "I'd like that too."

He snickers. "Can we sometimes be friends with benefits?"

"Simon!" I shriek, pushing him away, laughing because I think he only half meant it.

"You can't blame a guy for trying, baby."

"And you can't call me baby anymore. I'm the head of *our* Asian production company. It isn't professional," I admonish, shaking my finger at him.

"Yeah, yeah." He laughs.

"When can I leave for this fabulous spa?"

"Is tomorrow soon enough?"

I smile and nod, then start pushing him out the door. "I have to pack, you have to go."

He kisses my cheek at the door and pulls me into a hug. "Welcome back, Simone. I was getting worried about you."

"Me too," I say. "Me too."

Chapter Eighteen

A loud noise startles me awake and then, hearing the whistle of wind whipping around the house, I fully wake up and realize I have no electricity. I walk through the semi-dark house. It is late morning, but the sky is dark and ominous, making it seem like twilight. We have storms in Seattle, but rarely bad ones. So I am surprised when I look out and see a tree down across the road. “Does it never end?”

My bags are packed and ready in the corner of my bedroom.

But it doesn’t look like I’ll be leaving anytime soon. I call Simon, who tells me he’s been trying to call, but the connection doesn’t go through. His voice goes static for a second and then he comes back, and I get, “...worst storm...years...no flight today...”

“Simon? Simon!”

The line goes dead. *Well, crap.* I crawl back under the covers and listen to the wind and rain, hoping none of the big old trees around my house fall over.

It is some time later when I awaken to pounding on my front door. The wind is still whistling around my house. I think that Simon was insane to drive over here to tell me we couldn’t fly out. *He’s insane!* Grabbing a flashlight from a nightstand drawer, I hurry through the dark house. I open the door, smiling, then realize it isn’t Simon under the big yellow raincoat, but Geri. “What are you doing here?”

“I had to see you. I drove all night.” She pulls off her dripping raincoat and leaves it on the porch before stepping into the foyer.

“That will blow away,” I say. “Hand it here.”

She does, I carry it dripping to the hall bathroom where I lay it in the sink. “You drove?”

“If you haven’t noticed, there’s a storm out there off the coast and not only is the ferry down, but flights are grounded too.”

“Yeah, must be some storm.” I say, trying to see through the big picture window as I walk back into the living room. It is darker than before, seeming like night. I busy myself by lighting some candles.

“Must be some woman who drew me back.”

I don’t comment. I don’t know what to say. I don’t want this to be another false start at a relationship that doesn’t have a chance. I remember how real my dream was. Am I dreaming this now? I don’t think I will be able to bear it if I wake up again. I light a few more candles, on the fireplace mantle and on the coffee table. I turn off the flashlight and set it on a small side table by the sofa.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think,” she says.

"You've been away a week."

"That's a long time to think about someone when you're thinking you might never see them again. I didn't want the last time I saw you to be the last time I'd ever get to see you."

"Ah, that's what this is about." Enlightenment dawns a bit slowly. "Which one called you, Meg? Tina? Because it isn't going to change anything that you are here," I say, not believing I'm saying it. "I'm going back to Tokyo, and this time I'm sinking my heart and soul into the project. I'm not going to get sidetracked by what I think I want or need, because I already have everything I need to be happy. I *know* who I am. And I'm okay with that." I don't mean for the last part to come out as an angry jab, but that's exactly what it comes out sounding like.

"You're right." She nods. "You've always known who you are and you've never apologized for being yourself. I'm sorry if I made you think you have to be something you aren't to be with me."

I shrug.

"When do you leave?"

"As soon as the airport clears it."

"Wow. That's soon."

"Yeah." I sigh, sitting down on the couch. She sits beside me. Wasn't I just sitting here with Simon? *God, how ridiculous is this?*

"I can't believe you are here." I pull my knees up to my chin, hiding behind arms and legs. She tips her head back against the couch, closing her eyes, her eyelashes flaring out over her cheekbones. She looks so soft, so relaxed. And I'm a wreck, trembling beside her.

You are so beautiful.

Her eyes open and she turns her gaze to me. It is like she heard my thought, because she blushes, like she always does when I tell her she's beautiful.

"You are beautiful." She reaches her hand out to touch me, settling for running her hand over my arm. "It's what makes this so hard."

"Please don't tell me anything else that is going to make me hurt any more than I already hurt," I beg. "I can't take it. I fell in love with you! And you wouldn't—"

"I know. I know. I've been a complete and utter moron." She scoots closer, pulling me into her arms even though I stay wrapped up, a tight ball of uncooperative arms and legs. "I can't stand being away from you."

She pulls me nearer. "I want to be a part of your life."

Simon's words from only hours ago echo through my brain. *I'd rather be your friend than not part of your life at all.* Is that why Geri's here, to make certain we can be friends?

I lean over to kiss the dark freckle above her lip just because I've wanted to for so long.

She smiles at me, letting me pull back into myself. We're still touching, but I am as stiff as when she first put her arm around me.

"I can't believe you're here," I repeat, not wanting to ruin everything again, but needing to know. "Did Meg call you? Tina? Are you supposed to talk me out of going to Japan?"

Her face turns serious and she looks at me a long time before answering. "They both called and I panicked that you would leave and I might never see you again. So I drove through a storm hoping to get here before you left. I'm tired of running from you. From everyone. I haven't really dated since Sheila. I hate to admit it, but she made me fear love. I don't ever want to hurt as badly again as I did when she walked out of my life. Being with you has reminded me what it means to be aware of my beating heart again. I'm not here to keep you from going to Tokyo just like I know you would never interfere with my need to travel sometimes. I just knew that I had to come here and offer to share my life with you, because I think what we both feel when we are together is some kind of once-in-a-lifetime magic that goes way beyond love."

Pretty words. I try to get my cynical self in check, but Simon has really done a number on my mind too. And to think, a week ago I would have been happy with *I love you*.

"I'm too late, aren't I?" she asks.

"I don't know, Geri. My heart still pounds like crazy when I see you. My body wants you to make love to it. Like now. It doesn't want my brain to think too hard on this...but the problem is that my brain is thinking and I know that you will never be able to handle being in a long-term relationship with Simone Sinclair, porn star."

"What happened to retiring and being a normal person raising a baby?"

"A lot happened in seven days."

She nods and the look that crosses her face isn't a happy one. "So what's it going to take to be a part of your life?"

"Acceptance of who I am and what I do is a start. Whether I'm a porn star or a porn producer, I'm still the same me that you've known all these years...and I'm relocating to Tokyo, so you figure it out."

She doesn't leave, she doesn't pull away. She holds me, silently, and after a while, I relax against her because the storm and her warmth are lulling.

Minutes or hours later, I fall asleep against her, and after a while, she must sleep too because when I wake again, it is deep night and the storm no longer whistles around the house. Rolling off the sofa, I don't try to be extra quiet, but don't want to wake her either. I realize fairly quickly that nothing is going to wake Geri. She looks exhausted, even in deep sleep.

In the bathroom, I prep the next pee stick and then pass it under my urine. I'm so nervous, my hand shakes. It isn't a long wait. *Negative.*

“Shit.” I go to bed, crawling under the covers, leaving Geri asleep downstairs on the couch. It hits me that I’m done fighting for *I love you* from anyone. Maybe because she said the words and the words didn’t change anything. If anyone wants to love me, they can, but I’m done trying to make it happen and they’ll have to prove it with actions not words.

I toss and turn, deciding to just be happy with the happy moments that happen each day and having Geri on my couch definitely counted. It seems like I might never fall asleep but then I am waking up, and find Geri sitting on the edge of the bed. She holds my discarded pee stick in her hand and tears run down her face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” I say resolutely. “I’m going to have to be. Four more days of this, waiting to figure out if it’s positive or negative, I might go insane.”

She nods. “I’m sorry I fell asleep. You could have woke me up.”

“I’ve slept the whole time you slept,” I assure her. “Worry is hard work. I think I’m still exhausted.”

She lies down beside me and I feel her shoulders shake, her silent tears becoming a forlorn sob.

“Oh, don’t do that. You’ll get me started,” I beg.

She pulls me into her arms and, for a second, my heart races, thinking that she might ask me to stay, but then she doesn’t and I don’t know what to think. I kiss her shoulder, kiss her neck. She’s still wearing the same clothes she arrived in and I decide that she needs to be wearing none at all. “I need a shower, take one with me?” I ask, standing, holding my hand out to her. She nods, taking my hand.

In the bathroom, I pull off my clothes, adjust the water temperature, and climb under the shower spray. Through the glass doors, I watch her undress and feel like I shouldn’t be watching, but I can’t help myself as her shirt comes off, then her pants. I am surprised to see that she is wearing girls’ bikini underwear, white cotton, but still, girls’. Her bra matches. It is the same half-cami style that she wore the first time I saw her take off her clothes. She’s much more relaxed this time and I wonder what the difference is.

She pulls the bra over her head and lowers her panties. She isn’t strapped on, no hidden package, just girl, and I wonder about that, but only until she turns around. She ducks her head when she opens the glass door. I step into the corner, making room for her, enjoying her shyness. She turns to face me, putting me eye to eye with her perfect breasts. I palm a bar of soap and start to rub it over her chest and then dropping down just far enough to lather her breasts. I focus on them only long enough to draw her nipples to tight buds then lather her stomach and hips, her ass cheeks and then finally just a tease between her legs. She doesn’t shave. And her mons is beautiful covered in downy, blonde-brown hair. I lather her pubic hair and then play with the suds, swirling, dipping my finger deeper.

She growls, taking the bar of soap, insisting, “My turn,” and her voice sounds tight with desire. I stop her, explaining, “I can’t. Three weeks, remember?”

Nodding, she pulls me into her arms, tucking her face into my neck and, over the spray of the shower, I barely hear her say, “I love you.”

Kissing her shoulder, I convince myself that I only heard what I wanted to hear. I’m so good at that.

A while later, we lay side by side in my bed. The storm is over and dawn is breaking clear and bright. “I want you. I think we could sixty-nine...as long as I don’t orgasm...would that be okay?”

She nods and it is only slightly awkward as we reposition with me on the bottom and her on top. I wrap my hands around her thighs, pulling her closer just as she licks her first tongue stroke over my clit. “Oh God. This might be harder than I thought.”

She slides her tongue to a less sensitive spot. “Better?”

“Much.” I stick my tongue out tentatively, but then as my lips close around her clit, it becomes second nature. I lick her, suck her, sliding my tongue in circles around her clit, just like I would if she had a dick instead.

I suck her clit into my mouth and keep sucking, hard and fast. I slide my fingers between the lips of her labia, teasing, not penetrating. I feel her hips start bucking against my face and even then I’m not willing to let go, not until I hear her moans turn to sobs.

“Oh God, Simone, oh God! What you do to me.”

Two hours later, I am climbing into Simon’s Escalade, leaving Geri in my driveway, sitting in her Jeep, looking stunned and confused. I kissed her goodbye, not saying the words. I didn’t have any words in me to say, not *I love you*, or *I’ll miss you*, though both would have been true. I try not to think too hard about when or if I will see Geri again, I just face forward, hidden behind dark sunglasses, not daring to look in the rearview mirror because I don’t think that she ever looked in hers the times she was driving away from me. Because if she’d have looked, she’d have seen me doubled over, sobbing, and I don’t think she would have kept driving if she’d seen me like that. I know if I look and I see her in that condition, it would break my heart, but I don’t know if I could turn around if I knew she was crying. Have I grown so cold? So uncompassionate?

No, I’m a coward. I don’t look because my future is in Japan and I know that if I look and she’s sobbing, I won’t go. I close my eyes and grip the door handle with a death grip.

“Are you okay?” Simon asks from beside me.

“I’m okay. This better be a fucking hellacious spa you’re taking me to.”

He smiles, reaching over to squeeze my thigh and the warmth of his touch is welcome. He’s always been there for me, through the good, through the bad, he’s seen it all. I don’t hate him, not at all. In a way, I need him and he needs me, but I don’t want to dwell on *that*.

Chapter Nineteen

Spa experience does not even begin to describe my first day in Japan. I lie on a cushioned chaise with my eyes closed, a warm mist wafting around me from the hot springs. I'm tempted, but I won't climb in the very hot water, not while there is still a chance of pregnancy...and I have one more pee stick before I can call it a failure.

Bird song fills the small, sheltered area, finches of all colors roosting in thick clumps of lacy green bamboo. A small waterfall bubbles gently behind me and soft music filters out through an open door.

A petite, dark-haired woman with green eyes and a teasing smile massages my fingers. When I close my eyes, I see her naked, perhaps tied in rope. I want her, not for me, but for the production company. *I could make her famous.* I imagine Simon having the same thoughts about me twenty years ago. He said once, "We're not so different," and I hate to admit it, but he's right about that. I can imagine stripping my masseuse and bending her over the massage table. I imagine what her skin would feel like beneath my hands, what her come would taste like on my lips.

I am like Simon. However, I wouldn't manipulate the girl with sweet words. I wouldn't make her fall in love with me to get her naked in front of my camera.

As long as I'm being honest with myself I have to admit that I'm good at this business. I was good at being a porn star and I have no doubt I will do just as well on the other side of the camera. And damn it, I miss being in the studio.

I can do this. Alone.

I'm glad that Simon and I had the long flight to talk things through. My role, his role. He liked the new name Simon Simone Productions, though he thought my name should be first, Simone Simon. I laughed and told him that since I was taking eighty percent of the profits, he should be happy with having his name first. Besides, although I didn't tell him, the other way seemed too much like a marriage.

We ate dinner on the plane and, though it was very elegant, it wasn't romantic. It wasn't business either, it was just two old friends.

"I hurt you when I wasn't supportive of your decision to have a baby. I was just shocked, surprised, and I didn't want to be a father again."

"I never once asked you to be my baby's father."

"I know." He looked into his glass of wine and swirled it. "You know, Jeremy was a lucky kid. His father was a jerk, his mother disappeared, but he managed to find you. I think he'd tell you that he thinks of you as his mother."

I snorted. "I'm glad I could be Jeremy's friend."

"A friend doesn't go to every single baseball, soccer, basketball game of his life. A friend doesn't hunt him down and convince him back home to the father who didn't even have a clue where to look when he ran away. You always listened, you always took an interest, and you always knew exactly what was going on in his life. I was always too fucking busy to raise my son. You weren't and that's why I told you I wouldn't give you a baby, not because you are a porn star, not because you are too old, but because of my mistakes. I was a horrible father to Jeremy...I don't want to screw it up a second time around."

"Don't worry. I'm not looking for a father," I said. "I'm not even pregnant...yet."

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that if you do have a baby, I won't screw up. If you let me into your life, into your child's life, I'll be there."

"I think the implantation failed," I admitted.

He lifted my dropped chin and made me look into his eyes. "So, try again. I'm sure that there are fertility clinics in Tokyo," he winked, "and if there isn't any Caucasian sperm...I'll donate some."

We clinked wine glasses and laughed. *As if.*

But the conversation did make me feel better. I'm not a quitter. I will try again.

I relax deeper, the woman massaging my hands really knows what she is doing. I'm trying not to think too hard, but I'm dwelling on Simon's words. I have to just focus on the happy moments of each day. And last night's dinner was a happy moment. A very happy moment. It's a good thing he's back on a plane to the States, because I would hate to think that I'd end up naked with him again just because he was nice to me.

I smile, my brain recalling all of the frenzied, naked moments with Simon. I think I can file those memories under very happy moments...as long as I can keep the pain of not being able to make him love me out of it...and I don't even believe that anymore. Simon loves me, but it isn't a fairytale love...no white picket fences in our future. I'm okay with that.

The masseuse rubs her hand up my arm, signaling we are done, and I open my eyes, finding her magical green eyes staring at me intently. "When your baby come?"

"What?" I ask, confused, surely Simon didn't disclose that I was trying to get pregnant.

"How long? Very early, yes?"

"Yes," I say, mesmerized by her eyes. She bows and I watch her walk away. My open mouth gapes after her and I realize that I haven't peed on a stick in three days, not since the night of the storm, even though they are packed in my bag.

I hurry to my room, rummaging through bags until I finally find one. I'm so nervous I have to run water in the sink to make myself relax enough to go. I sit the stick on the counter, afraid of jarring it and messing up the results. I pace, counting each second.

Positive.

I stare at the stick. I can't believe it. I'm really pregnant. I'm going to have a baby. I scream, I jump up and down, I twirl in circles before falling on the bed laughing hysterically. I have to tell someone! I grab my cell, finding I had four missed calls in the space of a one-hour massage. I listen to my voicemail.

Simon: "I wanted to let you know, I've landed in Seattle. If you need anything, call me. I'll keep on top of Cho to make sure that everything is ready for you when you arrive in the city."

Tina: "Are you there? Are you sure you want to be there? Call me!"

Meg: "Have you lost your mind or is Simon forcing you to do this? That man! Errgh! If you need us, call us. Seriously!"

Tina: "I just talked to Geri...will you please call me?"

Deleting the messages, I sigh, not knowing that I want to call any of them. I'm too happy, too excited to have to defend my decisions...again.

I leave my room through the sliding doors that lead out onto an open veranda and the paved walkways beyond that with small signs that promise Meditation Trails with a dark, black arrow pointing the way.

Calm, peaceful, meditation...trail. *That sounds good.*

When I wasn't looking, summer turned into autumn and the evidence is all around me, even though it is comfortably warm. The trees on the mountain are changing colors. I inhale the scent of pine and dirt and an herb or flower that I've never smelled before, but one that is quite heavenly. *I'm glad I'm here.* As soon as I think the thought, I know it is truth. Not just that I am at the spa, but that I am in Japan. It seems like the perfect place for a new beginning.

I'm pregnant.

As I stand on a small balcony that is built into a mountain, giving me a mysterious view of fog rising around the surrounding cliffs, I am filled with awe and wonder. I wish the studio was here. In the mountains...not in the heart of Tokyo...and then I start to wonder how I can make that happen, because I want my child surrounded by this rural beauty, not necessarily the sights and sounds of the city.

"It's your baby," Simon had said of the studio. Does that mean I'm completely in control? And how reasonable would it be to expect that the people in these mountains would be as accepting of a porn studio tucked into their small corner of the world, whereas within the crowded buildings of the city, no one would notice. Besides, I'm certain there are more education opportunities in the city, schools, museums, theaters...

I purse my lips, deciding that I want both for my baby. High-rise living in Tokyo has its perks, but maybe I could have a weekend house in the country as well. Now, that's a plan. That's a very good plan.

"I may have to have one of these meditation trails at my weekend house."

Yes, I like the sound of that.

I rub my hand over my flat abdomen. "Hello, baby." I close my eyes with wonderment. I can hardly believe I'm pregnant. *What if the test was a false positive?*

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit! I panic, running back down the path to my room and peeing on another stick. *Positive.*

I pick up my cell and see I missed three calls. This is ridiculous. I ignore my voicemail box and call Dr. Abrams. His office is closed because it is after five p.m. there. Of course it is! I'd have to call at 2 a.m. Tokyo time to reach his office when he first gets in...or I could just leave a message. I decide it is a day for messages and say, "This is Simone Sinclair and I just wanted you to know that the home pregnancy test is positive! What do I do now?"

I close my cell and it beeps, reminding me I have messages...

Do I even want to know? I dial and listen against my better judgment.

Geri: "When you left yesterday, I suddenly realized just how awful I've been to you. How awful I've been to a lot of women since Sheila, but especially you, because I left wanting to echo the words you were saying to me, but I was just afraid to say them. I'm not afraid now. I hope I'm not too late. I love you, Simone Sinclair. I think I have since the moment I first met you."

Geri: "That first message didn't come out exactly the way I wanted. I'm sorry. I was scared. I'm sorry for letting my fears keep us apart. Can you call me? I'm horrible with messages, but I want you to know how I feel. How I *really* feel. And if you give me another chance, I won't ruin it by running away again."

Geri: "I know you're thinking you'd be stupid for giving me another chance and I probably don't deserve one. Saying I'm sorry isn't good enough for all the pain I've caused you. I wish I had another language to say it in...say it better...say it so that you will believe me. I want you to call me back, but I'm smart enough to know that you probably need some space. So I won't call again. I'll wait for you to call me, even if it's a day, or a week, or years. I'll wait."

I'll wait? I close the phone. I don't delete any of Geri's messages, thinking she is right about one thing. I need some space. And time. I guess that's two things. I don't believe for a second that she will wait years, but they were nice words.

My apartment is everything Cho promised and more, the view of the harbor defies description. I can't believe I am going to live here, but as I take a day unpacking, hanging my artwork, arranging knickknacks, it starts to sink in and now that I know that I am pregnant for certain, I think I'm going to be happy here too. My mind turns to hiring a housekeeper and interviewing nannies. Isn't that ridiculous, I'm not even a full month pregnant...anything could happen.

That's the scariest thought. I have an entire first trimester to survive before I can rule out a faulty pregnancy.

And I'm already attached to *this baby*.

I take a full week getting my apartment set up and a housekeeper hired. Cho located her. Iwa Yamaguchi. Cho assures me that her name means rock and that I will be able to count on her for her solid strength. I'm not certain how much faith I put in the meanings of names or how those meanings might influence character, but her resume is very impressive, leading me to believe she will be able to hold down my fort while I am working. I wasn't optimistic about hiring someone without meeting her first, she will be spending a lot of time under my roof, but it turns out that she is a lovely older woman who I take to instantly.

When I finally face the craziness of the Tokyo studio, it is with dread, because my apartment made me so happy, and honestly, after the last trip to Tokyo, I don't see how it could be much better. I am surprised when my office is completely put together when I arrive, a real office, a room with a view, a big desk, executive chair, and all of my porn career memorabilia—photos, awards, and pictures of friends I will miss. *Thank you, Simon*. There is even a stack of books on my desk, all of it classic Japanese erotica translations and a note from Simon. "Understand where they've been. You'll know where to take them. I trust your artistic eye."

I smile.

I don't waste time, I get to work.

Twelve weeks later, I am happy, settled, and the studio is garnering more success than I ever expected. I am also relieved, having made it through my first trimester complication-free. There is only one thing that is not perfect...I hate myself for driving away Geri the way I did. I dwell on it. I was cold and calculating, and despite the number of times she did the same thing to me, I still feel like she deserved to be treated better.

I've kept her messages and listen to them every day. I tell myself it is just to hear her voice, to remind myself that something did happen between us...even though I haven't defined what exactly.

"I miss you. Please call me, Simone. We need to talk." I sigh, because hearing Geri's voice in the recording doesn't hurt as much as it did two months ago. I disconnect from my archived voicemail when Ken knocks on my door. It is ajar, but he knocks anyway, bowing when I lift my eyes from the papers I shuffle quickly, hoping he will buy into the lie that I was reading them. "First proofs ready."

"Already?" I really am surprised.

I watch a five-minute segment, mostly interaction between the actress and actor, gauging their chemistry. It's good. I'm surprised, but then not too surprised, because I spent weeks in interviews getting

the people I wanted and those weeks were grueling, hours finding the right directors and actors. I delegated the stage crew interviews to Ken, wanting him to be comfortable with the people who work for him.

"This is excellent, Ken. Tell them to keep up the good work. I'll take the finals home tonight to preview, but we should be good to go." I purposely stay away from the action, staying instead in my office. I stand, handing him a stack of new scripts, and he lifts his brow, seeing me. His eyes twinkle and his cheeks turn pink, embarrassed. Today is my first day wearing a maternity top. I was trying to hide that I am showing, but have instead only emphasized the fact. "I know...it's horrible."

"Not most beautiful, Barbie. Yesterday was a better choice."

"Yesterday—" I start to refute him, because catching my reflection in a mirror yesterday was what led to the tent top. The swelling round of my lower abdomen was obvious, and even though I felt beautiful, I thought I should hide it away. "—was better."

He pulls on the tail of my shirt. "Throw this away?"

I nod and laugh.

"You should call her," he says in a soft whisper. I think he shocked himself as much as he shocked me by offering an opinion into something so personal, because he hurries from the room without any further comment. How many times has he caught me listening to Geri's voice?

Too many.

I sigh, hearing his hurried steps pad down the carpeted hallway. I don't know what I would do without him.

I feel guilty about not calling her. She hasn't called in six weeks. The last call was to give me her new phone number, she said it would make international calls easier, and though she didn't say it, I have to assume she's spending more time in Canada than in the States. I sit, replaying her messages...often enough for it to be some weird compulsion...often enough that I am finally strong enough not to cry every time I hear her voice. I decide Ken is right and dial her number before I can convince myself what a mistake I'm making, immediately regretting the call, but knowing I can't hang up now that I've taken the first step. My heart pounds wildly as I listen to her phone ring. I think for a moment I will get her voicemail, but I don't, I get her, and then I feel shy and unsure, saying stupidly, "Hi, how are you?"

I think I feel her shock at hearing my voice, but she had to know it was me, I reason. Wouldn't her cell show an international call? But then, I think, maybe not, maybe I blindsided her.

"Simone."

Oh shit. Is that an I'm-happy-you-called tone of voice or a Why-in-the-fuck-are-you-calling-me-four-months-after-I-poured-my-soul-out-to-you voice? I don't bother saying that I should have called sooner. *Obviously*. And I always hate that when someone says that to me.

"I hear congratulations are in order."

This time I do hear the hurt in her voice. Meg or Tina must have told her. I wish I had called her myself. *Shit.*

“Thanks.”

“When are you due?”

“April twenty-second.”

Oh God, why did I call? This is painful.

After a long silence, I ask, “Did you mean what you said in the messages you left?”

“Did I mean that I love you? Yes. I love you. Am I willing to be a grown up and accept that you are who you are and it’s my personal issues I need to deal with when I confront why your career upsets me so much? You bet. Do I want to see you? Desperately.”

“Oh.”

“Are you calling because you want to see me again, Simone?”

“Desperately,” I say and then I start crying. “I’ve missed you. That’s why I haven’t called. I knew if I heard your voice I’d want to come back to Seattle. I had to wait. I had to get on my feet here.”

“You definitely waited,” she says and the way she says it makes me feel like I’m too late. I waited too long. Maybe she even found someone new. *Oh hell.* My eyes fill with tears, but I say what I was going to say anyway. “I was thinking I might come home for the holidays.” I walk over to the wide window that looks over the city, nervous movement to make it easier to say what I need to say. “We’re taking a break for the month of December. Can I call you when I get into town?”

“I’m not in Seattle.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised, but then not really. “Are you still wrapping up in British Columbia then?”

She laughs. “No, they wrapped themselves up quite nicely. Once the company was turning a profit, I allowed myself to be bought out...for about three times what I paid for it.”

“Wow,” I say. “Good investment move then.”

“Very. So I’ve expanded. I’ve decided to take Gaia Eco-Tours global, and so far so good. Right now I’m in Shanghai.”

My heart stills. *She’s so close.* Three hours away, four tops.

“I’ll actually be in Hiroshima in three days.”

I may actually hyperventilate. I could see her in three days.

“I’d like to see you. I’m going to be reviewing a back-country-shrine hike. That will take about seven days, but after...I could come to Tokyo...if you want.” There is a long pause between us. I don’t know what to say. I want to see her more badly than I want to admit. *Damn.*

She speaks first. “I know that it’s the worst thing to say, but I was planning on calling you.”

“No,” I say. “Not the worst. The worst is saying that I wish I hadn’t waited so long to call you. It’s nice to hear your voice. Can I meet you in Hiroshima?”

God, why did I say that? I sound desperate. I do not want to sound desperate!

"Or you could meet me in Hiroshima. That would be very nice."

Whew. Three days...I'm going to see Geri in three days!

On a path that runs alongside the Aioi River, I stand facing the Gembaku Domu. With tears running down my cheeks, I wonder why on earth Geri wanted to meet here. Seeing the skeleton of one the few buildings to survive the atomic bomb, I am enveloped in sadness.

"That's how I felt when you left." I startle, turning to find her standing behind me. "Destroyed, barely there, but still standing. I knew I had to go on. I had to come out the other side better somehow."

I never thought of Geri as bitter. I begin to question my sanity in coming here, but then she smiles and it is the hundred-watt smile that she was wearing the first time I ever laid eyes on her.

"Better, stronger...faster." She holds out her arms and I walk into her hug.

"Should I call you the Bionic Woman?"

"Nah," she snorts. "I'm not made of metal." She backs away, looking down at my belly, which is half-hidden by a black pea coat. "Is that a baby bump?"

I open my coat and show her my very obvious baby bump. I wore black stretch pants and a spandex short-sleeved turtleneck. The effect is stunning...showing every girly curve...breasts, hips, and baby bump. I feel sexier than I ever did naked and on camera.

She bites her lip. Reaching out her hand, she hesitantly touches her fingertips over the slight swell of evidence. "Wow...there's a little baby in there."

"Two," I correct. "There are two babies in there, which makes it very difficult to hide them."

Geri shakes her head, "Don't hide this. You are so beautiful. Radiant."

I look up and her eyes are glistening. I look away, saying, "I'm sorry about the way I left things between us."

She wraps her hand around my upper arm, turning me to face her. I don't want to see the tears falling down her cheeks. Still holding my arm, she wraps her other hand around the nape of my neck and pulls me roughly to her, kissing me with a fierce passion. I don't resist her force and respond with an equal passion. Our tongues duel, our teeth clash...and I feel the toughness I built around my heart shatter. I feel my own tears welling as a bubble of tight emotion swells in my throat. "Oh God, I've missed you."

"I've missed you," I say, wanting to say I love you...again...but knowing my heart won't be able to take it if she doesn't respond in kind. And even though she said it on the phone, I need to hear her say it to me first, face-to-face, before I will ever say those words to her again.

"How long can I have you?" she asks.

Forever. I shrug, I'm not expected back at the office for a few days. She nods and grabs my hand. "I want to take you someplace."

She leads, I follow. She holds my hand on the train and on the ferry. I don't ask where she is taking me, I don't think it matters, because I don't know how I will be able to take my eyes off her to see anything else she would want to show me. Stepping off the ferry, I do take my eyes off Geri because I can feel she has brought me someplace very special.

"The Island of the Gods," she tells me and, facing the mist-surrounded mountains with the glimmering sea behind me, I understand how the island came to be known by that name. We walk, holding hands through the streets, around shrines. We eat, but I couldn't say what it is, noodles with vegetables that are unimportant in light of the fact that I am sitting with Geri in the middle of paradise. Our eyes catch over the top of the table and I am overcome with emotion. I need her in my life.

She takes me by the hand and leads me along a secluded boardwalk. Tucked between pines, she pulls me into her arms and I sob against her mouth, "I want you."

She steps back from me. "*I want you.*"

"I don't know how I'm ever going to go back to Tokyo without you."

"Don't go without me," she says. "Take me with you."

My lips part, but I can't form a single thought, let alone words.

"I love you, Simone Sinclair. I want to be part of your life, I want to be part of your children's lives. No more running."

I back away, not ready to trust words. How many times have we done this dance? One step forward, two steps back? I put my back to her, looking out over the trail, still not believing that she is here, let alone what she just said. I can't believe it. Won't believe it. She's left me too many times...we've had too many false starts.

Just like with Simon.

At least I've made peace with my relationship with Simon now. Friends. Partners. Not friends with benefits. Not any more. I said no to that. And survived. Maybe Geri and I can work on being just friends again.

She touches my arm before molding in behind me, her arms going around my baby bump. "I said too much, didn't I? I've scared you off." She lays her head on my shoulder. "I don't want to scare you off. We can take our time. Start out slow."

My mind spins. I want her, as much now as ever before. I whisper, "Slow would be good."

"Maybe we can start with dinner tonight?"

I nod, holding my breath, dizzy and scared. "How long can you stay?"

She turns me to face her. "As long as you want."

I smile doubtfully. "Gaia Eco-tours can do without you that long?"

“As a matter of fact, Gaia Eco-tours North America has a very capable staff overseeing operations while I am touring Asia and setting up my Gaia international headquarters. I’ve been scoping out Hong Kong real estate, but Japan is growing on me.”

I’m shocked and I’m certain my expression relays that, because she chuckles. I manage to say, “Wow,” but then I’m left speechless.

“I’ve missed you,” she says. “And I’m willing to do whatever it takes to win your trust.”

I notice that she doesn’t say love. She doesn’t have to. Love is a foregone conclusion. I love her. She loves me. We just both come with a lot of emotional baggage that has made the moments up until now...messy.

She kneels in front of me, putting her hands around my baby bump. “Twins.” She looks at me with wonder before kissing my belly. She takes my left hand and kisses it. “I know it’s too early for a ring. I know it’s too early to tell you that I want you to be my wife. But I want you to know that *that* is the level of commitment I am willing to give you.”

She bows her head. “I’ve been such a jerk to you.”

Standing, still holding my hand, she promises, “I know it is going to take time for you to actually start believing that I want a life with you, but that really is what I want more than anything else in the world. That includes celebrity appearances, because you are the woman I want to spend my life with. Simone Sinclair. I’ve just been too big of an idiot to admit it.”

I start to cry, silent tears sliding over my cheeks. *Damn hormones.*

“I don’t want the word *forever* to scare you, but that’s what I’m thinking.”

I nod, crying. “I think forever sounds about perfect, but right this second, I’ll be happy with dinner.”

“I love you, Simone Sinclair.”

About the Author

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A young woman from the mean streets of modern Europe finds true love in the ranks of the aristocracy...in the most untraditional way.

La Bonne

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How do you get a playboy prince to take an arranged marriage seriously, especially when his fiancée is eighteen and as innocent as fresh snow? Hire a young woman from the wrong part of town to turn her into a mantrap, of course.

But what happens when the maid discovers that awakening passion in her noble mistress touches her in ways she had not expected? And when the prince decides he's ready to settle down for good...with the maid!

Now the maid must find a way to answer the age-old question. Was Marie Antoinette right—can she have her cake and eat it too?

A light-hearted and very erotic romp through France and the Mediterranean, with a prince, a princess, an unruly ex-boyfriend, wicked paparazzi, fabulous jewelry, a royal wedding, and the luckiest maid in the world.

Warning: This title contains the following: explicit sex, lesbian sex, anal sex, ménage à trois.

Enjoy the following excerpt for La Bonne:

Over the next few nights, we conducted regular kissing sessions. Amanda was a quick learner, and I began to realize that we had passed what she could learn from practicing. I continued to indulge, because it was my job to indulge her, or so I told myself. I would not admit just how much I enjoyed it, how flattering it was that she found my company and my touch so desirable, or how exhilarating it was that this golden goddess would so gladly stoop to obey me.

But obedience was the problem, I realized. Amanda did what I asked, but not more, because she did not know there was more. It was like the thunder without the lightning. Amanda's kisses needed desire, hunger, a promise of things to come.

"I think you're ready to move to the next step," I told her one night.

"The next step?" she asked, wide-eyed. More than ready, I thought.

"You know there are, um, other things that Petros will do, right?"

"Yes," she blushed, "at least, I assumed there were."

So she didn't know.

"Here's the thing, Amanda. It's not going to work for you, unless you are ready." I remembered my first time. Then I remembered much later, when I finally discovered why everybody thought it was so much fun.

“Petros won’t hurt me,” she said. “I know that much.”

“That’s not what I mean. There’s more to it than what he does.”

“Like what?” She was truly innocent.

“Like what happens to you. Like being carried away on an ocean wave. Like being enveloped in a lake of glorious fire.”

Now I had her attention.

“But to get there, Amanda, you have to help him. He can’t take you there alone.”

“Show me,” she begged, “show me how to help him.”

“Have you ever, you know...touched...yourself?”

Her eyebrows arched, and I knew the answer was no. Now I was tongue-tied and feeling foolish. How was I going to explain this to her?

“Touched myself where? What do you mean? Could you show me?” she asked shyly, and I almost died from shame.

“No, of course not!” She flinched and I realized how harsh my words sounded. “I’m sorry, Amanda. I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just, you know, something you do in private.”

“Then how will I learn?” she almost wailed.

“Bathtub,” I said, relieved to finally have an idea. The bathtub was perfect—a place where you were naked, relaxed, and with a rough yet soft washcloth close at hand. “When you take a bath, I’ll show you.”

“Let’s do it now,” she suggested. “I feel like a bath anyway.” We’d been kissing for half an hour by now, and I felt like I could use a cold shower too.

I went to draw the water, turning on the silver taps in her huge marble private bath. She stepped out of the white silk slip of a nightgown she had been wearing and walked into the bathroom with me.

There was a brief embarrassed moment over her nakedness. Then it was past, and we were comfortable together, two close friends with nothing between us.

I watched her step demurely into that clear water, her breasts full, her nipples standing up like they always did during our practice sessions. The gentle rise between her thighs called to me, and that dark hunger to possess welled up inside me like a black fountain. Now clear-headed and unrestrained, I helped her down into the warm water.

Taking a cloth, I began to wash her back. “Just relax,” I told her, bizarrely confident. “Just let yourself go, and don’t worry about anything.” The words seemed strangely familiar, but of course they did—they were the sort of words men had said to me.

Stroking her gently, I washed her arms and legs. I could see her melting. “Close your eyes,” I whispered, and began to wipe the cloth over her perfect breasts. She breathed in heavily, and that affected me so much that I squeezed my hand, firmly grasping her breast, the nipple pressing through the cloth to my hand.

She did not pull away, but sat there with her eyes closed, willing to submit to whatever I chose to do to her.

“Relax,” I commanded, and slowly moved the cloth south, letting it trickle against her skin the entire way. When I reached that perfect, feathery strip of gold, I let the cloth pile up on it, one fold at a time, and then I pressed down with my hand and rubbed.

Her eyes opened now, and I smiled at her with that hungry look I had seen so many times before on the faces of the men who had touched me like that. “Just let it happen,” I told her, and kept rubbing tenderly.

When she began to arch her hips into my hand, my sensibilities got the better of me. “Now you,” I told her, and replaced my hand with hers. “Do that yourself.”

“Will you watch me?” she asked, so innocently I could not say no.

“Of course,” I said, and sitting there at the edge of the vast marble tub, I did. The sight could not have failed to move anyone. She was a beautiful and pure creature discovering the ultimate pleasure. It was like watching an angel learn to fly.

How far does she have to go to get is attention? Another girl's arms?

Love Me

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Melina Wenham is worried and frustrated. Lately, her boyfriend of six months seems to have lost interest in her. Yes, she knows he's stressed about his big project at work, but jeez, it seems like he'd rather go solo than have sex with her. Sexy lingerie, a Brazilian...nothing seems to get his attention.

Gavin's frustrated too. He's under enough pressure at work, without feeling more from Melina every time he gets home.

Another night, another party, and Gavin is off talking to the boys. Feeling ignored yet again, Melina confides her troubles to an acquaintance, Abby, who suggests shaking him up by flirting with another guy. Hmm. Not a bad idea, except there are no flirt-worthy guys at this party.

Then Abby suggests a different tack—flirt with her.

Could a little girl-on-girl tango be the match that reignites romance with Gavin? There's only one way to find out...

Warning: Hot girl on girl scene!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Love Me:

Gavin stared in stunned incredulity at the two women on the bed.

Melina was laying there with Kylie's cousin, both of them naked from the waist up, jean-clad legs twined around each other, kissing like crazy in a heated clinch. Holy fucking shit. Melina and Abby wrenched apart at his words and stared back at him.

His cock hardened painfully in his jeans and he almost put a hand down to it. "Jesus," he muttered. He shook his head, but couldn't drag his eyes away from the scene on the bed. Melina's long blonde hair was mussed and her eye makeup was smudged under her big eyes, round with apprehension. Abby's hair, too, was just-out-of-bed tousled, both their lips shiny and swollen. He almost groaned aloud.

He should be pissed off, he supposed. After all, Melina was cheating on him. With another woman. But he was so fucking turned on he could have drilled wood with his dick.

"Gavin," Melina said. Uh, yeah, that was him. Her eyes flicked nervously to Abby. "Um..."

Nobody seemed to know what to say and the silence in the room dragged on painfully. Then Gavin became aware of voices in the hall and he shoved the bedroom door shut behind him, plunging them back into darkness. His eyes had to adjust to the dim lighting and he took a step toward the bed.

"Melina, what are you doing?" he asked again, his voice gritty like sand. What a goddamn stupid question that was. It was pretty clear what she was doing.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, moving out of Abby's embrace, and strangely, covering her breasts with her arms. Christ, they lived together. He'd seen her gorgeous tits a million times. He watched her swallow hard, lick her lips.

"This is all my fault," Abby said, sitting up, but not making any move to cover her chest. Gavin tried, he really did, but he couldn't stop his eyes from flicking over her torso. In the back of his mind, "small but nice" registered vaguely. He jerked his eyes back to Melina's face. "It's kind of a funny story."

He lifted a brow and looked at Abby, forcing himself to look no lower than her chin. "Oh yeah?" If she'd been a guy, he'd be hauling her ass off that bed and shoving his fist into her nose. He blinked, waited.

Abby grinned. "Melina and I were talking and she was telling me how she's been feeling lately and I had the idea that she should try to make you a little jealous. Just to...you know...make you realize what a hot, gorgeous chick she is."

He blinked again. "I *know* what a hot, gorgeous chick she is," he protested. Wait a minute. He looked at Melina. "You were trying to make me jealous?" Both brows shot up.

She nodded, looking embarrassed, miserable, absolutely adorable and utterly fuckable. He adjusted his stance to accommodate the hard-on growing in his pants. "There were no guys around to flirt with."

"So I volunteered," Abby said cheerfully.

"Hold on," Gavin ground out. "This is *not* flirting." He threw a hand out toward them. "This is *way* past flirting."

"Things got a little...uh...carried away," Melina said in a small voice.

Gavin gave his head a shake in an attempt to clear it. It didn't work. "I..." He stopped. "You...*Melina*."

"I know." She pulled her bottom lip in. "I'm sorry."

"Hey," Abby said softly. "You know what, Mel?" She glanced sideways at Gavin. "I don't think Gavin's mad. I think he's turned on."

He scowled and willed his hard-on to go away. It didn't. Melina stared at him, Abby smiled. "So?" he growled.

"So," Abby said, tipping her head. "Why don't you join us?"

His eyes almost fell out of his head. "You must be joking."

She shook her head, still smiling, eyes sparkling. "Melina was being very um...brave and...adventurous. Maybe you should, too."



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