

A composite image featuring a man's bare, hairy torso in a white shirt and blue jeans, and a close-up of a smiling woman with dark hair and a blue top. The entire image is framed by a thick red border.

SO MUCH BETTER

Marie Rochelle

So Much Better

MARIE ROCHELLE

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Dedication

This story is for all of my fans
who fell in love with Richie.
Enjoy!

Marie

Chapter One

Keri Walker finished making the coffee while she waited for her boss to arrive at work. This was the third time this week he'd been late and it would probably continue for the rest of the month because so much had happened to Richie.

Richie hadn't been the same since his fiancé Kristy died in a car wreck driving back from her bachelorette party over six months earlier. Keri remembered vividly the night Richie got the call. They'd been working late on a couple of new clients when the phone rang. She would never forget the devastated look on his face. His usually brilliant blue eyes had gone dark and all of the color drained from his handsome face. It was as if all the life was sucked right out of him.

The police had determined that Kristy was reaching for her cell phone in her purse when she lost control of her car, hit a slick spot in the road and was thrown from the vehicle about a hundred feet. She was so badly injured that the police officers wouldn't even let Richie see the body.

Richie was so distraught over the loss he wasn't able to be the best man at his best friend Nick Lavery's wedding. She felt so bad for him because she saw the happiness Kristy had brought into his life. She was his soul mate and nothing else mattered in the world but making Kristy's every wish come true and vice versa.

It pained Keri even more that Richie would never see her as possible dating material. She knew that Richie was trying to date again because he had gone out with a couple of women recently. She had secretly been in love with her handsome boss for over two years now, but he was too blind to ever notice her as a woman. She knew she was living in a dream world thinking Richie might wake up one day and fall in love with her, but she held out hope that he could see her the way she envisioned.

He was the kind of guy that never thought about mixing business with pleasure no matter how much she wished for it. However, she was going to find a way to be with him. There wasn't a doubt in her mind, Richie was the man for her and all she had to do was make him see it too.

"This is the second time this week I've caught you daydreaming in front of the coffee pot. Does it have some kind of magical powers? Or is there a man in your life I should know about? I want to make sure he's good enough for you."

Keri jumped at the unexpected sound of Richie's deep voice with its hint of an Irish accent that she adored so much. Most people didn't hear it because he'd lived here so long, but at the right times it was there.

"No, I don't have a boyfriend. You know that Richie," she answered turning to face him.

Keri tried not to faint at the delicious sight Richie made. He wore all black, his thick red hair pulled back into a ponytail that hung to his shoulder blades. He had planned on cutting it shortly after Kristy's sudden death, but Keri had talked him out of it. Thank God! She adored his long hair and would hate to see it gone.

"Why don't you have a man? You're a cute girl. Any guy would be lucky to have you as long as he understood I came first. I can't have him stealing away my best assistant."

Keri tried not to let her feelings be hurt by Richie's comment, but they were. She loved him so much and he still only saw her as his capable and trustworthy sidekick.

"I'll keep that in mind when I find someone," Keri said. "You look nice today. What's the special occasion?" She'd looked over his calendar earlier and he didn't have anything scheduled, so it must be something she wasn't aware of.

"I have a meeting today with Deborah Lee about getting a loan so we can expand the business. I want to hire at least two more people so I won't be doing so much of the work. I'm beginning to see how working all of these extra hours aren't good for me. I need to get a life. I've known it for a while, but it's just so hard to think about it without Kristy to share it with."

"Richie, you are the most in demand financial planner in town now with the way the economy has been recently. I told you to hire another person six months ago. Isn't your brother planning on moving here? Can't you get him to help you out for a while? He does have the same degree as you do. I think he would be a nice addition."

Moving closer to her, Richie reached above her head and grabbed his favorite black coffee mug, the one he swore brought him good luck every time he drank out of it. She didn't really believe it, but she wasn't about to tell Richie that. She would let him believe in it if it made him happy.

"Excuse me," Richie apologized when his chest brushed against her back. The hint of his cologne stirred her senses making her panties instantly damp. Shit! She had to get herself under control.

“That’s okay,” she replied, hoping her voice sounded stronger than she thought. “So, are you going to answer my question? What about Tate? I truly think he could be a wonderful asset to the business.” Keri secretly thought Richie was too hard on his little brother. Tate did love to goof off sometimes, but he always got his work done and it was flawless.

“No, I couldn’t handle Tate working for me again. Those few months he was here last summer were enough to make me know better. He’s too unpredictable. I need someone I can count on to show up every day.” Moving away from her, Richie poured coffee into his mug along with one sugar and two creams. “That’s why I like you so much. I know you will never disappoint me by not being here on time and doing your job perfectly.”

Keri blew off Richie’s compliment because it was the same thing he told her all of the time. She wondered what he would do if she actually wasn’t little miss perfect anymore. “Is there anything else we need to discuss before I leave for my meeting? You know how much Deborah hates for anyone to be late for a conference with her.”

Deborah...Keri tried not to roll her eyes at that name. Did Richie not see how Deborah had been trying to find ways to get him into her bed since Kristy died? The woman had no shame at all.

“Yes, the event planner called about the St. Patrick’s Day event. She wants to know if you are still thinking about having it as a masquerade ball with the charity auction. I was trying to explain it to her, but I’m pretty sure Taylor would rather talk to you instead of me.”

Resting his back against the counter, Richie took a sip of his coffee. “You’re probably right about that. Taylor has been after me since Kristy died. She doesn’t understand I’m not looking for another committed relationship with anyone at the moment. My fiancée hasn’t been dead a year yet. Sure, I’ve taken a couple of women out to dinner, but that was only because Nick set me up with them. They were okay, but nothing I was looking for in a woman.”

Keri knew this was her chance to find out what Richie *was* searching for. The couple of women who had gone in and out of his office had seemed to last no more than two weeks at the most. Something was going on and she wanted to know what they were doing wrong, so she wouldn’t fall into the same quick sand when it came to winning Richie’s heart.

“So, what are you looking for?” She determined the direct approach would be the best bet for her when it came to her outspoken boss.

“Keri, I don’t have time to get into it now. Anyway, you have your own life. I want you to stop trying to help me with mine. I swear that I’m doing a lot better now. Nick is almost as bad as you and poor Tasha isn’t far behind the two of you. I promise you that I will know when I meet the right woman again.” Richie took another sip of his coffee before placing it on the counter next to him. “I’ll go and see Taylor after Deborah to make sure she has everything correct for the St. Patrick’s Day charity.”

“Richie, you know that you can talk to me just like you do Nick. We’re more than co-workers. I’ve always considered us pretty close and that’s what friends do. They confide in each other when they’re having problems.”

She already knew Richie was done talking to her, but she had to give it one last shot. This was the longest he had talked to her in days. She enjoyed it immensely when on those rare occasions he did open up and let her get a peek behind the private façade he kept up at work with his clients.

“Maybe later but now,” he answered after a few minutes, “can you have those financial reports done for my two new clients on my desk before you leave for lunch? I want to look at them first thing when I get back from my meetings.”

“Sure, they’ll be waiting for you.”

“Thank you.” Richie smiled at her slightly then left her alone in the small kitchen.

Right at that moment, Keri vowed to bring back the fun-loving Richie that she had fallen in love with. Hurrying to the door, she caught sight of Richie’s back as he walked into his office across from her desk and closed the door.

“I’m going to help you. It doesn’t matter if you want it or not,” she whispered.

Chapter Two

Richie sat at the table staring at Taylor wondering if she understood that he knew she was flirting with him. She'd started from the moment he got to the restaurant and despite subtle hints on his part she was still coming on to him. He considered it desperate and wasn't in the least turned on by it.

She'd never respected his relationship with Kristy when she was alive and it hadn't changed since her death. Some women had no morals and Taylor was definitely in that category in his opinion. He didn't know what else to do to show her he wasn't interested in a personal relationship with her. A business relationship was fine and he wasn't about to cross that line with her.

"I'm so glad that you were able to take time out of your day and finally meet with me. I could tell Keri was getting tired of all of my questions. She's a good girl, but I think she's a little overprotective when it comes to you. Keri is very capable, but she isn't the person I called to talk to; nevertheless, I have to admit her loyalty to you is amazing.

"I wish that I had an employee like her on my payroll. For the longest time, I thought she was in love with you even while you were engaged to Kristy. She would give you this look, like you were the most important person in her life, but I guess my first impression was wrong about her."

Taylor's comment took him off guard. How could she think Keri was in love with him? She had been nothing but a good friend and outstanding employee. Keri was the only woman he didn't have to worry about trying to seduce him into her bed. Hell, if his first impression was right, Keri might still even be a virgin which was a rarity with a twenty-nine year old woman.

"Taylor, we aren't here to discuss my personal life or Keri. I only have a few minutes and then I need to get back to the office."

A perfectly groomed eyebrow arched over light brown eyes as Taylor glared at him from her side of the table. "Fine," she huffed. "Let's get down to business so I can go back to my office too. You want to have a St. Patrick's Day charity ball but set in a masquerade ball theme? I'm a little confused."

Running his hand across the back of his neck, Richie tried to calm himself down so he wouldn't lose his cool. "I think it's pretty easy to

understand. I want to have a charity ball on St. Patrick's Day, the main event being an auction of volunteer participants. Everyone will be wearing masks and the guests will bid on the contestants. All of the proceeds will go to the children's homeless shelter in town."

The charity event was an annual thing, but this was the first time he'd decided to have it on St. Patrick's Day. He was hoping people would be in more of a giving mood with a little green ale in them.

"Are you going to be one of the hunky guys up there for all of the single women in town to spend their hard earned money on?" Taylor eyed him like she wanted to take a bite out of him at any minute.

"Of course, I am. It wouldn't be fair of me to ask my friends and co-workers to participate in something I wasn't a part of myself. This is my first year doing it, but I think it will be something different for me to do and it's for the community. I can handle dinner for one night with a woman. It's not like I'm totally against the idea of finding a new woman, but I don't think this charity will find me the new love of my life."

Richie had thought long and hard about not doing it because he wasn't up to making idle conversation for two hours, but the children's shelter needed the money badly. He was a huge supporter of things for the community and this was his first step in setting up a big forum for his charity participation.

"Well, aren't you the nicest man I've come across in a very long time? I might have to make an appearance at this event just to see you up on that stage and, who knows, I might even bid on you." Standing up, Taylor grabbed her purse off the back of the chair. "I'll call you in a couple of days. Maybe we can talk more over dinner if you're free this Friday. I can cook you something at my home. Do you even remember the last time you had a good home cooked meal?"

Richie couldn't believe this! Taylor wasn't listening to a word he was telling her. When was she going to wise up and realize he wasn't interested in her on a personal level? One rule he never broke was mixing business with pleasure. Things usually got really sticky if there was a bad breakup and he needed Taylor's business skills more than he craved her warm body in his bed.

"I think it would be for the best if we meet again over lunch. It works better for my schedule. I have a lot going on right now and I don't want to agree to something I wouldn't be able to keep my promise about and end up disappointing you in the end."

Taylor gave him a long hard look then spun away from him. She had only walked a couple of feet before she came back to their table. "Kristy is gone. How much longer are you going to mourn her? You can't go into the grave with her. It's past time that you started living your life again." After she had hurled these insulting words, Taylor stormed away but this time she didn't come back.

Long after his lunch companion's dramatic exit, Richie was still seated at the table thinking about the accusations she had flung at him. He disagreed with her one hundred percent. He wasn't trying to get into the grave with Kristy, but she had been the love of his life for so many years. How could he just forget about her like she was never a part of his heart and soul? No, he wasn't ready to date again and when he was Taylor sure in the hell wouldn't be the woman he'd pick to make a part of his life.

He needed a woman with a soul and heart. Taylor was lacking both of them. He wasn't sure if she was ever blessed with either one in the first place because she acted so detached and unsympathetic all of the time.

No, if he ever decided to date anyone again in the near future, it would be someone like Keri who was sweet, understanding and giving. And her rocking body didn't hurt either.

What the fuck!

Richie slammed the brakes down on his wandering thoughts about Keri. She was his employee and best friend. He shouldn't be thinking about her in any other way than as his assistant. He needed to get laid to burn off some of this excess energy that had built up since Kristy's death. He was used to having an active sex life and going without it for six months was slowly killing him.

He missed a soft, warm body next to his at night. A cold empty bed wasn't his idea of a good time at all. Keri's smooth creamy body was the kind of figure any man would love waking up to in the middle of the night. Her curves would make most models envious.

Today at the office while he'd been talking to her one of her buttons on her top had come undone giving him a peek of nice perky brown breasts encased in a silky black bra. He had thought about telling her about it, but in the end changed his mind and enjoyed the view. He had been only looking and not touching...unless Keri asked him to.

Stop it!

His daydreams about Keri couldn't go on like this. She'd been there for him all through his mourning period. Not once had she made any

sexual advances toward him before or after his fiancée's unfortunate death.

I need to get myself under control and refocus my attention on something or someone that isn't Keri, Richie thought as he got up from the table and headed for the exit.

Chapter Three

I know that I'd be so much better for Richie than Deborah or Taylor. Keri's thoughts were racing as she placed the pile of mail on her boss' desk. *They're only interested in getting him into bed, but I want to be there for him when he's hurting or just needs someone to confide in.*

Keri knew she had to get her plan underway, so everything would be in place for the St. Patrick's Day charity ball. The night was either going to make her relationship with Richie or she would finally realize he couldn't or wouldn't get over Kristy. She would have to move on to someone else no matter how much it broke her heart.

Moving away from Richie's desk, Keri was on her way out the door when she noticed his jacket thrown across the arm of the couch in his office. Walking over to it, she picked it up and slid her arms through it. She got lost in the wonderful scent of Richie's cologne. It was so sad how bad she had it for him and her feelings weren't returned. Richie had never encouraged her feelings. They were something that happened to her over a period of time.

He possessed all of the redeeming qualities she was searching for in a man. He was loving, attentive, a good listener, honest; and it didn't hurt that he was sexier than any Hollywood actor. She took one final whiff of Richie's jacket and was about to take it off when she heard, "Keri, what are you doing wearing my jacket?"

She spun around so fast that she almost tripped over her own two feet. Her eyes grew twice their size when she spotted Richie standing in his office doorway staring at her like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Think of a good lie quick!

"I was cold, so I put on your jacket," saying the first thing that popped into her head hoping Richie believed her. "Do you want me to take it off?" Keri started to remove it only to have Richie come across the room and pull it back on her shoulders.

"No, keep it on. I can't have my favorite person in the world getting sick, can I?"

Having Richie this close to her made Keri's pulse leap and her mouth go dry causing her to run her tongue across her bottom lip. She secretly wondered what Richie would taste like if she took the first step and kissed him.

“Did I tell you how nice you look today?” Richie asked as his hands tightened on her shoulders. “I always thought hunter green brought out the richness of your complexion.”

Keri couldn't stop her smile from spreading from ear to ear. Richie wasn't big on giving compliments, so she was going to take it and run with it. Maybe she wouldn't have as hard a time getting him to notice her as she first thought since he'd already been looking at her.

“Thank you,” she said, looking up into Richie's beautiful blue-gray eyes. “I'm glad you noticed what looks good on me. I like that a lot.”

Richie's brow wrinkled with worry like he wasn't pleased he had voiced his inner thoughts to her.

“Well. I was just letting you know what I thought. I would have told any other woman the same thing.” He gave her shoulders another squeeze and then walked away taking a seat behind his desk. Picking up the mail, he started sorting through it. “Did I get any phone calls while I was gone?”

Keri knew this tactic well when it came to Richie. He would bring up another topic to get her off the current one they might be discussing. She would let him get away with it this time, but she wasn't done with him, not by a long shot.

“Tate called while you were out. He said that he was about forty-five minutes from the office. He's coming back to see you.”

Richie tossed the mail down on his desk. “Damn. I wonder what he wants now. I don't have time for his games. Why didn't you tell him I wouldn't be here?”

She couldn't understand why Richie hated his brother so much. Tate wasn't that bad. Sure, he was a little immature sometimes, but that quality was what made Tate so likeable and truly fun to be around.

“How do you know Tate wasn't coming to see me?” Keri questioned.

Richie eyed her for a second or two then shook his head. “No, you weren't the reason my brother called. He wants a job because I know my little brother like the back of my hand. If Tate is actually coming, he has a better plan on his mind. He never can keep a steady job because he is constantly searching for the easy way out. I don't think he has a responsible bone in his body.”

“Richie, you shouldn't talk about your brother like that. He's the only sibling you have and you aren't close to your parents—despite the fact they call here twice a month to speak to you, but you never return any of their messages.”

"I know, but my baby brother isn't going to drag me into another one of his crazy schemes. I have too much going on to bail him out of trouble again." Richie massaged his temple with two of his fingers.

"There's nothing like family loyalty to warm a guy's heart," a male voice cut in from the open doorway.

Looking over her shoulder, Keri grinned at the handsome man standing there looking like he just stepped off the pages of GQ. Tate Davidson was the polar opposite of Tate. He stood around six feet one inches tall with a swimmer's body instead of the muscular frame Richie worked out four times a day to maintain.

Tate's light blue eyes constantly had a sparkle to them like he knew something you didn't. But the biggest difference between the two brothers was the hair color; Tate's was a dark brown that in the right light looked almost black. Richie's, on the other hand, was a dark rich red that suited him perfectly.

No, if she had to pick between Tate and Richie, her boss would win hands down each and every time. She couldn't help it. She was head over heels in love with Richie Davidson.

"Tate, you're already stirring up trouble and you haven't been here five minutes?" She gave him a teasing grin.

Coming into the room, Tate kissed her on the cheek. "You know that trouble follows me. So, how has the most gorgeous woman in the world been doing? Are you ready to dump my brother and hit the road with me? I mean we can be in Vegas in a matter of days living it up in the honeymoon suite. I swear I won't hog the bed."

The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of her mouth at Tate's flirting. She found it impossible to ever be cross with him. He was just too damn charming for that.

"Let me think about it and I'll let you know," Keri teased back.

Taking off Richie's jacket, she laid it back on the arm of the couch. "Richie, I'm going to lunch. I'll be a little late coming back. I have to buy a dress for the charity dance."

"That's fine," Richie said. "I can answer the phone while you're gone."

"Thanks." Keri touched Tate on the arm before leaving the room. She didn't have time to stay and find out what new adventure Tate was up to now. Whatever it was she would find out later because Richie would tell her if it was something too off the wall.

This afternoon was about her, and finding the perfect dress that would move her from the well-rounded employee to the girlfriend Richie couldn't live without.

Chapter Four

“Why can’t I find what I want?” Keri complained as she searched through the rack of dresses. She’d been at the dress shop for over twenty minutes and not a single thing was catching her eye.

She needed something that was sexy enough to get Richie’s attention, but not overly suggestive like she had worn it to get him to look at her. She never wanted to come across like Deborah or Taylor. Neither woman had a tactful bone in their bodies. Richie would come to her because he wanted a deeper more meaningful relationship, the kind two people built a future on. Not the sort that kept you in bed all night.

Now, she wasn’t against a good night of sex with Richie because he looked like he knew how to please a woman. She just thought Richie should see how much better she was than those two other women who truly didn’t care about him.

Keri was about to just give up finding the perfect dress when she caught a hint of green from the corner of her eye.

“Oh my god!” she gushed. “That dress is absolutely what I’ve been searching for, for half the day.” Keri walked over to where the green dress was hanging. From a distance the fabric seemed almost sheer, but once she got up close Keri could see the details of the material—delicate lace studded with tiny crystals. Looking closely at the craftsmanship, she was certain it had been hand stitched. The daring sweetheart neckline would show her cleavage to great advantage, and the dress itself would hug and flatter her figure. Without a doubt, this could be the outfit that would land her a second glance from Richie.

“Excuse me, can I help you with something, ma’am?” the young sales clerk asked as she stopped next to Keri.

“Yes, do you have that on any of the racks?” Keri pointed to the dress above her head. “I want to try it on.”

“No...that’s the only one left. We only got three in and that’s the last one in stock.”

“Can I at least try it on? I’m really interested in buying it.” Keri sent up a silent prayer that the green dress was her size.

“Sure, let me go get something to grab it for you. I think the hunter green will look amazing on you,” the sales girl said before walking away.

I do too, Keri thought to herself thinking she might be one step closer to winning Richie over.

“Hey, big brother,” Tate said. “How are things going with you and Keri? She gets better looking every time I see her. I love her short hair. I usually date women with long hair, but I would change my type for her.” He moved away from the huge window and walked around the office like he had excess energy to burn off.

“Leave Keri alone,” Richie warned, softly. “She’s a very sweet girl who doesn’t need you bothering her. Anyway, I thought you were dating that swim suit model. What happened to her? The two of you acted like you were really in love with each other.”

Tate ran his fingers through his hair before blowing out a breath. “We broke up last month because I wasn’t too fond of her dating her photographer behind my back. I don’t like when a woman cheats on me. I won’t stand for it.”

Richie frowned. “When did you get a conscience? I remember quite clearly you cheating on at least two of your ex-girlfriends back in college. You didn’t seem to have a problem back then. What’s changed with you?”

“Shit! Why are you in such a bad mood? Is there something going on that I should know about?”

Richie wasn’t interested in any sibling bonding because whenever his baby brother showed it he usually wanted something like financial help. “Why have you come here to see me this time?” he asked without bothering to answer Tate’s question. The quicker he could get rid of his freeloading family member the better his day would become.

“You think I’m here for money again, don’t you?” Tate rested his back against the wall and slid his hands into the pockets of his black slacks. “I’m not here for you to write me a check and send me on my way. I want a job and a chance to build a real relationship with you. We’re brothers and we never act like it. I hate that and I want to change it. We haven’t been close since we were kids. You wouldn’t even let me help you after Kristy died.”

Tate had tried to be there for him and Richie had shut him out along with his buddy Nick because he wasn’t ready to accept the truth back then. It had taken him almost three months before he was even able to visit Kristy’s grave. Tate volunteered to go with him, but he’d shot down the request as soon as it left Tate’s mouth.

Ever since then he'd thrown up numerous walls keeping his brother away because he wasn't positive Tate was sincere. His brother might have their parents fooled, but he wasn't going to take Tate on face value anymore. He'd been burnt enough to be more than cautious now.

"If I give you a job offer will you be here for the long haul or could I come in one day and find a letter of resignation on my desk? Also, will you be able to work here without bothering Keri day in and day out? She doesn't need you in her face flirting. Keri is too nice to tell you to leave her alone, but I'm not since I'm her friend and boss."

Richie could still see how Keri's pretty face lit up when she saw Tate earlier. His brother always had a way of charming any woman he was in the room with which was the main reason he could never stay in a relationship for a long period of time.

Sure, that's why you don't want Tate around Keri. Keep telling yourself that lie.

He didn't have time to dig deeper to how seeing Keri and Tate so friendly with each other made him feel. He had to deal with one problem at a time.

"I enjoy teasing Keri. She doesn't take it personally like you do. She's the perfect woman: gorgeous, funny, outgoing and smart. What more could a guy in his right mind ask for? I'm shocked you haven't asked her out on a date, but you've always been a slow mover when it came to the opposite sex."

"I'm not a slow mover," Richie said. "Where did you get that crazy idea from?" Sometimes, he wondered if his brother got dropped on his head as a kid. Tate was thirty-two but acted twenty-one.

"Come on, Richie," Tate laughed. "You were a virgin until your senior year in college. I lost my virginity in eleventh grade and to an older woman at that. I consider that a huge difference, don't you?"

How did the conversation move from him telling Tate not to flirt with Keri to discussing his sex life which by the way was none of his brother's damn concern?

"Nice try, baby brother, but I was talking about you not myself. Now, do you think you can do as I ask?"

There was a nagging thought in the back of his mind which refused to be stilled, but he couldn't harp on it right now. He had to take care of one problem at a time.

“Okay, I promise not to be overly flirtatious with Keri,” Tate finally agreed. “Can I at least speak to her or is a normal conversation off limits too?”

“You know what I mean,” Richie said smoothly with no expression on his face. “Don’t be a smart ass.”

“Okay.” Tate held up his hands in mock surrender. “I’ll leave your woman alone. Keri isn’t in any danger of me sweeping her off her feet away from you.”

Richie wondered why he was even having this conversation with Tate. It wasn’t like Keri had ever looked at his brother in a romantic way. He felt he knew Keri well enough by now and she would never go for a joker like Tate.

She had a better head on her gorgeous shoulders than Tate was giving her credit for. Besides he would have to talk to any man who might be interested in dating her because he was very protective of her. She had been in his life too long not to be.

“You won’t take Keri away from me because she isn’t mine in the first place. All we have is a boss/employee working relationship. She knows how I felt about Kristy and she would never cross that line with me.”

Coming across the room, Tate took a piece of candy out of the dish on the desk that Richie kept there for his clients. “How can you be so smart with someone else’s finances but so dumb when it comes to what is going on around you? What’s that old saying? A person can have a lot of book sense, but no common sense? That saying was made with you in mind, Richie.”

One corner of Richie’s mouth twisted upward at Tate and the way he was trying to push his buttons, but it wasn’t going to work this time. He was older and wiser now and all of these shenanigans weren’t going to drive him over the edge like they had in the past when they were younger.

“Think what you want, but I know everything going on around me. I’m very observant. How about you just worry about yourself and show up to work on time tomorrow? I’ll get the empty office next to mine set up before I leave today, but you better not disappoint me because this is your last get out of jail free card.”

“Excellent. I swear you won’t regret it. I’ve changed and I’ll prove it to you.” Tate grinned at him like everything else he told him had gone over his head. He popped the candy into his mouth and strolled out of the office.

Richie looked at the empty doorway wondering if he should have given his brother another chance or if it would blow up in his face, but the only thing he knew for certain was Tate would eventually show him if he was telling the truth or lying through his teeth.

Chapter Five

“Thanks for meeting me so late. I thought maybe you wouldn’t be able to get away,” Richie told his best friend Nick Lavery as he took a seat across from him at the bar. He hated how much he couldn’t spend a lot of alone time in the house he’d bought with Kristy.

Despite the fact most of her things were gone now, the memories of her beautiful spirit still filled the place and the king-sized bed seemed even bigger now without her there next to him.

“Richie, I told you I would be here for you day or night,” Nick said as he took his own seat. “Besides I think I was getting on Tasha’s nerves going over my speech for this weekend. She practically pushed me out the front door. I believe she wanted some quality time by herself for a couple of hours and being pregnant hasn’t helped her mood either. Last night, she couldn’t get any sleep because the baby was kicking.

Richie wished he had that problem with a special woman in his life, but he didn’t anymore. He couldn’t even get any pleasure from the man cave Kristy had decorated for him a couple of days before she died.

“Tasha is a sweetheart. I’m glad you took my advice and pursued her. However, I was surprised by how quickly the two of you got married.”

“I know, but once I realized how much I loved Tasha I couldn’t wait to make her my wife. How’s the personal life going with you? I remember from our last conversation a few weeks ago that both Taylor and Deborah were trying to date you. Are they still fighting over who will get their claws into you first?”

Why couldn’t anyone understand that he wasn’t interested in Deborah or Taylor? Neither woman fit the image of the kind of female he wanted to get involved with romantically at all. He might be a little lonely, but he wasn’t desperate for the company of a woman that anyone would do now.

“I’ve told both of them I’m not looking for a personal involvement with either of them. It’s strictly business and nothing else.”

“That’s good to hear because I didn’t think you needed to give either one of them the time of day. Neither woman is worth your time, but I do have a suggestion who you might want to think about dating,” Nick said making Richie wonder who in the world his friend could be referring to.

“Who is this mystery woman you are dying to make a suggestion about? I haven’t put myself around that many women lately, so how do you know about the perfect woman for me and I don’t?”

“You see her everyday at work,” Nick informed him.

Keri’s pretty face and soft smile popped instantly to his mind, but he couldn’t get involved with her. What if things didn’t work out? It would ruin the fantastic working relationship the two of them had and he would hate to lose her wonderful friendship in the process. No, he couldn’t think about Keri like that. He had to keep the right amount of distance between them.

He had to shut down Nick’s train of thought before it went any further. “Keri, isn’t an option so how about we stop talking about her? I told Tate the same thing this morning at work.”

Leaning back in his chair, Nick crossed one leg over the other studying him for a few minutes in silence. “When did Tate get back into town? I thought you had broken all ties with him.”

Richie knew that Nick had issues with Tate, but he hadn’t known why until a few months ago. Tate had confided in him that he had slept with the woman Nick had been dating before he fell in love with and gotten married to Tasha.

He couldn’t keep something like that to himself, so he told Nick. After his little confession his best friend’s dislike for his baby brother had grown even more.

“He came back yesterday asking me for a job. We started talking again after Kristy died. He tried to be there for me the best he could, but you know Tate, he never stays in one place for a long period of time.”

“Does that mean you didn’t give him a job?”

Richie wished he could tell Nick no, but he couldn’t. “No, I gave him one after Keri encouraged me too. She thinks he’s changed, but we both know he hasn’t. I don’t know how Tate is constantly able to get people to believe in him.”

Are we still talking about Keri now?” Nick asked. “Or are you referring to your parents? I know how they’re always on Tate’s side giving him money, money and even more money. What is their problem anyway? Did he put some kind of spell on them?”

Ever since his parents had adopted Tate at the age of three he had cast some kind of trance over them and it grew worse as Tate got older. He had lost track of how many times the high school called about Tate getting into

a fight or how he got caught smoking in the bathroom and should have been expelled, but his parents found a way to keep him there.

God, they had even missed his college graduation to attend Tate's high school graduation instead. Sometimes he almost forgot he was the biological child instead of Tate.

"You know how my parents are about Tate. To them, he can do nothing wrong. So, if I hadn't given him a job, he would have run to them and I would have gotten a phone call from my dear old mom.

"I'm not going to give him a lot of responsibility, just enough to keep him out of my hair and away from Keri. She doesn't need him flirting with her every day. I have to protect her. She only sees the funny and sweet side of him. We both know differently."

Richie wouldn't let himself think about what would happen if Keri allowed herself to fall for Tate's charm. He had to make sure it never happened. Tate couldn't ruin Keri's life like he had done everything else he touched. .

"Are you sure you aren't interested in Keri?" Nick grinned. "You sound like a man trying to protect a woman he's thinking about in more than a business manner. I think it's great if you are. She's so perfect for you."

"I've already told you how I feel. I'm not going to repeat myself. How about we order another drink and then you can get back home to your gorgeous wife, while I head back to my big empty house and go over some financial reports." Richie waved over a waiter hoping Nick would get the hint and leave the topic of Keri alone for the night.

Chapter Six

“When are you going to stop breaking my heart and finally go out with me? I mean I can only take so much.”

Keri picked up the stack of paper by the fax machine before facing Tate who was standing almost right behind her. She was glad Richie was trying to work through his problems with his brother, but Tate shouldn't take his new job as an opening to flirt with her. He was a cute man, but he was nowhere as handsome as Richie and he was the only man she was interested in.

“Good morning, Tate. I'm surprised you're here this early. What are you trying to prove?” Keri had a feeling Richie's brother was up to something, but she wasn't quite sure what it was.

“I promised Richie I would be here on time and here I am. I might even add that I made it here before my brother.” Tate puffed out his chest and grinned.

“Sorry to take your bragging rights away, but Richie arrived here at exactly eight o'clock and gave me a list of things to do before leaving for a meeting he had scheduled at eighty-thirty. You should know Richie well enough to realize that he's always early. I don't think I ever recall a time he was late for anything.” Keri hoped that Tate didn't hear how soft her voice got when she talked about Richie.

Tate lounged casually against the doorframe and then moved closer to her. His finger tenderly traced the side of her jaw, lingering here too long for her comfort. “Does my brother know you're in love with him?”

Keri reached out and clutched Tate's wrists. “I'm not in love with Richie. Where would you get that idea from?” She wasn't about to tell Tate how she felt before she'd told Richie. He deserved to know first. “Stop trying to stir up trouble.” Keri moved Tate's hand away from her face, but she didn't move quickly enough to stop him from yanking her to his body.

“Since you aren't having unrequited feelings for my brother, how about being my date for the charity event?”

She wasn't overly excited about going anywhere with the man in front of her. He didn't know how to stop messing around and act serious. Today wasn't time for his games or silly flirting. It was a good thing Richie

wasn't back from his meeting because he wouldn't be pleased with Tate's antics this morning.

"I'm not going to the St. Patrick's Day charity with you," Keri said shoving Tate away. She was totally bewildered at his behavior. She wanted to demand that he apologize until she saw the twinkle in his eyes and some of her anger evaporated leaving her wondering if Tate would ever leave his Peter Pan personality behind. It was past time he grew up!

"I still have a couple of days before then and I'll ask you again," Tate promised with a wink then walked back to his office closing the door behind him.

Keri moved toward Tate's office to tell him that her mind wasn't going to change, but decided against it at the last second. She wasn't up for another round with him. Moving over to her desk, she placed the faxes on the end and was about to take a seat when Richie's office door suddenly opened making her jump.

"Keri, can I see you in my office. I have a few things I want to go over with you from my meeting with Taylor." Richie turned and went back inside.

How long had Richie been back? Had he seen when Tate was flirting with her? If he had messed her plans with Richie she would kick his tall, lanky ass right out of the building. Hell, she might even bury the body where no one could find it. But her fears could be premature since she didn't know what Richie had or hadn't seen.

Picking up her pad and pencil, Keri strolled into Richie's office and her nerves immediately tensed as his gorgeous eyes watched her after she closed the door. The silence lengthened between them, making her uncomfortable. She felt impaled by his steady gaze and a thrill of anticipation touched her spine as she thought about her plan to seduce Richie in a matter of days.

Chapter Seven

“How have things been going while I was gone? I know two clients were supposed to fax over the credit reports for me to go over. Did they come?” Richie asked.

“I was going to look through them when you called me in here. I’ll check them after I’m finished here.”

“Good, I want to set up an appointment with both of them after the charity on Friday. I’ve some ideas about how they could save five hundred dollars a month, but it all depends on their credit score.”

Keri glanced down at Richie’s mouth while he was talking to her wondering how it was going to feel when he finally kissed her. She had known from the very beginning Richie Davidson was the man for her. She could no longer deny herself his caress. Sure, he touched her in a non-romantic manner all the time but she was past that now. She needed to know how it felt to have him moving in and out of her body.

Was he the type of man to look into your eyes when he found his release? Was he the kind of guy who slept on his back or did he prefer his stomach? Whenever she thought about Richie so many things came into her head and she wanted answers to all of them.

“Keri, can you stop thinking about Tate for one damn minute and pay attention to what I’m telling you!” Richie’s angry voice shocked her out of her fantasy.

The bewilderment she felt at his accusation went all the way down to her bones. Why in the hell think she wanted Tate unless...

“Were you spying on me earlier when I was talking to Tate by the fax machine?” Keri couldn’t believe this! Everyone around them knew how she felt but the idiot she was crazy in love with! Damn Richie!

“Yes, I saw you flirting with him.”

“No, I wasn’t flirting with Tate. He was being his usual cocky self and that it is.”

“Are you sure?” Richie’s straight glance seemed to be coldly saying something else.

Her heart leaped in her chest. Richie was jealous that his brother was paying attention to her and then she quickly chastised herself. No, Richie was only looking out for her like he usually did.

"I thought you called me in here to discuss what Taylor told you, not anything Tate might have got into while you were gone."

"How can you be so stupid?" Richie demanded. "My brother hasn't been here a good twenty-four hours and you're already falling for his nonsense and lies."

Clenching her teeth, Keri tried her best to calm down but she was furious! How dare he say she was doing something she wasn't! Hell, he never cared about who she dated before, why was it so important to him now?

"I'll say it again." Keri stood up, seething. "You don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"I do know what I'm talking about and that's why you're so pissed at me," he replied with contempt that forbade any further argument.

"Richie, I've no clue what Taylor said to you this morning, but whatever it was pissed you off. So, I'm leaving until you get in a better mood." Keri stormed away from her boss wondering how she could be in love with such a blind asshole.

She made it halfway to the door before a large hand wrapped around her upper arm swinging her back around. "Listen to what I'm telling you," Richie whispered harshly and then gave her a little shake.

"You're just jealous Tate knows how to approach a woman and you don't anymore," Keri tossed back, fired up. Richie wanted to boss her but not date her.

"Shit!" Richie growled a split second before his mouth captured hers.

The strength of his lips on her mouth sent the pit of her stomach into a turmoil. His mouth continued to move over hers, devouring its softness. Parting her lips, Keri gave Richie the silent hint that she wanted him to carry the kiss further.

Using the tip of his thick tongue, Richie traced the fullness of her lips sending shivers of desire racing through her already overheated body. She couldn't believe that one of her midnight fantasies was coming true. Wrapping both arms around Richie's wide shoulders, she pulled him closer to her body while the tips of her fingers played with the end of his thick silky ponytail.

Slowly one of Richie's hands eased down her back and cupped her ass while the other one found a permanent position on the back of her neck.

"Touch me," he whispered against Keri's swollen lips.

Keri lifted one of her hands from around his shoulders and placed it in the center of his chest.

“No, lower.” Richie moaned as he moved her hand until her palm cupped his hard thick cock. “Unzip my slacks and ease your hand inside, rub your thumb across the head. It needs your help to get rid of the ache.”

Chapter Eight

Keri swallowed her nerves as she slowly pulled down the zipper and slipped her hand inside. Her eyes shot up to Richie's in shock as her fingers came into contact with skin instead of fabric.

"You aren't wearing any underwear," she whispered as her fingers played with the ever hardening ridge of his cock. Keri had never, and she meant never, felt something so good.

"I'm not a big fan of them," Richie confessed as he nibbled at the side of her neck. "Damn, darling, you taste so good...like warm honey."

"It's my lotion," Keri whispered softly as Richie's mouth moved down her neck stopping at the front of her thin white shirt. She watched in awe as his tongue snaked out and licked at her left nipple before sucking it into his mouth through her blouse.

"Oh my God." She panted as her grip tightened on Richie's cock. In the back of her mind, she knew that he would be a good lover, but she had to stop him. Someone would hear them outside in the office. Tate was still here.

"We have to stop," she whispered brokenly as she tried to regain her senses. "Tate could be listening to us."

"Mmmm." Richie removed her hand from his pants. Lifting her up into his arms, he carried her over to the dark brown couch next to the award he had placed on the wall when he first moved into the building. He laid her down and quickly removed her lacy black underwear before she could say a word and shoved them into the pocket of his slacks.

Keri gasped for breath while she watched Richie kiss his way down her stomach as his large hands spread her legs wide until her right leg was hanging off the couch and the left one rested against the side.

"Oh, darling, you're so pretty." He brushed his knuckles against her damp curls. "I love that you haven't shaved everything off. I want to put my cock into a woman not a girl."

She was shaking as Richie worked his thick middle finger inside of her. Biting down hard on her bottom lip, Keri tried to hold back her cries of pleasure.

"Are you still a virgin?" Richie asked in a low, deep voice edged with more than a hint of desire. Her answer to his question seemed like it would determine his next move with her.

Closing her eyes, Keri hoped to get lost in what Richie was doing to her so she wouldn't have to answer him. She had dreamt about this for years and wasn't about to ruin it.

"Keri, I need an answer." Another finger was added to her body stretching her even further.

"Richie." Keri could barely exhale as she fought to take a simple breath.

"I already know my name. I need you to answer my question." Richie bent over and licked the spot right below her navel and above her tight curls.

"Yes!"

"I thought so," Richie said as he removed his fingers. "I'm dying to thrust my erection deep inside of you, but I won't let your first time be hard and fast on the sofa in my office. On the other hand, I can taste your sweetness all I want."

Her hips jerked up from the seat as Richie's large hands grasped her waist pulling her up to his mouth and his tongue swiped over her wetness. Keri opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out as his tongue lapped at the cream pouring from her body into his waiting mouth.

The orgasm hit her so fast that she didn't have time to prepare for it. All she could do was ride it out listening to the wet sounds of his sucking at her labia. Her nails dug into the cushions of the seat as she wished Richie's mouth could go deeper into her very soul.

The second orgasm hit her so hard in a matter of seconds that it felt like her body was being ripped in two. She let go of the couch and pressed her fist into her mouth hoping to muffle the screams of satisfaction.

"So good," Richie groaned deep into his throat. "Sweet and sticky like warm melted chocolate. Fuck! I want to be inside of you so bad!"

Leaning back on his haunches, Richie ran his hand down her thighs then he slowly closed them and fixed her skirt. Keri blinked in surprise as she stared at the man she secretly wanted to marry.

Dark gray blue eyes watched her through lowered lids as Richie adjusted his erection, zipped up his slacks and stood up like nothing had ever happened between the two of them.

"Keri, you need to leave right now." Richie turned away from her heading for the small bathroom he'd had put in his office a little over two years ago.

Standing up on shaky legs, she tugged her skirt back down to a modest level and made sure her shirt was in the proper order too. She

wasn't sure what had happened to her panties, but didn't want to take the time to search. "How can you just walk away like your face wasn't between my legs a few seconds ago?" Keri hissed, upset Richie could blow her off so easily.

Stopping in mid-step, Richie glanced back over his shoulder pinning her to the spot with his heated stare. "I'm walking away only because you're a virgin...make no mistake, if you still didn't have your innocence I would have you naked on the couch with my cock buried to the hilt inside of your tight, sweet little body."

Keri was so upset that she wanted to throw something at the back of the fine-looking man's head. How dare he lie and say that her virginity was the real reason he stopped making love to her. It wasn't the truth and they both knew it.

Well, if he was so scared of her undersexed body she would go out and find a man who wouldn't be. She bet Tate wouldn't care if she had never had sex before. She didn't realize she had spoken the last thought out loud until she turned to leave and Richie grabbed her by the arm pressing her back against the door.

"You aren't going to offer yourself up to my idiot brother," Richie growled as he placed his hand above her head. "I will kill him if he ever thinks about taking you to his bed." He leaned into her body, so she could see deep into his mesmerizing eyes.

She was getting really tired of him giving her advice. She was ready to make love to him and he shoved her away without a second thought and now was all up in her business. Why was it any of his concern who she spent her time with? It wasn't like he was harboring any secret feelings for her. Mistakenly, she had thought for a while that Richie was her end all and be all. Nevertheless, she was beginning to see she might have made a mistake since he was trying so hard to be her advisor instead of her boyfriend.

"You have no right to tell me what to do or who I can see. Now move out of my way." Keri shoved Richie hard in the chest making him stumble back enough that she was able to open the door and go out.

"Keri, we aren't finished with our conversation!" Richie yelled after her. "Come back here."

Keri snatched her purse from underneath her desk and stormed out of the building right past a smiling Tate. She had to get out of there before she lost her cool ever more and gave Richie a piece of her mind.

Chapter Nine

“From what you told me about what happened yesterday at work, I think Richie was jealous of the attention you were giving his brother.” Shay January, her childhood friend placed a hand on her arm to comfort her.

Keri and Shay had been friends since preschool when Keri had stood up to some other kids teasing Shay because of a limp caused by childhood illness. Keri never saw Shay’s handicap at all. She just loved having a best friend.

“Why didn’t you call him on it? Isn’t that the opening you’ve been waiting for like the past two years now?”

Keri wished Shay understood where she was coming from when it came to her emotions about her boss. She totally thought things had taken a leap forward after what occurred between them in his office, but boy was she wrong about that.

When she’d gone back to the office Richie and Tate were both out to see clients, but Richie had left a note on her desk with a list of things Taylor needed before the charity event next week. He had also added a special message at the bottom warning her to stay away from Tate.

If the notes from his meeting with Taylor hadn’t been on the same paper, she would have balled it up and tossed it in the trash can. How dare he try to tell her who to have in her life? Tate was her friend and nothing else. Richie had a lot of nerve implying anything else was going on.

“Richie wasn’t jealous,” Keri said, correcting Shay. “He was trying to be my protector. I don’t need one of those and I didn’t ask him to fill those shoes. I need a boyfriend and nothing less than that.”

“Girl...you got a taste of sex and you’ve lost your crazy mind,” Shay shot back.

Shaking her head, Keri tried to deny what Shay was telling her. She wasn’t becoming a sex addict because Richie licked at her a couple of times. Her willpower was a hell of a lot stronger than that; she only wanted to show Richie he had no say-so in her personal affairs since they weren’t in a real romantic relationship.

“We actually didn’t have sex. Richie and I only fooled around a little and got very lucky that no one walked in on us. I would have died right then and there if Tate had come into his brother’s office.”

“Tate probably heard the two of you through the door and that kept him from barging in unannounced,” Shay told her before taking a sip of her chocolate raspberry flavored coffee.

Keri’s hazel eyes widened in utter shock at her friend’s off-handed comment. There was no way Tate heard her with Richie. She had been quiet as a church mouse. No, Tate would have said something about it to embarrass the hell out of her after he got back from his meeting with his clients. He was just wired that away.

“You’re wrong. I barely made any sound. Tate is in the dark about what happened yesterday morning.” She was trying to believe her own words, but a hint of doubt had settled in the back of her mind.

“Enough about Tate. What I’m wondering now is will you do as Richie told you to do?”

“Hell no!”

“That’s my girl. Now listen to this, I have a plan for you to finally land that sexy red-headed man of yours. Do this and Richie Davidson will be all yours.” Shay grinned like she knew the world’s best kept secret to landing your dream man.

Chapter Ten

“Did you really give Keri an ultimatum?” Nick laughed as he followed Richie into his large, open kitchen. “Don’t you know you have no right to do that to her?”

Richie grabbed two bottles of water out of the refrigerator and tossed one to Nick. “I invited you over here so we could work out together, not to get a lecture from you about my love life or Keri.

“I thought you would be on my side anyway. I was only looking out for Keri. She’s so naïve that I need to make sure she won’t fall for Tate’s charm. He’s used it to fool other women, but I wouldn’t allow it to happen to my Keri.”

“Your Keri?” Nick snickered. “Is that how it is now? I thought you told me the other day you only saw her as a friend and nothing more.”

Taking a long sip of water, Richie thought about his conflicting feelings for Keri and he was beginning to see that he wanted more than a business relationship with her. He desired to have a romantic involvement: Which meant he would take her out on a real date, invite her over on Friday nights so they could pretend to be watching television while making out like two horny teenagers on his couch.

He liked how Keri’s face would light up every morning when he walked through the doors at work. Sometimes he would find a way to leave his office door open, so he could watch Keri work at her desk. She would be so busy that she couldn’t feel him staring at her. Back then he wasn’t about to cheat on Kristy because he believed in being faithful to the person he was dating.

“I think I might have to revise my original statement. I almost took her right on the couch in my office during the day. God, the best and worst thing about it was Keri was totally into it. Man, she was so vocal that I swear if she hadn’t put her fist in her mouth I know my brother would have heard us. You know how much I cared about Kristy, but she wasn’t into screaming and letting me know what she wanted when it came to sex.”

Hearing how a woman responded to him made him work harder to keep it going and thinking about ways to make it better for the both of them and Keri’s enthusiasm would constantly keep him on his toes.

“So, Keri is different?” Nick twisted the cap off his water bottle.

“I don’t know if it’s because she’s a virgin or she doesn’t care if anyone hears her pleasure, but Keri is so open and free. I think it adds to the list of things I’m growing to admire about my sexy assistant.

“The dream I woke up from last night about Keri had me running for a cold shower and I was in there for an hour. God, I swear I thought I was back in high school dreaming about the popular girl I couldn’t get because of my braces and coke bottle glasses.”

The need he had to be with Keri was getting worse with each passing day. All he could think about was how good she tasted on his tongue after her two orgasms. He recognized the instant he pushed her away from him that she would be pissed at him, but he had to do it.

His control was slipping fast and his cock was pushing for some relief between her warm, smooth thighs. Nick was right; he wasn’t attracted to Keri because she was there for him. Somehow and somehow she had worked her way into his chest wrapping her tiny hand around his heart.

“You sound like a man who is falling in love again. Do you think Keri has simmered down enough to listen to you?”

“I honestly can’t tell you, but I know first thing tomorrow morning I’m going to have a talk with her. I’m tired of trying to hide my feelings. Yes, a small part of me will always care about Kristy, but I’m ready to move on.”

“Are you sure?” Nick asked, suddenly very serious. “I don’t want my teasing to pressure you into something you aren’t ready for so you will end up breaking Keri’s heart.”

For the longest time, Richie thought he wouldn’t be able to move on from Kristy and their love, but after seeing Tate with Keri the other day, the shocking jealousy that ate at him proved how wrong he was. It showed him how ready he was to move forward with his life and the woman he wanted to do it with.

“I’m so sure that I’m going to make it official the first chance I get with Keri.” Richie grinned pleased that he was taking a huge leap forward with his life.

Long after Nick had left to go home to his wife, Richie sat in the living room nursing a brandy, thinking more about his decision to pursue Keri more on an intimate level.

Keri was so enchanting and delightful anytime the two of them engaged in a conversation. She specialized in having a good relationship with people. She first won him over with her gorgeous smile during her

interview. Even after she had gone all he thought about was how her dimples popped out every time she grinned at him.

Another thing he had come to admire greatly about Keri was her wit and how she used well-weighted insights to keep ideas flowing and fun at work. Keri never backed away from a friendly disagreement from him or anyone else.

He would never forget the debate they got into last year about a new client he was planning to add to his already overbooked schedule. She hadn't given up until she finally made him see her side which ended up being the better option.

Besides having the ability to give an honest opinion without blinking an eye, Keri was a born initiator. She possessed a strong determination to make things happen no matter how long it took. He wasn't even planning on talking to Tate again because of their past, but she encouraged him into rebuilding the bridge he had burned with his brother. Keri told him how she spotted the good in Tate and he would too if he only looked deep enough.

Well, he honestly hadn't found anything good yet, but he was willing to give it one last good try for Keri.

Keri was the type of woman who always had perfect decorum and tried not to ruffle feathers because she would rather kill with kindness. He liked that Keri was a peacemaker instead of following in Deborah's and Taylor's footsteps.

Those two women constantly found ways to stir up trouble and tear each other apart with their words. Neither one ever had a nice thing to say about the other one. It was hard to do business with females who were so self-destructive.

All of those qualities Keri had that the other two were lacking made him so impressed with her which slowly turned into him falling in love with her. Keri made him smile on days that he wanted to pull his hair out after dealing with a stubborn client. She was always there with a kind word or killer neck massage when he was in the desperate need of one.

It had taken all of his will power to toss her out of his office when he was dying to do the exact opposite. For a split second, he almost gave the keys to Tate and told him to lock up so he could take Keri back to his place for the rest of the day.

However, the quality he admired most about Keri was her uncanny ability to weigh in on all things no matter how big or small they were and find just the right balance for everyone. She didn't see problems from only

one point of view, but every point of view, so she could get the bigger picture.

Richie couldn't wait until he had Keri in his life in a better role. She might not be too keen to listen to him tomorrow, but he would get her alone so they could have some quality time. He would finally admit to her what he had been hiding from himself so long. He was in love with her and wanted to build a future.

Chapter Eleven

Standing outside of Richie's closed office door, Keri gripped the morning mail in her hand and ran her free hand down the back of her short Halle Berry style haircut. She'd been up most of the night contemplating what Shay had told her and she would do it.

This would finally make her see if there was any opening for her in Richie's life. If not, she would move on to another man. It wasn't like she couldn't fall for someone else. There were a lot of men out in the world for her to date. It might take a while, but she could do it.

Watch out Richie because this is your last chance to be with me. It doesn't matter how much I think I would be so much better for you than those other women. Keri knocked once on the door and then waited.

"It's open," Richie's rough voice called out.

Keri went inside closing the door behind her. "Good morning, Richie. Here's the mail. I placed the most important ones on the top." Moving across the room, she placed it on the side and got the last of her nerves together, while mulling over how wanting a man she really clicked with could lead to a dynamic connection. Now was the time to see if there was a possibility Richie could be in a 'long-term' commitment with her.

"Good morning, Keri. You look very beautiful today." Richie smiled at her.

Keri thought Richie's eyes grew a shade darker as his gaze roamed over her deep red short sleeved v-neck top and short black pencil skirt, but it might have been her imagination.

"Thank you. Do you mind if I talk to you about something?"

"No, have a seat." Richie waved at the empty chair next to his desk, but instead of sitting there Keri took a seat in front of the desk. She needed some space between them when she did this. If she was that close to Richie, she might not be able to stick with her plan.

"I have been thinking about what happened between us the last time we were alone in your office." Keri was giving Richie an opening and she hoped that he would take it and tell how he really felt or if he didn't feel anything for her at all.

"I have too," he admitted.

Wonderful. Maybe Shay was right. They needed to talk openly and honestly about their feelings and things would work out between them.

“Do you want to tell me what your thoughts were?” Keri asked.

“No, you can go first. I can wait until you’re done. I believe we might be on the same page.”

All of the excitement she had sensed left and floated away like a hot air balloon. Richie was showing her how he truly saw her and she was done. He might have gotten two years of her life, but that was it. She would move on and find a guy who was worthy of all of the outstanding qualities she had to offer. Hell, Shay had to have a single friend or two that she could hook her up with.

“Never mind, I think I’ll pass.” Standing up, Keri looked at Richie and shook her head. He was so caught up in his own misery he didn’t see what a good woman he was allowing to slip through his fingers, but he wasn’t her worry anymore.

Keri headed for the door intending to leave until Richie came around his desk and blocked her path.

“Where are you going?” he asked, confused. “I thought we were going to talk...we need to talk.”

“No, I have nothing to say. What I was going to tell you doesn’t matter now. I see things a lot more clearly now. It was an eye opening experience.”

Richie reached out to touch her, but she stepped back from him. As much as her heart might be breaking, she wasn’t going to fall into this trap anymore with him. She would have some class about herself.

Starting at this moment there would be no touching or anything else between them on an intimate level. She wouldn’t be giving him free advice about the women in his life anymore. He was a grown man and should be able to deal with his own problems without involving her. From here on out, it would be business and nothing else.

“Mr. Davidson, I should get back to my desk. I need to return some phone calls about the charity this Friday. Please buzz me if you need me for anything,” Keri said.

“You have never called me Mr. Davidson before,” Richie said, shock clear in his voice.

“I know I should never have addressed you by your first name. It started us out on an unprofessional foot from the beginning. I’m going to try my best to bring it back the way it should be between us.” Keri went around Richie to leave, but stopped when he grabbed her by the arm.

“Wait! You can’t go yet. I have so much to tell you. You misunderstood everything. I want you to know...”

“Will you stop?” Keri jumped in cutting off Richie. “I know what is going on now. I see things for the way that they are and I’m not hurt or upset. I’ve always had a bad habit of falling for the wrong guy and you were no different. I have this need to save lost things. It’s a part of my personality. I was the little girl who would bring a stray dog home and feed it my supper so it wouldn’t go hungry. This behavior isn’t good for me and it needs to stop, so I’m going to start with you.”

She shook off Richie’s touch and continued on toward the closed door. Opening it, she went out and barley missed running into Taylor.

“Oh, I didn’t think you were here since your desk was empty,” Taylor said stepping back from her. “You spend more time in Richie’s office than you do at your work area. Is Richie in there? I need to talk to him about the catering to make sure I have all of the last details correct.”

Looking back over her shoulder, Keri’s eyes connected with Richie’s confused ones. She took in his perfect appearance one last time through the eyes of the woman who loved him, but wasn’t going to much longer.

“Yes, he’s in there,” she replied as she spun back around and headed out of the door past Taylor.

“Can I go in and see him?”

“He’s all yours.” Keri meant her answer in more ways than one.

Work seemed to drag by because every time Keri turned around Richie was in her face trying to talk to her, but she didn’t ever let him get her alone. She constantly found ways to avoid him with something to do. Once she went into Tate’s office for a couple of hours and helped him out with a new client he had been working on.

The end of the day finally came and Keri thought she was home free as she was getting her stuff together to leave. For the last couple of hours, Richie had been in his office returning phone calls for potential clients. She thought she was doing a good job at hiding how horrible today was going for her.

However, even self-absorbed Tate had noticed the tension between her and Richie, but she didn’t care. She was tired of loving someone who had zero interest in her. Richie was never aware of her as a woman. Hardly ever considered what she might have been thinking and he seldom included her in anything he was doing, but why would he?

He never saw her as an equal although she had been his capable assistant for several years. For all of those days, weeks and months, she imagined him giving her some companionship, but she shouldn’t live in

fantasies because reality was a much better place to be and where she would stay from now on.

Keri looked over her space one last time making sure everything was in its right place before she picked up her coat, purse and went for the door.

“Keri, wait. We still need to talk,” Richie called after her.

Great. She hadn’t even heard his door open. What did he want with her?

She thought she had made things loud and clear this morning. Did he not understand the words that had come out of her mouth?

“Yes, what can I do for you, Mr. Davidson?” Turning back around, Keri took in Richie’s unruffled appearance. He always looked so well put together. She couldn’t recall a time that he didn’t look model perfect.

“You can stop with that Mr. Davidson shit,” he snapped, shocking her. “I don’t like it one damn bit.”

What crawled up his ass and died? she wondered. There was no pleasing this man. He was harder to read than a book by William Shakespeare.

“Fine, I won’t call you Mr. Davidson,” Keri replied. So was that it? Could she leave now? It was still hard for her to be around Richie. She wasn’t able to run off her love as easily as she thought. Nevertheless, it was going to get better the more she practiced at it.

“Good...how about I take you out to dinner. I still have so much to tell you and was going to earlier before Taylor interrupted us. It’s very important. I think it’s a confession I should have made a very long time ago. How about it? I can take you to that Thai place you love so much.” Richie grinned at her making his beautiful eyes sparkle even more.

The old her would have jumped at the chance to spend some time outside of work with Richie, yet the new woman she was trying to become wasn’t going to do it.

“I can’t,” Keri answered. “I already have plans. I’m sorry. You should have asked me sooner.”

Richie stepped closer to her until he was in her personal space. “Cancel the date. I don’t care who it’s with. Tell the person you have other plans with me.”

Her eyebrows shot up to her hairline at Richie’s selfish demands. He had never spoken to her like this before. It was kind of shocking. When did he come to think that he had such power over her?

“I’m sorry. I can’t and I won’t do that. I’m sure whatever it is can wait until after the charity party tomorrow. So, I’ll see you there. Have a nice night.”

Keri turned and went out the front door leaving Richie staring after her with a perplexed look plastered across his handsome face.

Chapter Twelve

Two and a half hours after leaving work, Keri finally unlocked her front door, walked into her house and before she could close the door completely a ball of fur ran up to her almost knocking her to the floor.

“Move back, Snuggle,” she said to the husky puppy that seemed more intent on licking her ankles than listening to a word she was saying.

“Move now!” she commanded again with a little more force in her voice.

Snuggle tilted his head to the side before running away and getting on the couch. He laid down staring at her with a pitiful puppy expression on his cute face and she instantly felt bad for snapping at him.

Keri recalled the day she’d found Snuggle. She’d been driving home from work and spotted him at the side of the road with his head and half his body sticking out of a bag. At first, she thought he was dead until she saw him move. She couldn’t believe someone would hurt such an adorable little puppy.

After picking him up, she’d taken him to the vet’s office and had him checked out. He had stayed there for a few days before she was able to bring him home with her. It had taken about a week before he had learned to trust her. She had awakened during the night to find him snuggled up against her in bed and the name just stuck with him.

“Come on, boy. Let me get you a treat.” Locking the door behind her, Keri went into the kitchen with the puppy at her heels. She stopped in her tracks as she noticed a little surprise for her by the pantry door. “Snuggle, bad boy,” she scolded shaking her finger at the puppy.

Moving past it, Keri unlocked the back door allowing the puppy to run outside and take care of the rest his business, but she seriously doubted there was anything left in him since it was already all over the floor.

She grabbed cleaning supplies and took care of the mess. After Keri was done, she tossed it in the trash and went outside to empty the trash into the bin at the side of her house. She waited a few more minutes while Snuggle explored the backyard.

“Let’s go, Snuggle,” she hollered as she headed back into the house with him at her heels. Back inside, Keri opened the cabinet door by the stove. She pulled out a box of bacon flavored treats and fed one to Snuggle. “There you go.” She rubbed him on the head and then put the

box away. Keri quickly refilled his food, water and left the kitchen while Snuggle got distracted by his Sylvester chew toy underneath the kitchen table. She knew it would be only a matter of time before he fell asleep under there, so she wouldn't have to come and check on him later. It was his favorite spot to take a nap.

On the way to her bedroom, Keri replayed the events of the day in her head. It had been so hard to let her emotions not show today with Richie. Once Keri got inside her room, she kicked off her shoes and sat down on the edge of her bed.

She would never forget the first day she had seen Richie. She was getting out of her car when he had walked past her looking mouth-wateringly delicious in a dark blue suit and sunglasses. The sunlight shining off his dark red hair made her stop in her tracks for a moment. Being from a small town in Iowa, she wasn't used to seeing men like Richie. She hated to admit it, but he might have stolen a piece of her heart right then and there.

Over the years her feelings had grown deeper and deeper. Even when he was engaged to Kristy her love for him never changed. She bet that he never knew how she observed him from afar noticing how he acted with his clients and close friends.

He always presented himself with such determination and resolve, like nothing could ever stand in his way or hold him back. Richie was a leader in every sense of the word. He believed the way he did things was the right way, no matter what it might be and he was usually correct. Maybe only once or twice one of Richie's plans had come back to bite him in the ass.

How could she not fall in love with a man like that? Besides being attracted to his brilliant mind, Richie's body made her sizzle. All he had to do was walk into a room and she was ready to jump on him.

God, she would never forget the time Richie had arrived to the office late after his morning workout. Instead of going home to change he decided to do it at work. By mistake, she had walked into his office as he was putting on his shirt. The washboard abs and light dusting of hair on Richie's chest had kept her nights filled with delicious dreams for months. One night she'd been so caught up in a vivid dream about her and Richie having sex on his wide oak desk that she'd slept through her alarm and arrived forty-five minutes late for work.

However, all of that was in the past now. Richie wouldn't be the man she built her 'perfect' life around anymore. He was still too drawn to the

past. If he couldn't move on then she would because she wanted to be in a relationship with a caring and loving man who saw her and only her. Togetherness was a high item on her lists of wants right below respect.

Keri wasn't about to force Richie to see they could be more than capable co-workers but good partners in and out of the office. She never wanted to be one of those women who got seduced by a charming man. In the past, she had dated men that were too bland which turned into boring by the fourth date. Or when she did try to change her model of the men she went out with, the new guys were too crude, rude or down right heavy-handed.

She guessed that was why she fell so hard for Richie. He was the perfect blend of bad boy on the inside, but the looks of an angel on the outside. Not only was he way better looking than any of the guys from her hometown, he could carry on a stimulating conversation with her.

That was one of the main reasons she'd left home. Most of the guys there disliked that she was intelligent and craved to have a career. Sure, she got asked out back there, but most of the men didn't want to listen to her hopes and dreams over theirs. They would rather talk about themselves and expect her to smile and nod at the appropriate times in the conversation.

As much as I still love Richie I have to let him go. It's the best thing for the both of us.

Getting off the bed, Keri began to get undressed when the sound of the doorbell stopped her. She took a quick glance over at the clock on the night stand noticing it was almost seven o'clock. She wasn't expecting anyone this late.

I better go and see who it is. It could be something important. Walking out of her bedroom, Keri headed across the plush dark brown carpet. As she reached the foyer, she almost tripped over Snuggle stepping on his feet. She quickly picked up the puppy and soothed him. "I have to answer the door. It could be important."

Keri looked out of the peephole and her heart sped up when she spotted who was on the other side. Richie never came to her house after hours unless it was something very important.

Keri unlocked the door and opened it. "Richie, what are you doing here so late? Is there a problem with the final guest list I turned in for the St. Patrick's Day event tomorrow?"

"Yes, there is a problem," Richie said as he came inside closing the door behind him.

Keri held Snuggle closer to her chest as she tried to calm down her racing nerves and pounding heart. It was too much having Richie in her house after what happened between the two of them. She still thought about it, but she wasn't sure if he did or not.

"What a cute puppy." Richie ran his hand across the puppy's head and then looked at her.

"Yeah, he's the man in my life. I don't know what I'd do without him. He's always waiting for me when I come home." Keri quickly closed her mouth as she realized she was starting to babble and put Snuggle down on the floor.

"You didn't come here to listen to me talk about my puppy, so why are you here?"

Chapter Thirteen

“Do you mind if we talk?” Richie asked. “You left so suddenly from work. I thought someone had lit a fire under you. I was used to you staying and us walking to our cars together.”

Keri couldn’t believe that Richie came to her house to complain about her not staying late. God, what was wrong with him? “I’m sorry I couldn’t stay, but I had other plans. I wasn’t about to be late. I had someone waiting for me.”

“Who was it?” Richie demanded coming closer to her. “Did you have plans with Tate? Is that why he practically ran out of the office today? I thought I told you to stay away from him. He isn’t the type of man you want in your life. He’ll break your heart and not give a damn about it.”

She might have to put up with Richie at work telling her what to do, but this was her house. She wasn’t about to listen to him lecture her. Who in the hell did he think he was? She didn’t need this from him. She needed...no, deserved someone that was going to make her number one.

A man who would invite her out places with him because he couldn’t imagine her not at his side. She craved to operate as a duo even if it only meant shopping for groceries at the local farmer’s market. She liked the old-fashioned idea of being a couple and her man calling her his ‘girlfriend’.

Keri wasn’t going to let Richie get her into another debate; she had to put some distance between them for a few minutes. “Wait here. I need to put Snuggle in the kitchen or we won’t be able to talk.” Bending down, she picked up the puppy and carried him into the kitchen then closed the door so he couldn’t get out.

“Now that you’ve taken care of the puppy, I want you to listen to me.” Richie came up behind her and grabbed her by the arm spinning her around to face him.

“We’ve already had this discussion at the office. I don’t like repeating myself and especially in my own home.” Keri shook off Richie’s hand. “So, for the last time you don’t have a say in my personal life. I can do anything I want with whomever I please. Now, I think it’s time for you to leave before I say something else that will cost me my job.” Keri tried to move around Richie, but he grabbed her again by the arm hauling her against his hard chest.

“Do you know how much you’ve been on my mind lately? Half the time I’m at work I can’t get anything done because I keep replaying that day over and over in my head.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Keri lied as she squirmed around in Richie’s arms. Hell, she remembered it too, but she was trying her best to push the sexy erotic encounter out of her head.

“Sure, you do.” Leaning down, Richie ran the tip of his tongue along the side of her neck before nibbling at the sensitive skin there.

“I’m sorry but I don’t.”

Lifting his head, Richie’s extraordinary eyes blazed at her like he knew she was lying to his face. Like he recalled every sound and movement she made while his masterful tongue worked its magic and he wasn’t going to let her not tell him the truth.

Keri’s heart pounded against her rib cage as she watched his gaze roam over her body before coming back and stopping at her face. She held her breath while she waited for his next move. There was no way Richie would allow her challenge to go untouched like that. He was going to do something, but she just wasn’t sure what it would be.

“I guess I have to refresh that failing memory of yours,” Richie said as his hands slid down her body. The tips of his fingers played with the hem of her skirt then slipped underneath inside her panties until his knuckles brushed against her already damp center. Her knees went weak as one finger eased inside of her body. If Richie hadn’t tightened his hold she would have fallen over from the sheer pleasure of his touch.

Richie had the ability to get her body going like no other man. Just one little touch from him and her inner sex kitten was ready to break free.

“Do you want me to do that, darling?” The finger that was tormenting her worked itself deeper into her and Keri felt her body trying to stretch to accommodate the intrusion.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do,” she moaned softly as a second finger was added.

A bead of sweat popped out on her temple and slowly slid down the side of her face. All of a sudden everything else faded from the room as Richie ripped the panties from her body in one confident pull.

Removing his fingers from her body, he spun her around so her bottom was pressed against his straining erection. Her skirt was shoved up above her waist so fast that the button flew off, but she didn’t care. Keri was too lost in what Richie was doing to her.

“Your ass is so perfect,” he said as he ran his hand over it then grabbed a fist full. “Do you know how many times I’ve found ways to walk behind you at work simply to watch this wonderfully ripe part of your body?”

Keri shook her head, too shocked at what was happening to speak. Richie was here with her touching her the way she had dreamed for years.

“Answer me,” Richie demanded with a slap to her ass causing her to jump at the sudden sting.

“No, I didn’t have a clue,” she answered, quickly.

His large palm moved over her stinging flesh massaging away some of the pain. When his tongue darted out and licked the spot below her right ear she moaned. While one hand stayed firmly planted on her ass, Richie’s other hand moved to the front of her black silk blouse and slipped the buttons open one by one until her black lacy bra was exposed.

“I have a confession to make,” Richie whispered as he unhooked the front closure of the garment. “Do you want to hear what it is?”

“Yes.”

“Every time you leaned over my desk to check paperwork or write something down, I would peek down your shirt. I couldn’t help it. Your breasts are just so full and firm. One day, I got lucky enough to see a nipple and all I dreamt about that night was sucking at your nipples while you were in my bed screaming my name.”

The way Richie described his fantasy brought it vividly to Keri’s mind. She could actually feel his cock buried deep inside her as he made love to her all night long. Shit! What was he doing to her? She was supposed to be leaving him in her past, but here she was standing half-naked in her living room with Richie touching her body like they had been lovers for years.

“I’m ready for my recurring dream to become real. How about you, Keri? Do you want to know how it feels to be hot, sweaty and totally lost in another person’s mind, body and soul?” Richie brushed his erection against her ass.

Maybe if she was able to get away from Richie this spell he had over her would go away but when she tried to move, Richie growled deep in his throat and wrapped his arm around her waist keeping her against him. Keri was deliciously aroused at the thought Richie wanted her so badly that he didn’t desire to have an inch separating them.

Did she want to have a night of passionate sex with Richie? Could she really do that and still walk away from him? She wasn’t dumb. Richie

wasn't in love with her. Keri knew now that no other woman would capture his heart like Kristy, but for tonight Richie was totally focused on her. She was going to live her life in the moment and not over think the 'what if's'. Richie wanted to give her tonight and she was going to take it.

"Yes! I want it to be real," Keri answered before she could change her mind.

Chapter Fourteen

Before Keri could say another word Richie removed the remainder of her clothing until she was standing naked in front of him. She couldn't believe she was standing here in the hall without any clothes on. When she'd come home tonight she never thought this would be happening to her. The heated way he stared at her body made her self-conscious. She tried to cover her body with her arms but Richie brushed her hands away.

"You never have to cover up your body in front of me. I love everything about you," Richie said. He kissed her softly on the mouth and then picked her up in his arms. She loved how it felt to be next to his muscular body like this.

"Which way to your bedroom?" he asked. "I don't know how much longer I can last."

"Down the hall—the first door on your right," she answered.

He made it to her bedroom in a flash. Stopping by the side of the bed, he gently laid her down in the middle. Seconds ticked by turning into minutes, but Richie never spoke a word. All he did was stare at her body like he'd never seen a naked woman in his life.

The intense way his blue-gray eyes took in every inch of her made her reach for the cover at the end of the bed, but she stopped when Richie raised an eyebrow at her. After a few more minutes of the same thing, she had finally had enough.

"Are you just going to stand there and stare at me all night? I might be a novice when it comes to sex, but I know that it involves more than looking and touching here and there."

Deep, rich male laughter echoed through the quiet room. After Richie stopped laughing, he grinned at her. "Sweetheart, you are correct, making love does involve more than that." He kicked off his shoes. He reached for the first button on his white shirt, but Keri sat up on the bed and laid her hand on the top of his.

"Let me do it," she said, looking at him.

His sensuality always reminded her of a mountain lion ready to pounce on his prey. A woman never sensed it was there until he was up on her and she had no place to go. The side of his mouth kicked up into a slight smile as he slid his hand from underneath hers.

“Have at it, but don’t take too long. I have waited a long time for you, sweetheart.”

Keri blew off Richie’s comment not thinking much about it because she was more concerned about getting him as naked as she was. She shivered at the thought of finally being able to touch Richie’s body all she wanted. Without a doubt, she knew the first item she was going to remove from him.

“Turn around,” she instructed, softly.

“Why?” the question hung in the air. It was said low, but it came across like Richie wasn’t about to obey.

“Don’t question me. Just do it.”

Pushing his shoulder, Keri made Richie spin around until his back was facing her. “I have been dying to do this for as long as I can remember.” Reaching up, she pulled off the black rubber band that held Richie’s thick hair away from his gorgeous face. Once his locks were brushing the top of his shoulders, Keri threw the rubber band down on the floor.

Starting at the sides of his hair, she ran her fingers through the cool strands pausing to massage his scalp as she went. Richie tilted his head back, lost in her touch. Keri loved having him under her control like this. She massaged his scalp for one more minute, then stopped.

Sliding off the bed, she moved around Richie placing her hand in the middle of his chest. A small smile of pleasure touched her lips at how fast Richie’s heart was beating. At least right at this moment he wanted her just as much as she desired him.

Slowly, she unbuttoned his white shirt hoping he didn’t notice how her hand was shaking a little. She wasn’t sure if it was from nerves or anticipation. Standing on tiptoes, Keri pushed the fabric off Richie’s wide shoulders while the scent of his cologne kicked up her attraction to him another notch.

“I thought I might have to do that myself because your touch was driving me crazy,” Richie confessed.

Glancing up, she noticed his eyes were a shade darker with desire. “Are you saying that you aren’t man enough to wait until I finish undressing you?”

Keri gasped as Richie picked her up tossing her back on the bed. Damn, she loved how forceful Richie was being. She wasn’t usually into dominating men, but he was making her rethink her lists of don’ts when it came to a man.

“I’m saying I’m trying to let you have your way with me, but I can’t this time. I need to be inside you.” Richie hurriedly stripped out of the rest of his clothes and joined her on the bed.

Keri was more than ready for this because over the past nine months her dreams about Richie had grown more frequent. She couldn’t stop thinking about him every night her head hit the pillow. She moved her eyes slowly over his face taking in every single detail so she could burn it into her brain.

His eyes held a bright sheen of purpose like he was going to prove that his reality was so much better than any of her nightly dreams. Richie’s boldly handsome face held a slight smile of eroticism making her body grow even wetter than it already was.

Dropping his head, he ran the tip of his tongue across the corner of her mouth before planting a kiss there. “Do you know how much I love the way you smell?” Richie grabbed her by the wrists and placed them at the side of her head. “Sometimes at work I would get as close as I could to you hoping it would rub off on my clothes.”

Keri was shocked at his admission. She never knew that and it made her feel feminine as hell to know Richie’s attraction to her ran that deep and intense.

“No, I didn’t know that,” she moaned as Richie licked the side of her neck. “You never told me until now.”

“Baby, I have so much more to tell you, but later. I’m ready to stop talking and make love to you.” Richie captured her mouth with his, slipping his tongue inside.

Chapter Fifteen

Richie had to calm down his racing need to spread Keri's smooth legs wide and push his cock into her as deep as it would go because she was a virgin. He wanted to go as slow as possible to make it good for her, but he had waited so fucking long to be with her like this that he was almost crazy with want.

Moving his hands from her wrists, he cupped the back of her head so he could deepen the kiss. Slowly, he traced the top of her teeth with his tongue loving the soft mewling sounds coming from the back of her throat. He couldn't believe how hot her skin was. Her wonderful breasts were pressed into his chest and the warmth from them was driving him crazy.

As he continued to kiss her he allowed his hands to roam freely over her tight, sweet little body. Every part of her was like a treasure he was having the pleasure of discovering and he wasn't about to stop until he got to the best one. The one she had been saving for that one special man...him. He wasn't about to let Keri go after this. She was his and would be for the rest of their lives.

Richie groaned loudly when Keri's soft hands started exploring different parts of his body from his chest, down to his stomach and around to the lower part of his back. However, she didn't touch him where he wanted it the most. Grabbing her hand, he placed it on his cock and held it there when she tried to move it.

"Don't panic. I only want you to get used to the feel of me." He moved his hand showing Keri how he liked to be touched and stroked. His balls grew tighter when her thumb feathered the tip of his already rock hard erection.

Every soft innocent touch Keri was doing to him made his cock grow longer and harder. She truly didn't know how close he was to completely losing control. Before he lost it entirely, Richie brushed her hand away from him and grabbed her plump, juicy ass with both of his hands. Using his knee he spread her legs and eased them apart until his erection was resting against her. Keri's body scooted back a little from his, but he grabbed her by the waist and brought her back.

"Relax...don't get nervous on me now," he coached in a low voice.

Trying to get Keri's mind off what was about to happen, Richie refocused his attention on her breasts. Lowering his head, he sucked one hard nipple into his mouth rolling it around with his tongue until he felt the tension leave her body.

"Oh God...that feels so good," she whimpered.

He couldn't get enough of her. After months of wanting, dreaming and needing, Richie was finally getting Keri the way he wished and hoped for: naked and sweaty in his bed. It was so unbelievable that he had to kiss her again to make sure it was real and not another one of his x-rated dreams.

"Please don't stop," she begged shamelessly as her body twisted around on the purple sheets.

Blue-gray eyes had turned so dark that they almost looked like steel. Richie heard Keri's words, but he had to be positive she was ready. Once he started it would kill him to stop, but he would if she needed to do it for her. His love for her ran that deep and he wouldn't want to do anything to cause her any kind of pain.

"Are you sure?" Richie asked one last time.

Keri's eyes held his and he saw the desire hovering there along with ultimate trust. She believed in him and he wasn't about to disappoint her.

"Yes."

Richie worked his cock halfway inside of her biting down hard on his bottom lip to keep from screaming out in pleasure. Keri was so tight and wet. He got halfway in and stopped moving, so she could get used to having a man inside of her. He hadn't taken her virginity yet, but he was close to making her his woman.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled out just a little and then thrust all the way back in until he was in to the hilt taking her virginity. Keri's wetness wrapped around him like a well-fitted glove while he kissed her swallowing down her soft cries. He had been proud of things in his life before but none of them compared to this moment and nothing else ever would. He kept kissing Keri until her tears lessened and then he started to move.

Richie pulled Keri as close to his body as he could, working his hips slow and steady. He didn't want to scare her by pounding into her too fast since she wasn't used to making love. But as her walls tightened around him sucking him even deeper inside of her, his thrusts sped up until the

bed was moving underneath them and Keri was biting at his shoulder to keep from screaming out.

Sweat covered their slick bodies as they moved across the sheet toward the edge of the mattress. He quickly readjusted them back to the center, so Keri wouldn't end up on the floor but he didn't think that would have stopped him or her.

Shit...it wasn't enough. He needed more from her.

Flipping them over, Richie lay on his back so Keri could ride him. Holding her waist, he guided her through the actions until she got the rhythm of it on her own. She cried and moaned her pleasure as her orgasm grew closer making him hotter than she already was for him. Richie felt his orgasm hovering, but he wasn't about to come until Keri did.

Without giving her a chance to react, he changed their positions again, so he was back on top. He placed her legs on his arms giving her sharp corkscrew thrusts until she closed her eyes and screamed his name so loud that he was positive that her neighbors were going to call the cops.

As soon as Keri finished he thrust deeply into her welcoming heat several more times and hollered his own release as the best orgasm of his life shot through his body. After the earth-shattering experience was over, Richie barely had enough energy to pull a semi-conscious Keri to his body, cover them with a sheet and whisper softly 'I love you' before he fell asleep with her wrapped in his arms.

Chapter Sixteen

Stretching in the bed the next morning, Keri couldn't get over how exceptional her body felt. If she had only known making love left a woman with this feeling she would have done it a long time ago. She had barely sat up before Snuggle ran through the door and jumped on the bed trying to lick her face.

"Snuggle, you know better than to be on the bed with me. Go and eat your breakfast," she laughed as she moved the puppy away from her and pointed toward the door. Snuggle barked at her before jumping off the bed and racing out. Keri couldn't wait until she got to see Richie this morning. She listened for sounds of his moving around the house, but she didn't hear any.

Tossing the covers off her, she was about to get out of the bed and go look for him when she noticed the note next to her clock. She picked it up and smiled at Richie's masculine handwriting, but it went away once she started to read what he had written.

Keri,

I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up this morning, but I had an early morning meeting with Deborah and then I need to meet Taylor at the hotel to make sure everything is perfect for tonight.

I'll be back to pick you up for the charity tonight.

Love,

Richie.

Keri balled up the note and flung it across the room. Why did she ever think anything would change between them because of last night? Richie got what he wanted from her and left without even waiting for her to wake up this morning. Well, she didn't need another slap in the face for him to show her how last night meant absolutely nothing to him. Hell, he could have called Tate and told him to have those two meetings, but no, he had to be the one who went. Damn it to hell! She wasn't going to sit back and wait to see if he would show up for her tonight. She was going to get dressed and go there without him. She had volunteered to be in the event and she wouldn't let what happened between her and Richie ruin what the charity was about—getting more money for the shelter.

"Happy St. Patrick's Day to me," Keri mumbled under her breath as she got out of the bed and headed for the shower.

Richie tried to block out Taylor's rambling while she gave him a tour of the hotel for tonight. He had to admit, Taylor might be a pain in the ass, but the place did look damn good. He couldn't wait until he was able to show Keri around before the guests got here later on.

Last night, while she was asleep he stayed up and watched her wondering how he'd made it so long without her. Yes, he had been in love with Kristy and she would always have a special part of his heart, but Keri was his everything and then some. Now, he understood the love Nick had for Tasha. It was all consuming.

He had already rented a room here tonight, so he could finally tell her his feelings. He wanted to last night, but she had fallen to sleep and he didn't have the heart to wake her. Then this morning he thought about doing it when he remembered these two appointments he had agreed to right before he left the office yesterday afternoon.

God, he wished he had told Tate to do this instead of him. He could be back at Keri's house making her breakfast in bed instead of here with Taylor. He knew she was purposely holding him longer than she should and he was about to put an end to it.

"Taylor, I need to..."

"Thank God, Mr. Davidson, you're still here," one of the servers said as he ran up to him. "We have a problem in the kitchen and the caterer needs to see you."

"What's the problem?" Taylor demanded before he could say a word.

The male server gave Taylor a quick look and then focused his attention back on him. "She made six vegetarian meals for the guests tonight who requested meatless meals, but she didn't bring them with her. She left them at home."

"Just tell her to go back and get them. We still have several hours before the party," Richie said.

"That's the problem. She doesn't have a car because her husband dropped her off and then took it on a business trip out of town. She doesn't have a way to get home and her sister was going to pick her up after work. She has no way to get the food unless someone drives her back to her house which is over an hour away."

"Taylor, can you take her back home for the food?" Richie asked.

"I can't," Taylor said. "After I leave here I have two more parties that I need to check in with tonight. I can't do it."

If he took the caterer back home then he wouldn't be able to make the trip to Keri's house to pick her up for the charity. All he would be able to do is drop the caterer back off here and then make a quick run back home, shower and change for tonight. Shit! Tonight wasn't turning out at all like he wanted it to, but they needed those dinners here. He would just call and tell Keri. She would understand and they still would have time together during the event and afterwards.

"Tell her to give me five minutes and I'll drive her back home to get them."

"I'll let her know," the waiter said and then hurried away.

"Taylor, thanks for making the place look so amazing. I'll have Keri mail your check to you." Richie pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and then walked away leaving Taylor standing there, so he could call Keri. He punched the number one on his speed dial and waited for her to answer, because he wanted Keri to know early that he wouldn't be able to pick her up. He prayed she wouldn't be too mad at him.

"Hello?"

"Hi sweetheart," Richie said. He loved that he could call Keri that now.

"Hello, Richie," Keri replied after a short pause making him wonder what was going on. Was she upset about something? "How does the hotel look? Is it the way you wanted?"

"The place looks terrific, but I did run into one little problem and I won't be able to pick you up tonight. I hope you aren't too disappointed."

"No, I understand. Take care of whatever problem came up and I'll check in with you later at the charity. I have to go, bye." The phone clicked in his ear preventing him from saying another word.

No, something wasn't right. He would find someone else to take the caterer back home. He needed to go over to Keri's house and find out what was going on with her. She wasn't acting like herself and he was concerned. Did he do something wrong last night? He thought they had an amazing time, but maybe he had hurt her. God, his blood ran cold at doing anything to cause Keri pain.

He couldn't help the caterer. She would have to understand and he would find someone else to take her back home. Spinning around, Richie was about to leave when the frantic caterer ran up to him with a worried expression on her face.

"Thank you so much for giving me a ride back home. I forgot all about the trays I left in my cooler at home. This is my first big job and

Taylor told me that if I messed up it would be the last time I worked for anyone in this town.” Tears streaked down her cheeks.

Taking a tissue out of his pocket, Richie handed it to the poor woman. Damn Taylor. He couldn't toss her away now. She was already a bundle of nerves as it was. He had to take her home or she was going to have a panic attack right in front of him.

However, when he got back to the charity event tonight, he would apologize again to Keri for not picking her up and find a way to make it up to her. He had several ideas, but he knew which one she would like the best.

“Come on...let's go so we can get back before the first guests start to arrive.” Richie went toward the exit sign with the crying caterer walking a few steps behind him.

Chapter Seventeen

“Wow...you look sensational in that dress. I think Richie is going to fall more in love with you when he sees you in it.” Shay teased as Keri checked her reflection one last time in her bedroom mirror. “You might not even make it out on that stage tonight for other men to bid on a date with you,”

Keri brushed down the last lock of her hair before doing on final twirl to make sure everything was in place. The strapless lacy hunter green dress did look fantastic on her body. It hugged her curves making her seem hotter than she really was. It sure did get rid of her good girl image.

“I’m not interested in Richie. I could care less if he likes or hates my dress. I didn’t buy it for him. I got it for me,” she lied as she shut her closet door and picked up her mask off the nightstand.

“How can you say that after you slept with him last night?” Shay asked. Getting up off the bed, she limped over to Keri and fixed the emerald necklace around her best friend’s neck. “You have waited forever to have sex and you always dreamed about Richie being your first.”

“Are you okay? I noticed you are limping more than usual tonight. Did something happen?”

Shay shook her head. “You know how it is with my leg. It acts up something awful when I move it the wrong way, but I’ve had this limp since I was three years old, so I’m used to it by now. I’ll take a couple of pain pills and it will act a little better. I just don’t want you to toss Richie away. I think he’s a great guy and perfect for you.”

“Forget about Richie. Do you need me to stay home with you? I can call Tate and tell him not to pick me up. I’m sure the charity will still make a lot of money without me being there. I can stay home and we can watch the Criminal Minds marathon on television. I know how much you love Shemar Moore.”

“You aren’t going to use me to hide from your problems. You’re going to this event and working things out with Richie. I bet he doesn’t even know you’re upset with him. He’s going to be pissed as hell when he sees you walk in with Tate. I still don’t think it was a good idea you called him.”

Keri was tired of wondering about Richie’s emotions. He didn’t give a damn about hers or he wouldn’t have left this morning. No, she took her

night with Richie as what it was, a one night stand and that was it. She wasn't interested in dating Tate and he knew it. He was only her ride to and from the hotel tonight.

"First, I'm not trying to hide from Richie. Aren't I dressed and ready to go like I promised I would be. I keep my word unlike some people and Tate knows there isn't anything romantic between us. We are only friends."

Picking up her small metallic purse off the bed, Keri left the bedroom and strolled for the kitchen to make sure Snuggle had enough food for the night because she wasn't sure when she would be back home.

"Don't try to avoid this conversation. You know that Richie will drag you away from Tate the second you walk through the door." Shay sat on a kitchen chair and watched her as she got Snuggle's food ready.

"He won't be able to do that because he'll already be on stage. I made sure I wouldn't get there early. I didn't want to hear his lies." Keri took care of her pet's hunger needs and then joined Shay at the table. She loved Shay like a sister, but she wasn't interested in getting any advice about her love life tonight. All she wanted to do was get this over with and come back home alone. She had always laughed at that one saying 'be careful what you wished for' but now she wished she'd listened to it. How many times had she wished to be with Richie and when she finally got him it turned out horribly?

No, she was going to try her best to avoid him and if he knew what was good for him. Richie would stay out of her way too. Now when it came to work, she wasn't just sure what would happen but she would deal with that Monday morning.

"Stop over-thinking stuff in your head." Shay laughed tapping her on the back of her hand.

"I wasn't doing that."

"Yes, you were. Your right eyebrow does this weird thing at the side when you're worrying about something you shouldn't."

"Fine." Keri sighed. "I was thinking about Richie and how I could have been so wrong about him. I shouldn't have pushed things, but he's in my past now."

Shay studied her like she wasn't quite sure what was going on in her mind. For a long moment, she looked back at her friend wondering if she should prepare herself for the worst, because with Shay she never knew what might come out of her mouth.

"I'm done with you. For months all you talked about was Richie this and Richie that. Now you have the man and you're ready to dump him without even talking to him. I swear if you weren't my best friend in the world I would think you'd lost your mind."

"I can't believe you're on his side," Keri said jumping up from the table. "He slept with me and then left me a note. Why shouldn't I be angry with him? You're acting like he did nothing wrong."

The ringing of the doorbell stopped Shay from giving her some more of her advice. Leaving the kitchen, Keri hurried to the door hoping to get there before Shay could lecture her anymore tonight.

Opening the door, she smiled at Tate who looked gorgeous as usual in a dark gray suit. "Don't you look good? It's a shame you aren't in the charity event tonight. You would bring in a lot of money for the kids."

"Has Richie seen you in this dress?" Tate asked as he walked into the house. "He's going to have a fit when he sees you. You look stunning. Green is definitely your color, sweetheart." Bending down, he planted a chaste kiss on her cheek surprising Keri because Tate was usually the type to go big and kiss a woman on the mouth.

"No," was the only reply Keri gave Tate. She was done talking about Richie.

"Keri, do you want me to stay here until you get back?" Shay asked as she came into the room.

Moving back from Tate, Keri noticed how Shay's eyes lingered on him. Most women were taken aback by how good-looking he was and Tate constantly played on that fact. He was a born flirt. She couldn't wait to see how he acted with Shay.

"Shay, I would like for you to meet, Tate Davidson. Tate Davidson, this is my best friend Shay January," Keri said making the introductions.

"Nice to meet you, Tate." Shay smiled as she walked up to him, her limp a little worse than it was earlier.

Tate glanced at her then over to Shay. "Nice to meet you too, Shay," he answered, hastily and then refocused his attention back on her.

Keri was a little taken aback that Tate didn't say more to Shay. From the corner of her eyes, she noticed the hurt look that passed across her friend's pretty face before she quickly masked it.

He usually flirted with every woman that came within five miles of him. Surely, he wasn't unfriendly because of Shay's disability because if that was the case, she would have a talk to him about that once they were in the car.

“Are you ready to go? We need to hit the road. I’m sure Richie is wondering where you are.”

Despite the fact Keri was pissed at Richie, her heart kicked up a notch. “Did you tell him you were bringing me tonight?”

“No, I wanted to have the element of surprise on him,” Tate grinned. “I wanted to see his reaction when we walked through the door together. I love pushing his buttons and me bringing you to the charity will do it.”

Keri wasn’t going to get into a debate with Tate tonight. She only wanted to get to this fund raiser and get back home. She already had plans to climb into bed with a good book after she was done with her part. Whoever won a date with her would have to call her at work to set up their dinner date.

“Tate, let’s go and you better not cause any problems,” Keri stated as she picked up her items off the table by the door. “Shay, do you mind making sure that Snuggle is back inside before you leave. He’s outside right now. I don’t leave him out there at night.”

“Sure, I can do that for you,” Shay answered and then glanced at Tate who was looking at her too. “Call me when you get home. I want to hear everything.” Turning away from them, Shay went back toward the kitchen.

“How long have you known her?” Tate asked as soon as Shay was out of the room.

“Since we were kids, why?” Keri wondered where Tate was going with his questions.

“Does she always dress like that?”

Okay, now she was really interested in finding out what Tate thought about Shay. Why was he so concerned about her clothing? It didn’t make any sense to her at all. She had mentioned to her friend that she would take her out shopping to get rid of all those long skirts and shirts she loved to wear, but Shay told her no. So, she never brought up the topic again. However, she thought Shay was too pretty to be dressing like she was an old maid instead of a twenty-eight year old woman.

“What are you talking about?”

Tate glanced away from the kitchen door and looked down at her like he couldn’t believe she had even asked him that question. “Shay looks like she doesn’t want to attract a man’s attention. She’s hiding behind those clothes and she shouldn’t.”

Whoa! Keri couldn’t believe Tate was actually thinking about someone who wasn’t him? What in the hell was going on? Maybe Richie’s

little brother was telling them the truth when he told them he was a changed man.

“I agree with you, but she’s vehemently against me trying to freshen up her look. I wish I could get someone else to help me, but Shay would disown me as her friend.”

“It might just take the right person to make her see what a knock-out she could be,” Tate mumbled under his breath, but Keri heard him anyway.

Keri would have loved to stay and talk about helping Shay, but they really needed to go or they were going to be late. “Tate, it’s time to leave. We can discuss my best friend more on the way to the hotel.” She turned and headed for the door with Tate at her heels.

“Let’s go. I can’t wait to get there, so I can pick on Richie.”

Concerned, Keri turned and looked up at Tate. “You aren’t going to do anything to stir up any trouble tonight are you? I don’t need you and Richie arguing.”

“No, I’ll be a perfect angel.”

Lord, Keri knew she was in trouble now as she spun back around and went out the door. Not once in Tate’s life had he ever been an angel.

Chapter Eighteen

Where in the hell was Keri? Richie thought to himself as he made another walk around the crowded room. He had been looking for over an hour and she wasn't here. Did she decide not to come tonight because he couldn't pick her up? God, he barely had enough time to run home and get dressed himself after bringing the caterer back with all the food.

He needed to talk to her to make sure everything was still good between them. He couldn't let her think he only wanted sex from her and then dumped her after he got it. He was sure that Keri heard him tell her that he loved her before she fell asleep last night.

If his meetings today had ruined his relationship with Keri, he was going to kick himself in the ass and then beg her to overlook his stupidity. Shit, he had so much planned for tonight and everything counted on Keri showing up.

Richie was headed toward the bar for a drink when he spotted Tate walking through the doors. He quickly made his way over to his brother and stopped him. He had a sneaking suspicion that his brother knew about Keri's whereabouts. "Have you seen Keri?" he asked.

"Yes, I have," Tate grinned at him like he knew something Richie didn't.

"Where is she? I need to talk to her before she goes on stage." Richie wasn't going to let his brother play games with him tonight. He was going to tell him where Keri was.

"I gave her a ride here and as soon as Taylor saw us she grabbed Keri because I believe she's about to go on stage. If I was you, I wouldn't go anywhere."

What was going on? Why was his brother warning him to stick around? He wasn't fond of the feeling he was getting at all. What was about to happen he wasn't going to like? It must be something bad for Tate to warn him ahead of time about it.

"Come on. I want a drink," Tate said heading for the bar. "We can see Keri perfectly well from the back of the room and I think the further away you are the better." Without waiting for him, his brother walked away assuming he would follow him which Richie did.

"What am I suppose to see?" Richie asked after the bartender had placed his drink next to him.

“Patience. You’re about to see,” Tate answered then took a sip of his beer.

Standing in the back of the room. Richie watched as the announcer walked out with a microphone in his hand and stood at the side of the stage. He didn’t see what the big deal was so far. If Tate was messing with him, he was going to kick his brother’s ass and then fire him tomorrow at work.

“Good evening, everyone. Thank you for coming tonight for the first annual St. Patrick’s Day charity event. Every bid here today will be donated to the local children’s shelter. So, let’s begin by bringing out the first gorgeous lady.”

Richie still didn’t see anything special until the woman walked out from the back of the stage and it was Keri. She was wearing a hunter green dress showing off curves that only he was suppose to know about. The fabric hugged her body like the garment was made for her and no one else. The hem of the dress stopped right above her knees showing off well-toned legs. Legs that were wrapped around his waist last night as he made love to her. After looking at the bottom, his eyes shot up to the top noticing how it’s strapless bodice making her breasts look like more than a mouthful for a man.

“Doesn’t she look hot?” Tate taunted. “I bet she’s going to get a lot of bids for a romantic date. I knew Keri was cute, but who would have thought she could be sexier than a *Pussycat Doll*?”

Richie was so lost in looking at Keri that he didn’t even hear the announcer finish talking about or suggesting the first bid until Tate snapped his fingers in front of his face.

“What?” he shouted, slapping his brother’s hand away.

“Are you going to let someone else win a date with your woman?” Tate asked. “The bid is already up to a thousand dollars. If you don’t do something soon, Keri is going out on a date with a man who isn’t you.”

“One thousand going once, one thousand going twice,” the announcer said.

“Ten thousand dollars,” Richie shouted out making everyone in the room gasp and swing around in their chairs to look in his direction.

“Ten thousand going once, ten thousand going twice,” The announcer looked around the room one last time. “Sold for ten thousand dollars! Congratulations, Mr. Davidson, for your generous bid. Looks like you’ve shocked the entire room.” The announcer chuckled. “You’ve won a two hour date with the gorgeous woman wearing the green dress.”

The audience applauded while Keri snatched off her mask and got off the stage storming in Richie's direction.

"Okay, I don't want to be here to hear this, so I'm leaving. Have a great night." Tate hurried away right before Keri got to him.

If looks could kill he would be buried six feet under right now. Oh yeah, Keri was more than mad at him, she was pissed as hell. He could only guess what she was livid about when it came to him. He should have picked up Keri instead of helping out with the problem earlier, but he would make it up to Keri. He had a surprise upstairs for her that was going to blow her mind.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Keri snapped. "I didn't need you to interfere. I was having a good time."

Was she kidding him? Richie didn't like what Keri was telling him at all. Did she really think he would allow another man to take her out after the night they shared together? He was in love with her and another man better not get within twenty feet of her or he would regret it.

"I made a donation to the children's shelter by winning a date with a sexy woman. I think the date should begin right now, don't you?" He reached for Keri's arm, but she slapped his hand away.

"Are you kidding me? I'm not going out with you. Do you think I've forgotten how you slept with me and left, only leaving me a note? Plus you added insult to injury with your phone call today. No, I'm done with you. My biggest mistake was sleeping with you in the first place. I can't believe I ever thought I was in love with you."

Richie wrapped his hands around Keri's arms and hauled her against him. He wasn't about to lose her after he just realized how much he loved her. No, Keri couldn't be trying to dump him. He wouldn't allow it to happen.

"Let go of me," she hissed tugging against his hold, but he didn't let go.

Her little rebellion didn't impress him at all. It was making him want to kiss her senseless in front of everyone in this room, but he wouldn't act on his impulse. Instead, he would take her upstairs and give her what he had planned for them tonight.

"No, you're coming with me." Richie moved toward the exit door with his hand still around Keri's arm.

"I'm not playing with you Richie. You need to let me go. I'm going home. I have to find Tate so he can give me a ride."

Richie stopped so fast that Keri stumbled into him. "Stay away from my brother. He isn't going to give you a ride anyway. Do you understand? If I had known he was coming to pick you up in the first place, I would have put a stop to it." He gave her a look and then started walking again until they reached the elevators.

"Where are you taking me?" Keri huffed next to him.

"It's a surprise. I wanted us to have some privacy for what I want to do with you." Richie smiled down at her, but she turned her head away.

"I don't want any privacy with you."

"Sweetheart, it doesn't matter what you want at the moment because you're upset with me; however, after you see my surprise you will be glad you came."

"We'll see about that," Keri mumbled under her breath as the elevator came and Richie walked on with her. During the ride, she kept trying to get him to let go of her arm but when she realized she was fighting a losing battle she stopped.

Richie glanced at her a couple of times from the corner of his eye, but she never looked at him. She was done allowing him to have power over her because she found him sexy as hell. It didn't matter what kind of surprise he had for her in the room, she wasn't going to accept anything from him.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Richie walked off. "I can trust you to be a good girl if I let go of your arm?"

"Yes."

Richie released her arm and continued down the hallway with her behind him. Keri thought about turning around and leaving, but she knew Richie would follow her. So, it was best to just get this over with and then she could go back home.

Stopping at a door midway down, Richie pulled a room keycard out of his pocket. He slid it into the lock and then turned the handle with the light went from red to green. "In here."

Keri brushed past Richie and walked into the room. She jumped when the door snapped closed behind her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Richie leaning against it with his arms folded across his chest.

"Did you wear that dress tonight to get my attention or make me jealous?" he asked.

"No, I wore it for me." She wasn't about to admit to anything.

“Liar.” Richie laughed as he pushed his body away from the door. “You knew I would get jealous and drag you out of that room. You’ve been in love with me for a while, haven’t you?”

Keri turned back around and put more distance between her and Richie by going over to the window. Wrapping her arms around her body, she looked down at the traffic below. She knew Richie had followed her before she felt his touch on her shoulders.

“Keri, I’m sorry about how I left you the day after we made love. I shouldn’t have done it. Don’t you know how much I love you? I think I’ve always been in love with you, but I wasn’t ready to admit it to myself.”

“You aren’t in love with me. We both know it. There will always be only one woman in your heart and that’s Kristy,” Keri said.

Spinning her around, Richie raised her face up to his. “The love I had for Kristy doesn’t compare to how I feel about you. Let me show you something. I was going to give it to you later, but I think you need proof of my love for you.”

Richie kissed her on the mouth and then took her over to a small table in the corner of the room with a white cloth covering it. He planted a kiss at the back of her neck. “Remove the napkin.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me what it is?” Keri tried to contain her excitement, but it was boiling over.

“No, it will ruin the surprise.”

She lifted the napkin and placed it at the side. Sitting on the table in front of her was a stand with a rainbow necklace dangling over a pot of gold wrapped candy. “It’s a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

“Yes, but there is more there,” Richie said. “Why don’t you dig around in the pot of gold? I’m pretty sure you might find something else.”

Sticking her hand in the small pot of gold, Keri felt around until her fingers brushed against something soft. She grabbed it and then pulled out her surprise. Her eyes widened at the velvet ring box in the palm of her hand.

No, this couldn’t be what she thought it was.

Taking the box out of her hand, Richie spun her back around and got down on one knee in front of her. “Keri, I’ve gone over so many ways in my head to propose to you, but none of them seemed quite right. I was going to tell you that I love you more than anything in the world and I was an idiot not to have said it sooner. However, that didn’t seem like the right thing to say and it has been done so much. I wanted to be a little more

original than that. So, I thought and thought until I came up with this. I hope you like it, baby.

“My days have been so dark for so long that I never imagined I could find love again, but one day this stunningly beautiful woman smiled at me and it was like seeing a rare rainbow after a rainstorm. Keri, you are my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I promise to make each and every day exciting and new for you like you have done for me. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?” Richie flipped open the box and the biggest diamond she had ever laid eyes on sparkled back at her.

Keri brushed away the tears that were pouring down her cheeks. “No, I can’t marry you.”

“What!” Richie jumped up from the floor. “Why in the hell not?” Hurt mingled with anger passed across his handsome face.

“Your proposal was so beautiful, how will you be able to top it on our wedding day?”

The emotions that covered Richie’s face changed as the words left Keri’s mouth. “Well, you just have to accept my proposal to see if it will happen.” Taking the ring out of the box, Richie slid it on her finger. “Now, Ms. Keri Walker, are you ready to make an honest man out of me or do I have to get down on my knee and beg again?”

“If I say yes, do you think my boss will give me time off for my honeymoon in Hawaii?” Keri asked as she wrapped her arms around Richie’s neck.

“I think your boss will be so happy for you that he might actually join you there,” Richie whispered

Grinning, Keri wrapped her hands in Richie’s shirt and pulled him closer until his mouth was a breath away from her. “Are you sure about that?”

“I’m damn sure,” Richie answered right before his lips touched hers.

The End