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Namaste My Love

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Aspen Mountain Press

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Chapter One

Drenched in sweat and exhausted, Felicia Jeffries scrubbed her face with a towel. Her legs almost gave out on her when she stood up. Reaching down, she pressed the power button on the DVD player and rolled her yoga mat, settling it against the wall. It was hell getting older. She had to work harder and harder every year to keep herself in moderately good shape.

She ate virtually nothing and constantly battled with weight gain.

Life just wasn't fair.

Sighing, she headed upstairs to shower.

Her phone rang just as she was stepping out of the shower. She glanced at the caller ID before picking up. "Hey Sis." Sis Blake was Felicia's best friend, and the force behind the looming event Felicia was currently dreading.

"Hey girlfriend. You ready for a hot night of drinking and debauchery?"

Felicia groaned. "I think I'm coming down with something."

"Mm hm. No way, babe. You're coming tonight if I have to drag your narrow, white ass out the door and into that club myself."

"Okay, don't get violent. I'll be there. At eight o'clock sharp. You'd better be there to give me cover. Lord knows this is going to take five years off my life from sheer embarrassment."

Sis' throaty laugh slid through the phone line, making Felicia smile. "It'll be good for you. Just because you're turning forty-five doesn't mean you have to act like an old woman."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll see you tonight."

"Eight o'clock sharp, girlfriend. Wear something sexy!"

Felicia groaned again and hung up.

Sexy. At forty-five. What if her kids saw her?

* * * *

Felicia pulled into the lot and parked. She stared at the low-slung brick building, chewing her bottom lip nervously. She wasn't gonna be able to do it. It was crazy.

Sis was nuts.

A forceful knock on her window made her jump and shriek in alarm. She turned to see Sis' pretty café mocha face grinning through the glass at her. "I knew you'd get cold feet, so I was waiting for you."

Felicia climbed out of the car. "You bitch. You scared the shit out of me."

Sis laughed, linking her arm through Felicia's. She looked incredible as always. Sis was tall and well built, with huge boobs and a firm, round ass. She kept herself in fine shape and nature had been kind to her, giving her high sculpted cheekbones, pretty golden-brown eyes and a wide mouth with full, sexy lips. She wore her hair in a soft, seventies type fro, and it worked for her. Her clingy, extremely short black dress looked as if it had been made for her, and only Sis could get away with red shoes that had four inch high stiletto heels without looking like a hooker.

Felicia smoothed a hand nervously down the front of her oriental-style red dress. The dress had a high neckline and cap sleeves and she knew she looked good in it but it was a little tight for her comfort level, showing every curve in her body. Even the ones she didn't want to advertise. Compared to Sis' 'fuck me' shoes, Felicia's simple black heels seemed dowdy.

"You look sexy as hell, Miss Felicia." Sis purred. She gave Felicia's arm a tug and all but dragged her toward the door of the club, stopping with her hand on the knob and turning to her nervous friend. "Are you ready to have your life changed?"

Felicia closed her eyes and filled her lungs with air. Stars burst in front of her eyes. "I can't go in there, Sis. Don't make me."

Sis laughed and threw open the door. The low pulse of music throbbed from the

room, the bass set so low Felicia's jaw vibrated as she stepped over the threshold. As loud as it was, the music was occasionally eclipsed by a burst of feminine shrieks.

Felicia looked past the bar toward the long, curvy stage that split the room in half. The stage was about chest high and had chairs all around it, with a narrow ledge for the customers sitting in the chairs to set their drinks on. Connected to the drinking bar across the back, the stage was lit with colored strobe lights and had dancers on it.

Male dancers.

Scantily clad male dancers.

Felicia blushed and averted her face from Sis, not wanting to endure the razzing she knew would follow if Sis noticed.

Sis' throaty laugh told her it was too late. "Come on Polly Pureheart. The girls are saving a seat for you.

A welcoming cheer erupted as Sis dragged Felicia over to the edge of the stage, where all of her friends were seated with nearly empty glasses in front of them.

"I see you've gotten a head start on me." Felicia grinned at Beth Collins, her best friend since college. Beth had turned forty-five a few months earlier but didn't look a day over thirty-five, due to some really good genes, some strategic sculpting and monthly visits to a great hairdresser.

In response to Felicia's jab, Beth pursed her lips and made a fart noise. To which every one of Felicia's friends hooted as if she'd told the world's best joke.

Felicia rolled her eyes. "How long have they been here?"

"I think since about five o'clock. Betty's already met all the dancers. She has their names and phone numbers in her little notebook."

Felicia looked down the row of her friends to the short, pudgy librarian with glasses. Betty was the oldest of her friends and didn't try to hide it. She looked every bit of fifty years, right down to the short bob with bangs she wore her graying brown hair in. "Betty?"

Betty lifted the notebook over her head and yelled, "Oo-Rah!"

They all burst into laughter again.

Beth patted the seat next to her. "Sit down, honey. We saved you a seat."

Felicia glanced from the seat at the dancing bar toward the scantily clad young man on top. There couldn't have been more than five feet in distance between them. She'd be close enough to catch a flying drop of sweat...or get soaked in an errant wave of pheromones.

"Why don't we move over there?" She pointed to a dark corner that was just about as far away from the dancers as they could get.

Beth grabbed her hand and yanked her into the chair. "Not a chance, honey," she slurred. "We're stayin' right here. I still have fifty dollar bills left." She reached into her purse and pulled a wrinkled bill from its messy depths. Lifting it over her head she waved it, hooting at the nearest dancer.

Felicia's eyes widened and she tried to grab the bill. "Beth, that's a twenty!"

A cheer arose around the dancing bar as two dancers descended on Beth. They stood right on the brink of the bar, their naked toes dangling over the rounded edge. One of them pumped his bulging crotch toward Beth's face and the other one turned, pushing a well-shaped behind toward her.

Beth watched the dancers with avid eyes, her mouth slack. The twenty dollar bill drooped sadly in her hand...probably wilting from all the steam coming off the stage.

Felicia was staring at a train wreck that was about to happen and couldn't look away.

Finally, the women around the bar started chanting, "Ben-ny, Ben-ny, Ben-ny!" Beth came back to life. She jerked and grinned, licking her thin lips, and reached to stuff the twenty into the speedo of the dancer who'd been shoving his package into her face.

Her fingers dipped pretty low into the speedo. And they dallied a long time. So long, in fact that poor Benny had to pull her hand out of his pants.

He was more than a good sport about it though. He grinned at her and lifted her fingers to his mouth, licking the tips of each one before he let the hand go. The ensuing shrieks of delight from the ladies around the bar made Felicia want to duck down in her chair.

But underneath the embarrassment she was aware of something else that surprised her. She found herself clenching her thighs together on a tingle of something warm and delightful. Something she hadn't felt for quite a while.

Something that felt suspiciously like lust.

"It's the birthday girl's turn. Lap dance!" Sis yelled. This startling declaration was followed by a resounding cheer from the crowd.

Felicia looked around with wide eyes. Women who she'd never clapped eyes on before were grinning at her, whistling and clapping their hands.

A twenty appeared in front of her face. "Time to dive into the water, Polly Pureheart."

Felicia tried to get out of her chair so she could run away. She figured once she got into her car they'd have trouble catching her...worst case she could probably lose them in the warehouse district...

Somebody grabbed the back of her chair and yanked it backwards.

The bar erupted into chanting. "Lap dance...lap dance...lap dance!"

The blood drained from Felicia's face. She didn't know what a lap dance was, but it didn't sound good.

A shadow fell over her.

The chanting stopped as suddenly as it had started. A collective sigh settled over the room.

The music changed, becoming even more heated, deeper and sensual. The pulse of it beat in her veins, changing the tempo of her heartbeat. She stared at the floor, panicked and terrified.

A long, muscular pair of legs appeared in front of her. Thankfully they were clad in well worn jeans.

The jeans had holes in them.

Lots of holes.

Some of them in extremely strategic places.

Her gaze faltered at the juncture of two muscular, denim-clad thighs where the crotch of the jeans should have been. What was there instead was a hole, frayed at the edges, and a silky yellow patch of fabric sporting a road runner in the center.

Felicia looked into a pair of sparkling blue eyes, fringed in thick dark-gold lashes.

He was laughing at her reaction to his road runner. He winked at her and her heart, literally, thumped against her chest.

Suddenly a large, square hand appeared in front of her face.

The crowd went crazy. They screamed and started chanting again. At first Felicia couldn't hear what they were saying, but soon she realized they were chanting, "Go for it!"

She tried to lean back, away from the hand, but Sis wasn't gonna let her get away with that. She grabbed Felicia's arm and pulled her out of her chair. Before Felicia knew what was happening the hunk on the stage had grabbed her hand and she was pulled onto the stage with him.

She hit his broad, naked chest with an undignified "umph!" and felt the jolt to her system through her whole body.

The first thing she noticed was his scent. It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. He was all warm musk overlaid by clean sweat and something that she couldn't quite identify which reminded her of hot sex.

The next thing she noticed was the smooth warmth of his naked chest. His well-formed pecs were right in front of her nose, a small triangle of dark gold hairs nestled between them.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her body into his, swaying to the decadent pulse of the music. Felicia held herself stiffly in his arms at first, but the combination of hot, sexy man and the throbbing beat of the music quickly overcame her natural resistance and her muscles softened, molding to his.

She closed her eyes and swayed with him, feeling every hard line of his long body against hers. His hands slid over her back and shoulders, soothing, caressing, until her muscles felt like the softest butter under his fingers.

Felicia's hands moved over his body, sliding across his narrow waist, up his sides, and across his broad chest. They trailed past the strong shoulders and thick neck, to a square jawed face with just the hint of dark gold stubble across it.

The room erupted as he lowered his head and laid his lips over her throat.

Felicia gasped at the moist heat of his mouth resting on her pulse and threw her

head back. His tongue slipped out from between his teeth and he licked her.

Feeling as if she'd been drugged, Felicia pressed herself against the hard thigh between her legs, humping it shamelessly as her body climbed, incredibly, toward release.

His tongue was replaced with the sharp points of his teeth. He bit her, gently, and then followed the tiny nip with a swipe of his hot tongue.

The room fell away. Felicia was aware of the music and the room full of friends and strangers only as a dull throb at the back of her consciousness. It disappeared under the all-encompassing aura of the man in her arms.

His was a sensual sphere, filled with promises and forbidden delights. And Felicia suddenly realized she wanted it all.

Her hands slid to his buttocks. They were firm and round and filled her hands nicely. His lips moved down her throat to the tops of her breasts, leaving a warm tingle of sexual awareness in their wake.

Felicia groaned and pulled him closer, grinding against the long, hard length beneath the denim...and the road runner. The thought made her giggle and he pulled away, looking down on her with bright blue eyes.

When he spoke she almost came just from the sound of it. His voice was warm and smoky, like the best whiskey running through her system. "You like my big bird?"

She stared back at him, her smile sliding away under the intensity of his look. Her brain was fairly fogged with lust, so it took a moment for her to realize that he'd pulled a thought right from her mind.

His mouth was wide, his teeth white between generous lips. His dark gold hair was cut short, curling softly around his ears and at the back of his head. When he looked at her his jaw worked as if he was fighting some emotion. His tongue slipped out and slid across his lips as if he were tasting something.

Felicia's eyes widened. "Who are you?"

His generous mouth curved upward, his eyes sparking with humor. He lowered his lips toward her ear just as the music in the bar stopped, signaling a break for the dancers. "I'm a man who thinks you are sexy as hell."

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His tongue slid around the edge of her ear and he stepped away. The smile was gone. In its place was a look of such smoldering heat Felicia thought her knees would give out. He offered her his hand and she looked down at it, confused.

"Can I help you down off the stage?"

"Oh..." she fidgeted nervously. "Yes. Thank you."

He handed her down to her friends and turned away.

Felicia watched him saunter toward the bar. She found herself wishing he'd turn and look at her one last time.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, he turned and his eyes held the promise of delights to come.

Felicia jerked her gaze away and dropped back into her chair beside the stage. She determined to get out of the bar as quickly as possible. He was at least twenty years younger than she was and obviously only interested in one thing.

There was nothing but trouble in the thoughts she was having.

And she was much too old to get embroiled in that type of relationship.

Chapter Two

Sis hung on Felicia's arm, nearly dragging her down to the ground. The woman was about three martinis past coherent and Felicia was determined to drive her home. Sis had her car keys in her hand and was insisting...very loudly...that she was, "purefactlee culpable to drive her own dammmmm cure home!"

Felicia patted her friend's shoulder placatingly. "I know you're perfectly capable, Sissy girl, but I'd like the company. We'll come back in the morning and get your car."

Sis snorted in disgust. "Nishe try, booby. I'm drivin' my nown cure."

"Need some help?"

Felicia stumbled and almost dropped her friend. A strong pair of arms covered in soft, worn fleece, wrapped around Sis' waist and pulled her gently upright.

Sis turned her head and leered drunkenly at Felicia's young dancer. "H...hey hansome! I'll let *you* take me home!"

Irrational anger swamped Felicia as her friend flirted with the gorgeous young man. "He's not driving you home, Sis. He's going to help me get you into *my* car so *I* can take you home." She glared at him, daring him to disagree with this plan.

He just grinned back. "Which car is yours?"

She turned and walked toward a creamy white Lincoln MKX. Bris Holcomb licked his lips as she stalked angrily toward the fancy car. Her tight little behind swayed sexily beneath the little dress she wore, the clingy fabric dancing gently just over a pair of truly cute knees. She had long, dark brown hair with pretty red and gold highlights that had sparked in the flashing lights of the club when he was dancing with her. Her body was lithe and she moved with a confidence only a woman who'd experienced life could enjoy. She was beautiful.

Bris had always been drawn to older women. They had many things going for them, including knowing how to make a man feel really good in bed. He also appreciated the fact that they rarely wanted a relationship. They unabashedly pursued him just for the sex.

Bris was okay with that...usually. But something about this particular woman pulled at him. He hadn't felt this type of connection to a woman since...

He shook his head to dispel that thought.

The woman in his arms sagged suddenly and he realized she'd passed out. Reaching down, he scooped her up and started toward the Lincoln with her. The birthday girl held the passenger side door open for him, her face still clouded with anger.

He settled her friend inside the car and closed the door. He pulled his keys from his jeans pocket. "I'll follow you home."

Birthday girl jumped in surprise. "What? No! I mean...why?"

Bris glanced at the woman in the car. She had fallen sideways and her full, lush mouth was smashed against the glass. She looked like a large, brown sucker fish. "You'll need help getting her into the house."

Some of the panic left Felicia's eyes. "Oh, you meant her house. Okay."

Bris chuckled as she realized how bad that sounded and her face took on a horrified look. "I mean...not that I want you to know where *she* lives!"

He shook his head and turned toward his car. "No worries. Just make sure you don't leave me at a light or something."

* * * *

Felicia found herself staring at his yummy backside and broad shoulders as he sauntered away from her toward a black Jeep parked at the far edge of the parking lot. She swallowed the saliva that had pooled in her mouth and ran her tongue over her lips. She'd never felt an attraction like the one she felt for the young, gorgeous dancer. She'd have to be seriously on her guard with him.

Namaste My Love

Or she'd embarrass herself.

Big time.

* * * *

He settled Sis onto her bed with little apparent effort. Felicia slid her friend's shoes off and covered her with the throw she kept on the bottom of her king-sized bed. When she turned away she was standing way too close to him. Mere inches. His breath bathed her face in sweet warmth.

He smelled like mint with an underlying scent of beer.

"Thank you so much for helping me get her home." The words clenched in her throat and came out as a breathless whisper. She sounded like the worst kind of tease.

He reached toward her and slid an errant dark curl from her face. "It was my pleasure."

Felicia sucked air and tried to take a step back, but Sis' damn island-sized bed was in the way.

He moved an inch closer.

She could smell his heat, taste his scent. Her mouth watered.

"You're a very beautiful woman."

"I'm too old for you."

He smiled. "Not a chance."

Felicia stepped sideways . "You should leave now."

His smile slid away. "You're right. I absolutely should." He lifted one hand in a wave and turned away, striding quickly from the room.

Felicia had a sudden, nearly irrepressible urge to go after him. In fact she took a step toward the door. But she stopped herself before she could start running.

Her body clenched with sudden need and she sat down hard on the edge of the bed. Her lungs were tight and she couldn't breathe. Her palms were sweating. She hadn't had this type of reaction to a guy for decades. Maybe never.

Felicia Jeffries, you are a shameless hussy!

Felicia grinned. She hadn't heard her grandma's voice in her head for years. Not since she'd stopped taking chances and risks and become the good little wife and mother.

It was kind of nice to have her back.

Felicia stood up and left Sis' bedroom, moving quickly toward the door. She made sure his car was gone before she stepped out of the house, locking the door behind her.

She climbed into her car and headed home. Thank heavens her birthday celebration was over! For the last several years, birthdays had only served to make her feel old and out of touch. She'd approached this one feeling that it would give her those feelings in spades, but somehow it hadn't.

Felicia's body was thrumming. She felt as if every cell had been infused with sexual energy. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so alive.

Being a shameless hussy was energizing. Laughing, Felicia decided she'd have to let her hussy side out to play more often.

She'd just have to keep it away from gorgeous dancer types who were much too young for her. That would only lead to disaster.

* * * *

Felicia picked at her salad and fought a yawn. She was on her second *real* date with Dave Foust, a longtime acquaintance. Dave had been a friend of her husband's. He was ten years older than Felicia and as a tort lawyer was rolling in money. He was tall and slim and reasonably good-looking. Although he'd been in love with her for years, he'd kept his feelings more or less to himself when she was married.

Since her divorce, he'd stepped up his pursuit of her, to the point where she'd finally given in and agreed to go out with him. That first date had been long and unexciting. The second one was turning out to be endless and downright boring.

Dave liked to talk about himself.

Occasionally he'd ask her something about herself or her life, but then he'd interrupt her and go off on a topic of far more interest to him...Dave Foust.

Felicia promised herself there would be no third date.

"I can't even believe this food." Dave informed her.

Felicia moved her fork around some more, hoping he didn't notice that she'd barely touched hers. There was nothing at all wrong with the food; she just couldn't concentrate on eating.

Her traitorous slutty mind just kept comparing Dave to her gorgeous young dancer. It was an ugly comparison.

Dave lifted a hand and called the waiter over. "I'd like to speak with the chef."

Felicia barely stopped herself from groaning. He did this every time they were together. He'd done it even before her divorce, when she and Philip and he and his now ex-wife, Astrid, had gone out together. Dave liked to draw attention to himself. She only hoped he would praise the chef this time, rather than berate him as he usually did.

Felicia bent over her plate and picked up a roll. She stared at it to avoid looking at the unfortunate soul who was about to have his skills called into question by a boring, overconfident lawyer.

"You asked to speak with me, sir?"

"Yes. I wanted to ask you if you got your training at a McDonalds."

Felicia's gaze swung desperately around the room, looking for something to concentrate on rather than the poor chef's crestfallen face. Just then a couple at a table across the room stood up and started toward them. The woman was young, gorgeous, and draped all over her date. The man with her was Felicia's dancer, from the club.

Felicia sucked a minute particle of roll into her windpipe and choked. She bent, red-faced over the table, covering her mouth with one hand and wishing she could climb under the linen covered table and disappear.

Alas, it wasn't to be.

She barely heard the poor chef trying to hold his temper in check as Dave continued to berate him.

As she choked and sputtered, earning only a glare from her "date" before he returned to abusing the chef, Felicia wished she could run to the bathroom. But she couldn't get out of that chair and risk coming face to face with her sexy dancer. He was

moving directly toward her.

A moment later the situation was taken out of her hands when a firm hand clapped her on the back and a deep, concerned voice inquired, "Are you okay, Miss? Maybe you should drink some water?"

Felicia lowered her head and tried to shake off the warm hand on her back. She thought if she didn't look up he might not recognize her. But the hand on her back slid upward, squeezing the back of her neck before dropping away.

Dave frowned at her. He really didn't like scenes. "Maybe you should go to the ladies room, Felicia, and get yourself under control."

Felicia stood up, hurrying toward the elegant restrooms at the back of the restaurant. Still coughing violently, she nearly dove into the ladies room and dropped onto one of the elegant couches in the outer room.

She laid her head on her knees and sucked in a breath as the coughing began to subside. The door opened again but she didn't look up.

"So your name is Felicia."

Felicia's head flew up and she gasped. He was just standing there. Her beautiful dancer. Wearing fashionably faded jeans and a crisp white dress shirt...and he looked amazing.

She gave him an embarrassed smile. "We have to stop meeting like this. I mean... really."

"Why?" His eyes sparkled with humor.

Felicia dragged the linen napkin she'd carried into the bathroom under her eyes and stood. She took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to regain some speck of dignity after she'd nearly coughed out a spleen just from seeing him across the room. "I'm sorry. Don't let me interrupt your date. I'm fine now."

"It's okay. I wanted to talk to you."

Felicia cocked her head in surprise "You did? Why?"

He moved a step closer. "I can't stop thinking about you."

Felicia laughed.

"It's true."

She stopped laughing. She was at a loss. What could she say to him that wouldn't sound rude? When she finally managed to form some words they came out all wrong. "You're so young."

He frowned and so did she. She'd meant to say she was too old for him. Now she'd just insulted him.

"Trust me, I'm plenty old enough."

Felicia blinked and he closed the distance between them before she could backtrack.

Suddenly she was in his arms, his lips mere inches from her own. "And I still think you're damned sexy."

Felicia made a little mewling sound but didn't try to stop him when he kissed her. Instead she dragged him closer, wrapping her arms around his neck and returning the kiss hungrily. Self respect be damned. The man was offering her everything she wanted on a silver platter.

After spending two hours with a man society would expect her to choose, she was more than ready to go after what she really wanted.

And she really wanted this man. Felicia pulled her lips away from his. "What about your date?"

"It's okay. We're just friends. We work together."

Felicia was thrilled by his response. "Oh, well that's good anyway."

He chuckled as her face turned red again and leaned in, taking her bottom lip between strong, white teeth and tugging it gently. "My name's Bris Holcomb. I'd like to see you tonight."

Felicia extended her hand. "Felicia Jeffries."

"So nice to meet you, lovely Felicia." He pulled her close and captured her lips again. Thankfully, Felicia's agitated thoughts calmed as her body melted into his.

* * * *

Bris stood outside Felicia's home and looked at the ink-scrawled napkin in his

hand again. Yup. It was the right place. He frowned. The place was huge and opulent.

Apparently she had money.

Lots of it.

That definitely put a crimp in things. He'd come from a family with more money than sense and it had brought them nothing but pain. As soon as he could, he'd run from the depression, alcohol and drug abuse that permeated his childhood and had never looked back.

Bris believed that money was nice for buying what you needed, but if you had too much of it, it tended to make you miserable.

Felicia hadn't seemed miserable.

But sometimes these things aren't readily apparent. He didn't want to serve as anybody's crutch. Been there, done that. He wasn't anxious to do it again.

It had nearly killed him last time.

Bris frowned at the napkin Felicia had scrawled her address onto. He crumpled it up and stuffed it in his pocket. He left the way he'd come, feeling as if he'd just thrown away something he wouldn't find again anytime soon.

* * * *

Felicia sipped her iced tea and laughed at Sis, who was describing her date the night before with some young stud she'd picked up at the club. It was the same club she'd dragged Felicia to on her birthday.

She was dying to ask Felicia what the guy's name was, but she didn't want to open herself up for interrogation by her inquisitive friend. Felicia breathed a silent sigh of relief when Sis described a Hispanic man who aspired to be a professional dancer.

Not Bris. Thank God. Felicia's ego was already bruised and didn't need another shot.

"Hello? Anybody in there?"

Felicia jerked and looked up from deep contemplation of her straw. "Huh?"

Sis lifted a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Girl, you're more than distracted today.

You get a little Cougar action yourself last night?"

"Cougar action?"

Sis made a sound of disgust. "Do you ever listen to me, honey? I explained all of this to you last week."

Felicia grimaced, embarrassed to have been caught tuning her friend out. It was just that Sis' sexual exploits were so far outside her comfort and experience level that she couldn't drum up any interest in them. Besides, it made her a little jealous that Sis was so successful with men when she absolutely sucked at finding the right man.

Maybe it was because Felicia was looking for the *right* man. Sis seemed to be just looking for *a* man. The only prerequisite seemed to be that he be much younger than she was.

"Cougars are older women who like younger men."

Felicia wasn't sure she liked being called an older woman. "What do they call the men?"

Sis' smile widened. "Cubs."

"Eww. That sounds kind of perverted. Like den robbing."

Sis threw her head back and laughed. "Do Cougars live in dens?"

"In your case they live in ritzy apartments above the park."

"Oh yeah, right." Her brown eyes sparkled with pleasure. "But seriously, go to this website and read up about it. I think you might need it soon." Sis placed a small square of paper in front of Felicia. The URL for a website was written in small tidy letters across its surface.

Felicia narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

Sis had that look on her face that Felicia had learned to fear. It usually meant Felicia wasn't going to like what came next. "You just never know."

"Hello, Felicia."

Felicia stiffened. Bris stood there, looking unsure of his welcome.

Sis stood up. "I have an appointment." She leaned down and kissed Felicia on the cheek and winked at Bris. "I'll see you later, honey."

Sis swayed towards the door, drawing the eye of nearly every man in the place.

Felicia turned an unfriendly eye on the young man who'd taken Sis' abandoned seat. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

"Why?"

"Look, I know I screwed up. I wanted to see you again to explain."

Felicia reached for her purse. "That's not necessary. I get it. I'm twenty years older than you..."

Bris grabbed her hand. "Please, hear me out. I can't..." He cleared his throat, and then fixed the saddest blue eyes on her face that she'd ever seen. "I made a huge mistake. I thought I could just walk away. But, ever since that night, it's like there's something unfinished between us. I can't explain it but I feel like I need to spend time with you. I'd like to try again...if you'll give me another chance."

Felicia felt the hit first in her lungs, which clenched shut and cut off her breath, and then in her stomach. She dropped her purse from numb fingers. Swallowing hard, she said, "Go on."

He pulled her hand closer and turned it over, running a calloused finger over her palm. It tickled but she was strangely reluctant to pull away. "I come with baggage." He laughed and the sound was harsh. "It's funny. I did come to your house the other night. Like I said I would."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"But then I turned around and left because I told myself *you* would have baggage...because of your money."

Felicia opened her mouth but he held up a hand.

"No, don't bother to tell me I'm an idiot. I already know that. You see, I have some bad history. My family...well, we won't go into that right now, but you might say I'm obsessed with the idea that money is a corrupting influence."

"But you seem to be doing all right...financially I mean."

"That's true. Which is why I'm an idiot. Well, one of the reasons." He gave her a crooked smile. "The other reason I'm an idiot is because I walked away from the first person who's made me feel anything...romantic...in a long time." Bris pulled her hand

to his lips and kissed the back of it. But he didn't stop there. His tongue slipped out and he ran it across her hand. "I want you, Felicia. However I can get you...I just want to spend time with you. I want to explore these feelings you create in me. And see if you have them too."

Felicia licked her lips. The sensation he'd created with his tongue on the back of her hand shot through her body like electricity, warming, igniting feelings she'd been afraid to recognize. She pulled her hand away. "I don't think it's a good idea." She leaned forward, her hazel eyes fixed on his face.

"I let myself get carried away the other night...at the restaurant. But you and I... we're not a good match."

"I disagree."

A small part of her wanted to grab his hand and run home with him. She wanted to pull his clothes off and fling him onto her bed, riding him long and hard until they both dropped from exhaustion. That part of her was screaming for attention at the moment, but Felicia had a ruthless grip on that little part of her and didn't plan to let it go.

After he'd stood her up the other night, in the brutal light of day, Felicia had told herself it was a good thing. She didn't have what it took to flaunt tradition and go after a younger man. She didn't have the feelings of self worth that would make it fun rather than a constant worry. She didn't have the spine to lift her chin against the whispers, the judging glances.

She just plain didn't have the energy.

She stood up, avoiding the pain in his eyes as she grabbed her purse off the chair. "It was really nice meeting you, Bris. I hope you find the woman you're looking for someday. She'll be a very lucky *young* woman."

Felicia headed for the door, fighting tears. She suspected that she'd just said no to something important. But she didn't have the strength to turn back around and say yes. Her judgment where men were concerned hadn't been all that stellar. Going with her heart had always gotten her into trouble. This time she was making the rational choice. Despite the fact that she ached to follow her heart just one more time.

Sam Cheever

Chapter Three

Dave Foust was leaning against the front of her car when she exited the restaurant. Felicia was surprised to see him there, especially since his face was dark with rage.

"Hello, Dave."

He inclined his head. "Felicia."

She waited for him to tell her why he was there. When he didn't, she walked past him and pressed the unlock button on her key fob, reaching to open her car door.

He reached out and held the door so she couldn't close it. "Who the hell was that man you were talking to, Felicia?"

She was torn between anger and amusement. Apparently he didn't recognize Bris from the restaurant the other night. She finally settled for anger. Dave's attitude was entirely inappropriate and worse, it reminded her of her ex-husband's manner. "Not that it's any of your business, but that was Bris Holcomb. You saw him the other night. He helped me." She couldn't help adding the emphasis. It still pricked her that Dave had only glared at her when she was choking.

For just a second, surprise replaced anger on Dave's face. "That punk who accosted you when you were making a spectacle of yourself? What the hell is he doing here?"

She pulled on the car door. "He came here to see me." She was shocked even as she said the words; she hadn't wanted to fight that particular battle. Hadn't thought she had it in her. But it seemed the battle was upon her...and surprise, surprise...she appeared to be up for it after all.

Color flooded Felicia's face as Dave's expression took on the judgmental quality she'd been expecting. "To see *you*? Why Felicia? Certainly you aren't having a fling with that young man? He's young enough to be your son, for God sakes!"

Although she'd been expecting the words they still stung. "Who I choose to spend

time with is none of your concern, Dave. Now please remove your hand from my door so I can close it. This conversation is finished."

He stepped closer and grabbed her arm. Felicia was caught by surprise. His long fingers pinched as he jerked her into his body, his face purple with rage. "You will not see this young man again, Felicia. Do you hear me?"

Felicia gasped as terror washed through her.

* * * *

Bris exited the restaurant and headed for his car. As he hit the button on his keychain to unlock his car door he heard raised voices. One of them was familiar.

He turned toward the sound and saw Felicia, standing beside her open car door talking to a man. He had slightly graying hair and wore a well-cut suit. His stance toward her was predatory. He stood too close and leaned toward her as he spoke. One of his hands was on the car door next to Felicia's. It looked like he was keeping her from closing it.

Bris was striding toward them before his mind had time to tell him it wasn't a good idea. When the man grabbed Felicia's arm and she gave a little cry of pain and alarm, he was only two steps away.

Bris grabbed the older man and flung him up against the side of Felicia's car. He gripped two fists full of the man's expensive suit and leaned close, putting his face just inches from the man's terrified face. "Don't ever touch her like that again."

Felicia gasped. "It's okay, Bris. Dave was just leaving." When Bris didn't immediately let the man go, Felicia touched his back and spoke into his ear. "Please, Bris. I don't want any trouble."

Bris kept his gaze locked on the furious older man for a moment longer before releasing his lapels, but he stayed between Felicia and the enraged man. The man she'd called Dave stood up and smoothed his hands over his expensive-looking suit.

Bris was disgusted. "For the lady's sake I'll overlook your disrespect." He leaned closer. "But if you ever lay a hand on her again I'll make sure you and your nice suit

become intimately acquainted with the ground. Is that clear?"

The older man smirked. "You'll be sorry you did that, son." He threw Felicia one last glance before turning and striding away toward a Mercedes two-seater at the edge of the lot.

Bris watched until he drove out of the lot and then turned to Felicia. She was pale and shaking. "Awe hell, honey. Come here." He pulled her into his arms and held her tight while she shivered and sobbed against his chest.

Holding her while she cried, Bris decided he was going to do everything in his power to win Felicia's heart. He didn't really have a choice. *His* heart had already made the decision.

* * * *

Felicia typed Cougar into the search field and hit enter. Several links to stories popped up. There were a couple of scientific papers that talked about the psychology of older women wanting to be with younger men. The stories were clinical and started with the premise that society found the pairing of an older woman with a younger man perplexing.

However, the real life stories she read implied that the stigma to the term 'Cougar' was changing. Many women appeared to relish Cougar relationships and found great pleasure and satisfaction in them. Felicia knew that was true. Sis was a perfect example.

Her friend fit the Cougar description perfectly. She'd been visiting bars and clubs for years looking for men who were much younger than she was. But Sis wasn't some kind of monster. She was a caring woman who truly cherished her young lovers and treated them very well. Her lovers cared for Sis too, showing every sign of wanting to spend as much time with her as possible.

Thoughts of Sis reminded Felicia of the URL her friend had written on a sticky and given her. She went to her purse and dug through it until she found the slip of paper.

The Cougar Club was apparently some kind of chat group. Felicia discovered she had to sign into the group to use it. She bit her bottom lip for a moment, staring at the

Sam Cheever

screen and thinking about whether she was ready to take that step.

But then, thinking about the date she had planned with Bris that very night, she decided she'd better do it. If there were rules and traps in a Cougar relationship, Felicia wanted to know what they were, so she didn't make a fool of herself.

Finally, she took a deep breath and set up an account, using the name FelicitousFeline. She logged in and looked at the series of posts, with names like Bosscougar, Cublover, and Prettybrownkitty.

A chime sounded and a new post popped up. Several more chimes followed in quick succession. Felicia didn't know what to do. She stared at the screen, her fingers hovering over the keyboard, and panicked.

Bosscougar: Welcome FelicitousFeline!

Cublover: Hiya FF.

Prettybrownkitty: Felicia, is that you?

Felicia's eyes widened, who the hell was Prettybrownkitty and how did she know her? Felicia started typing.

FelicitousFeline: Hello, my name is Felicia. I'm new to the Cougar Club.

Felicia hit send and then felt stupid. Duh! They obviously knew she was a new member already. More chimes sounded.

Bosscougar: I'm glad to meet you, Felicia.

Prettybrownkitty: Girlfriend!

Cublover: Is there something we can help you with, Felicia?

Prettybrownkitty: It's me, Sis

FelicitousFeline: Hey Sis! I didn't realize you'd be here...I guess I should have since you gave me the URL right? Duh!

Prettybrownkitty: I'm a regular. This is a great group.

Cublover: Thanks PBK!

Bosscougar: Do you have a cub, Felicia?

Cublover: You two know each other?

Prettybrownkitty: She's got the yummiest cub.

Felicia's eyes just kept getting wider. She couldn't possibly keep up with the speed

Namaste My Love

of the interactions coming at her. Taking a deep breath she decided to take one post at a time. Cublover had asked if they could help her with something. That was a definite yes.

FelicitousFeline: I'm having my first date tonight with my cub.

Bosscougar: How fun!

Prettybrownkitty: You go girl!

FelicitousFeline: He's about twenty years younger than I am.

Cublover: Perfect!

FelicitousFeline: I'm very nervous and wondered if there was any advice you could give me about dealing with a much younger man. What will we talk about? Should I downplay the age thing? Or be very straightforward about it? I'd appreciate any advice you can give me.

Bosscougar: Just be yourself, Felicia. You'll figure it all out.

Cublover: Don't focus on the age difference, it doesn't really matter.

Prettybrowkitty: Screw his brains out, honey. Enjoy yourself!

Felicia choked. Leave it to Sis.

FelicitousFeline: Sis! You're incorrigible.

Bosscougar: Obviously you two know each other, so I won't try to explain Sis to you Felicia!

FelicitousFeline: LOL, don't bother, I've known her for years. She just likes to shock me.

Prettybrownkitty: LOL, it isn't hard to do. But I'm not kidding, girlfriend. That man wants you bad. If you don't jump on that yumminess I'm gonna clock you over the head.

Bosscougar: LOL, no violence, please!

Cublover: Well, maybe a little BDSM! If you're into that. Hehehe

Prettybrownkitty: Ooh, spank me honey!

Cublover: ROFL!

Bris was straightening mats in the yoga studio when Giorgio found him. Around them the club roiled and buzzed with preparations for nighttime classes. "Hey, Giorgio. What's up?"

Giorgio looked upset. His round face was red and his lips white from pressing them together. He touched Bris' arm. "Can you come to my office, please? I need to talk to you about something important."

"Sure." Bris took one last look at the mats and followed Giorgio into a small, cluttered office at the back of the club. He pulled a stack of glossy brochures off the only chair and sat down, settling the brochures on the corner of Giorgio's messy desk.

Rather than sitting down behind his desk, Giorgio went to the rickety, wooden bookshelves on the back wall and pushed some exercise physiology books to one side, pulling a dusty bottle out from behind them.

He poured them each two fingers of the expensive brandy he kept for special occasions, handing one to Bris.

"Are we celebrating something?"

Giorgio made a rude sound. "Hardly." He dropped into his chair and lifted his glass to Bris. "To fools and thieves."

Bris sipped the brandy and settled back in his chair. "Ok, buddy. Tell me what's wrong. You look like somebody made you hold plank for twenty minutes."

Giorgio settled his forearms on his desk and looked at Bris. "I can't believe I'm gonna say this to you." He took another sip of his brandy and set it down hard. "I have to let you go."

Bris gulped his brandy down in surprise, nearly choking. He coughed and sat up straight. "You what?"

"Some fat cat lawyer called Penelope and threatened to file a very public lawsuit against the club if she didn't fire you."

Bris surged to his feet. "What! That's crazy. Who was this lawyer working for?"

Giorgio drained his glass and poured them both more. "Himself apparently." He handed Bris his glass and sat back. "He says you attacked him in a parking lot over some woman."

Namaste My Love

Bris' face grew pale and he dropped back into the chair, feeling stunned. *Felicia's lawyer date. Holy crap!*

"Tell me it's bullshit, Bris."

Bris lifted his gaze and fixed it on Giorgio's frowning face. He opened his mouth to respond but didn't know what to say. He didn't want to lie to his friend. His lips slammed shut and he looked away.

"Oh crap, Bris. What have you done?"

* * * *

Felicia's face felt more confident as she shut down the Cougar Club chat group. She'd interacted with several of the ladies and Monique had been right. It was a friendly and supportive group.

She checked her email and discovered she had five new emails since she'd checked earlier.

The first one was from Sis, a picture of a hot, young stud wearing only a small, strategically placed bouquet of roses. Felicia giggled and told her friend the young model, who was no older than twenty-four, was too old for her.

She hit send, grinning.

Felicia was still smiling when she opened the next email. The word WHORE hit her first. It was blown up to about a size thirty-eight font and in red. Felicia felt the blood draining from her face as she forced her eyes downward, to read the rest of the email.

It was from an anonymous sender, and consisted of a diatribe about her unnatural lust for younger men.

Felicia's eyes locked onto the last line in horror:

Stop your whoring ways, or the world will know of your perverted lust.

It was signed, Watching.

Felicia hit *Delete* with a shaking finger and sat back, feeling as if she would throw up. Who was sending her such hateful mail?

And more importantly. Why?

She realized exactly who it was. She had the phone in her hand and was dialing Dave Foust before she had time to think about it.

He answered right away as if he'd been waiting by the phone. "Hello?"

Felicia hesitated. What if it hadn't been him who'd sent the note? She'd be opening up a whole can of worms.

"Hello?"

Felicia made a decision. "Dave, it's Felicia."

"Good afternoon, Felicia. Is everything all right? You sound strange."

"No, Dave. Everything *isn't* all right. How dare you send me this email? Your behavior is atrocious!"

There was a silence that made Felicia frown. What if she was way off base?

When he finally spoke, Dave's response cemented that fear into her gut. "Felicia, sweetheart, I don't know what you're talking about. Has someone threatened you? Do you need a lawyer?"

Felicia's whole body was shaking by this point. She felt like she might pass out from the combination of fear and uncertainty washing through her. "You threatened me, Dave."

"Don't be ridiculous, Felicia. I've loved you for ten years. I haven't made any secret of that, have I? Why would I threaten you? What's going on, sweetheart?"

Felicia let her hostility slide away. If he was guilty he was an extremely good actor. "Someone sent me the most hateful email." She didn't even get into the inference in the signature, which was making her skin crawl.

She could visualize him pulling a legal pad and pen closer to take notes. "What was the email about?"

This had been her greatest fear. With a deep breath, Felicia grabbed the tab on the can of worms and gave it a pull. "The note accused me of being a whore and perverted."

Silence.

"It what?"

"I know. It's crazy."

"Not as crazy as you might think, Felicia. How well do you know that young man who accosted me in the parking lot yesterday?"

Felicia bristled. "He's a full grown man, Dave!"

"Well I guess that answers my question. Felicia, sweetheart, do you know what you're doing? He's half your age. People are going to talk."

"We're both consenting adults, Dave."

The ensuing silence was filled with disapproval.

"If you're going to buck the norms, Felicia, you'll have to take the consequences, however harsh or unfair they are."

Now that just pissed her off. "You said it yourself, Dave, you've been in love with me for ten years. You're what, fifty-five?"

"That's different of course."

She was shaking again, but this time it was from a healthy anger. "It is? Different how exactly?"

"It's perfectly acceptable for a man to be with a younger woman, Felicia. You know that. I know it doesn't seem fair..."

"No, Dave, it doesn't seem fair because it's not!"

"But that's the way it is, sweetheart. Fair or not."

"Well then we'll just have to create new norms won't we?" Felicia hung up the phone. She was so angry she could barely breathe. It was so unfair.

Men had been linking up with younger women since the beginning of time, in some cases even ridiculously young women. Society had never looked askance at it. But let a slightly older woman...a woman still in the prime of her life...even look at a sexy younger man and all hell broke loose.

It was unfair.

No! It's more than unfair. It's unacceptable.

It had to change and she was just the woman to change it.

Felicia had always liked causes. This felt like a cause that needed to be championed.

Sam Cheever

She headed for the shower.

Now if she could just safeguard her heart in the process.

Chapter Four

"Is there something wrong with your dinner?"

Bris looked up, surprised. He'd been playing with his food. Shrugging, he put his fork down. "Sorry, I'm not very hungry. I've had a rough day."

He took her hand, drawing it to his lips. "How about I make us dessert at my place...later?"

"Only if you promise there will be chocolate involved."

Bris laughed. "I think I can whip up something involving chocolate."

Felicia stood up, grabbing her purse off her chair. "Then let's go. I've got a hankerin' for chocolate...and other things."

Bris followed her out the door. She seemed different somehow. She'd been very chatty and upbeat all evening, and rather than skulking around looking guilty she was holding her head high and looking people right in the eye.

He liked the new Felicia. She seemed so much more relaxed and happy.

Bris handed Felicia into the passenger side of his car and walked around to the driver's side. He gave the valet a five dollar bill and thanked him.

"Hey man, I'd drive this beauty for free." The young man looked at Felicia and winked, grinning widely.

Bris hoped the guy was talking about the car, a dark blue Pontiac Solstice, rather than Felicia. Or he might have to teach him some manners.

He was shocked when Felicia threw back her head and gave the young man a throaty laugh. Something had definitely changed since the last time he'd seen her. He needed to find out what it was.

* * * *

Felicia watched Bris closely as he drove. He hadn't been quite himself all evening. He'd been quiet and sort of withdrawn.

It was really starting to worry her.

She bit her bottom lip and looked away, staring at the lights of the city as they flashed by. Maybe he'd changed his mind about her. Maybe he'd just realized how much older she was.

Tears stung her eyes and she blinked rapidly to get rid of them.

But then Bris reached over and grabbed her hand, kissing the back of it before smiling at her. "I'm really looking forward to *dessert*." He waggled his eyebrows at her like a lech from an old black and white movie.

Giggling, Felicia reminded him, "You promised me chocolate."

He nodded and sucked one of her fingers into his mouth. "I always keep my promises."

Felicia's eyes fluttered closed as he pulled the finger into his hot mouth, his tongue bathing the sensitive tip in a sensuous slide. Her head fell back as a wave of pure lust enveloped her. "That's good," she managed after clearing her throat twice. "See that you do."

Her voice grated away as her throat closed up, and another finger found its way between his sexy lips.

* * * *

"I don't care what you do to my club, man. Bris is my most popular dancer. If I let him go I might as well shut down anyway." Bruno Hench glared across the room, his deep-set black eyes sparking with temper. His gaze encompassed the space where a very timid cleaning crew was sweeping the floor and wiping down tables.

A couple of the Mexican illegals stopped working and glanced toward the door, ready to make a run for it.

Bruno was oblivious. The voice on the other end of the phone was cultured, sure of

itself, and spoke in legalese that made his mouth go dry. But ex-marines don't scare easy. And Bruno was Italian to boot.

"You can just go fuck yourself, buddy. I'm not firing my best dancer just because you couldn't hold your own in a tussle. It sounds like all he hurt was your pride, anyway. Losin' my business is too steep a price to pay for your stupid pride. Next time pick on somebody your own age!" Bruno slammed the phone down and walked back to the bar.

Bruno retrieved his pad and pen. He decided he'd give his Uncle Guido a call if this lawyer guy tried to muscle him about Bris.

Nobody wanted to get on Guido's bad side. As Guido liked to say, "You wanna swim wid da fishes?" Bruno smiled to himself and returned to his inventory.

* * * *

Felicia sighed as Bris' lips feathered down her throat and into the channel between her breasts. She laid her head back on the couch and slid a hand under his shirt. His chest was smooth and warm, and the triangle of soft, dark gold hair between his pecs was soft against her fingertips. She scratched her nails gently across his warm flesh as he undid her blouse and pulled it back, exposing the sexy silk and lace demi-bra she wore.

His tongue slid across the tops of both breasts, dipping beneath the lacy edge of her bra to tantalize her already rigid nipples. One hand slid down her hip and found the hem of her skirt.

It didn't take him long to locate the matching panties.

* * * *

Bris slid his warm fingers over her clit, caressing it through the damp silk of her panties. She sighed and went limp, giving herself over to the pleasure he was creating.

Sam Cheever

He nudged her knees apart and settled between them, kneeling on the floor in front of the couch.

Her skin was pale, flawless and so exquisitely soft. The muscles in her thighs flexed as he slid the silk of her panties aside to glide a finger into her warmth. She gasped with pleasure, her mouth coming open and her tongue sweeping across her lips as if she were hungry.

Bris was hungry too. He reached for the sides of the flimsy panties and pulled them over her thighs and calves, kissing a trail down to her soft, white feet as he went. The panties came off and Bris lifted a foot to his mouth.

* * * *

Felicia's eyes popped open as she felt the warm wetness of his mouth enveloping her big toe. She giggled self-consciously.

He grinned. "Tickle?"

She watched as his tongue made a sensuous trail across her instep, causing her to shiver in unrestrained lust. Then he nibbled her arch and she came up off the couch, arching her back with pleasure.

Bris settled her foot into his groin and pulled off his shirt.

Felicia pressed the hard ridge of flesh beneath the zipper of his jeans. He stood up and pulled her off the couch. "Let's get more comfortable."

She allowed herself to be led into his bedroom, which, like the rest of his home, was decorated in a stark, masculine style that was understated and classy.

The king-sized bed was covered in a black and tan comforter with oversized pillows. He pulled the comforter back and turned to her, peeling off her blouse and bra.

Felicia reached for the zipper of his jeans and slid it carefully down. She giggled as the Road Runner peeked out at her.

Bris laughed. "I knew how much you liked him."

"I'll never look at Saturday morning cartoons the same way again."

Bris slid the short zipper of her skirt down and let it fall to the floor, leaving her

naked before him. Felicia fought the urge to cover herself as his heated gaze moved over her.

He examined her with an intensity that made her palms sweat, his bright blue gaze sliding hungrily over her. Felicia had a sudden urge to dive under the covers.

Just when she thought she couldn't take it anymore, he lifted a hand and reached toward her. His touch was feather light, only the barest tip of one finger. He touched her lips—oh so softly—and then moved downward, feathering a skin tingling trail over her chin, down her throat and into the valley between her breasts.

There, he laid his palm over her heart and slid it, fingers loose and gently cupped, over each breast in turn, before moving down her belly toward the vee of her thighs.

Felicia stopped breathing. She closed her eyes and prayed that he wouldn't notice the telltale stretch marks or be repulsed by the soft roundness of her belly.

But when his gentle touch found the soft curls at the vee of her legs, all thinking stopped.

The finger slid inside and Felicia gasped.

* * * *

Bris had never seen such a beautiful sight as the woman standing vulnerable and trembling before him. He didn't see the flaws he knew were probably there. He only saw the beauty he knew she didn't appreciate.

The soft, flawless skin, the gentle rounding at breasts, hips, and belly that differentiated the female form from the male form. The rounded edges versus the hard angles made him hard and eager to bury himself inside her.

He'd dated prodigiously since turning old enough to date. He was twenty-seven years old and he thought he understood woman pretty well. He knew that women tended to obsess about their perceived faults and completely miss the things that made them beautiful.

Young women starved themselves to get rid of the things that made them look like women. Much to their chagrin, older women were unable to rid themselves of the soft curves nature wanted them to have.

Bris agreed with nature. Women should be soft and curvy.

"You're so beautiful," he told the woman standing before him.

She closed her eyes, sighing as he touched her.

* * * *

His voice was filled with reverence. It was soft and husky with need.

Felicia took a breath for the first time in what felt like hours. She shook her head and opened her mouth, feeling the irrational need to point out her flaws. She didn't want him acting under some misconception of her. That would be too hard to live up to.

He stopped her with a finger on her lips. "Yes. You are beautiful. Every last inch of you." He replaced the finger with his lips.

Felicia started to believe.

She started to believe that what they were trying to do was possible.

She started to believe she had something to offer the young, gorgeous man who was wrapped around her at that moment.

She started to believe that she maybe she *was* beautiful.

* * * *

Bris lowered her to the bed and covered her body with his own. His kisses were intense, filled with need. Felicia was drawn into his intensity as lust stabbed through her, turning her stomach to jelly and making her thighs quiver with need.

Bris' tongue tangled with hers, swept hungrily across her lips, and then slid down to lap gently at her throat. Felicia moaned and reached for his jeans, trying to tug them off. He chuckled, pulling back. "Not just yet, Lissy...I promised you chocolate."

Felicia sat up, leaning on her elbows. She gave him a questioning look. "What are you up to?"

Bris just laughed and left the room.

Felicia heard the microwave door slam and a series of beeps. He padded into the room a few moments later, holding a brown plastic bottle in a towel. He set it down on the bedside table and stripped out of his jeans. Then he stripped off the road runner and he was standing before her wearing only a wide grin.

He was perfect. Wide shoulders tapered to a narrow waist and met narrow hips which flowed into long, muscular legs. The dark gold hair on his chest matched the triangle of golden curls around his cock.

His beautiful long, hard cock. Felicia licked her lips.

* * * *

"Lie back while I serve dessert."

Bris shook the bottle and opened the nozzle, squirting a bit onto one finger to test the temperature. Felicia watched as he climbed onto the bed and knelt over her. He leaned down and captured her lips in a tender, emotionally-charged kiss before sitting back on his heels again.

Felicia tried not to stare at the heavy package bouncing around in front of her, but it was too big a temptation. She was distracted when something thick and warm was drizzled over first one nipple and then the other.

Bris leaned over her and swiped some of the chocolate off of the first nipple, then pulled it between his lips and sucked it gently. "Mmmm. Just like an ice cream sundae."

Felicia whimpered.

The warm chocolate sauce was drizzling down her stomach now. She lost her mind when his tongue followed the chocolate trail down, stopping just above the patch of soft, brown curls between her legs.

The chocolate found her thighs and she gasped. Bris squeezed a large dollop on her knee and sucked there for a long moment.

Felicia had never had her knee sucked. Her giggles quickly turned to gasps of delight as the chocolate found her moist entrance.

Bris removed it with several strong laps of his talented tongue and then pulled her

pulsing clit into his mouth. He gave it several hard sucks that sent her roaring over that delicious edge into full-blown orgasm.

She bucked against his mouth, moaning loudly, with her toes curled up tight. Her fingers were tangled in his hair and, as her climax softened into gentle waves of pleasure, she gave him a tug to urge him upward.

Bris happily complied, settling between her thighs and claiming her lips in a less than gentle kiss. Felicia could taste her own juices on his lips, along with the sweet dark taste of chocolate and his natural masculine scent.

Bris drove into her, causing her to gasp in delight. He nibbled on her throat as she arched to send him more deeply into her body. He reached under her buttocks and held her as he thrust hard and deep into her welcoming core.

Felicia wrapped her legs around his waist and held on, feeling every touch and every stroke as if for the first time.

It was like her body hadn't recognized a lover until it found Bris.

He drove them harder and faster until there was only one place to go for either of them. They crested that peak together, reveling in the sensual wave that swept them over the edge.

Felicia screamed as she climaxed, stiffening against his thrusting body. Her body throbbed around his driving flesh, demanding that he follow her over. He finally gave in with a groan, plunging even more deeply into her body as his head rolled back on a groan of exquisite pleasure.

Bris dropped onto his elbows and nuzzled the tender spot where her throat met her shoulder, licking the throbbing pulse there in lazy, satisfied swirls.

Felicia made circles on his back with her fingernails, causing him to shiver. "That was amazing."

Bris lifted his head and kissed her, gently, possessively. "It was more than amazing. It was...fattening."

Felicia laughed. "Which reminds me. You got all the chocolate."

"I figured you might prefer yours in a bowl with ice cream."

"I would. Later. But for now..." She dug in her heels and lifted her butt, dumping

him off onto the bed beside her."

"Hey!"

Grabbing the brown bottle, Felicia gave him an evil grin. "There's at least one other place this chocolate needs to go."

Bris flopped back onto the bed. His toes curled just thinking about what she was going to do with that chocolate. "Who am I to deny a beautiful woman her chocolate fix?"

"Exactly what I was thinking." Felicia tipped the bottle and squeezed, licking her lips in anticipation.

Chapter Five

Felicia walked into the Children's Hospital through the emergency room doors as she always did. She smiled at an EMT on his way out and waved to an admin she knew behind the reception desk.

She headed toward the cafeteria, as was her practice before starting her shift, to get a cup of coffee. She was standing in line to pay when she spotted someone who looked a lot like Dave Foust walking down the corridor toward the exit doors. She briefly considered following the man to make sure it wasn't Dave.

What would Dave Foust be doing in the emergency room of the Children's Hospital?

"You gonna pay for that or become one with it?"

Felicia jumped and turned to the woman sitting at the checkout queue. She smiled and handed the woman two one dollar bills. "Sorry. I thought I saw someone I knew."

The woman had already dismissed her and was glaring at the man behind her in line.

Alrighty then.

Felicia headed toward the gift shop to pick up the morning's allotment of goodies for the kids in Intensive Care. She didn't make it that far.

Ben Miller, the hospital administrator, met her outside the gift shop.

He wasn't smiling.

"Good morning, Ben."

He inclined his head by way of a greeting. "Felicia. Can you come to my office with me please?"

Her smile died on her lips. She'd known Ben Miller for twenty years. He'd never failed to greet her warmly when they passed. Whatever he wanted to talk to her about,

Felicia knew in her gut it wasn't good. "Sure."

When they were seated in Ben's large cluttered office he looked at her sadly. "I'm sorry to say, Felicia, that I need to let you go."

"What are you talking about, Ben? I'm a volunteer. You're firing a volunteer? Why?"

His expressive, brown eyes darted around the room, refusing to look her in the face. The hands he'd placed on his desk in front of him twitched and fluttered, showing his discomfort. "I'm under pressure from one of the board members to get rid of you. He says you're indulging in decadent behavior that, if discovered, will reflect badly on the hospital."

She flew to her feet, nearly toppling the chair over. "What! Are you crazy? What decadent behavior?"

He shook his head, finally meeting her eyes. "I've known you for years, Felicia. I would no more believe that you were involved in anything seedy than I would of myself."

The starch went out of her knees and she dropped back into her chair. "Then why are you firing me, Ben? I love working with the kids. I've been doing it for ten years. I don't want to leave."

His face turned red. He walked over to the room's only window, his back to her. "I have to do what I'm told, Felicia. Surely you understand that. Competition for patients is stiff and protecting the hospital's reputation is very important. The pressure to fire you has been...intense."

She stood up again, really angry now. "It was Dave Foust, wasn't it?"

Ben didn't turn but his shoulders jerked in surprise.

"I saw him leaving a few minutes ago. I should have known..." Her voice trailed off.

Ben turned. "Dave's a powerful and respected member of the board, Felicia. If I went against him..." He walked back to his desk but didn't sit down. He leaned on his desk, fixing his sad eyes on her again. "Why would Dave say such a thing about you, Felicia?"

She sighed. "I think he was in love with me."

"Was?"

"I can't return his feelings. And a couple of days ago..." She glanced up, feeling guilt coloring her face as the words choked in her throat. Then she realized she was doing it again...worrying about breaking a double standard, an unfair prejudice, and she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "I recently started seeing a young man..."

Ben's eyebrows lifted before she could finish the sentence.

"He's twenty-seven, Ben!"

Unfortunately Ben didn't look any less shocked. She might as well have told him Bris was ten years old. "Oh Felicia." He shook his head and dropped into his chair, looking for all the world like someone had punched him in the gut. "No wonder."

She placed both hands flat on Ben's desk and leaned over it with fire in her eye. "Now you listen to me, Ben Miller. Men have been dating younger women since the dawn of time. Sometimes much younger women. Nobody seems to have a problem with that."

"That's different."

"Oh it is? Why is that, Ben? Because men make the rules and men enjoy that particular rule? That's a horrible double standard and you know it."

"I don't make the rules, Felicia."

"Yes you do, Ben. Don't you see? Every time you frown upon a healthy, vibrant woman dating someone who happens to be younger than she is and finds her attractive, you're bolstering that stupid rule. And by supporting it you're helping it live. You don't have the right to judge me, Ben. For God's sake, how old is Katie?"

His entire body stiffened in shock and anger. He stood up. "My private life is none of your business!"

She straightened too so she could reach across the desk and poke him on the chest. "But mine is up for judgment by you and any other hypocrite who cares to judge it?" She headed toward the door to his office. I don't think so, Ben!" She turned at the door. "Why don't you ask your ex-wife how she feels about that double standard. I'm sure

Namaste My Love

she's just thrilled with it. After all, it allowed you to drop her when she got a few years on her so you could take up with someone who's barely older than your daughter." Felicia stepped into the busy hallway. "You make me sick!"

She slammed the door on his shocked face and headed out of the hospital. Adrenaline carried her home and anger got her into the house. But then shock and sadness overwhelmed her and she climbed into bed, suddenly so depressed that all she wanted to do was sleep.

* * * *

Bruno met him at the door when he entered the club. They clasped hands and slapped shoulders like they always did. Bris had known Bruno since college. They'd terrorized bars and wooed women together.

"You've made a powerful enemy, man."

"Let me guess, you got a call from a lawyer demanding that you fire me?"

Bruno jerked his head toward the bar. "Join me?"

Bris nodded.

Bruno went behind the bar and poured them each a shot of bourbon. They clinked glasses and downed it.

Bris shuddered as the fiery liquid slid down his throat and exploded in his chest. "I'm getting a strong sense of déjà vu." He muttered. Then he looked at his friend, prepared for the worst. "So," he narrowed his eyes at Bruno. "Am I fired?"

Bruno laughed. "Not a chance. My business would never recover if I let you go. But I don't think this guy's gonna go away. I got a surprise visit from the health inspector this morning. He's determined to ruin you." Bruno poured them each another shot. "You must have really stomped on this guy's dick."

"I'd have to find it first."

Bruno's laugh was hearty and infectious. Bris laughed with him, swallowed his drink, and then leaned over the bar. "He's in love with my girl."

"Ahhh." Bruno's face filled with understanding. Despite his strong features and

heavy brow, he was an intuitive and intelligent man, who ran the finest woman's club in the country. "The pretty little Cougar whose friends dragged her in here on her birthday?"

Bris frowned. "Don't call her that."

"It's not a derogative term unless you mean it that way, man." Bruno's wide face split in a grin. "And I surely don't."

Bris couldn't help chuckling.

"She's a woman who knows what she wants and she takes it. Society and its outdated mores be damned. I respect that in a woman."

Bris laughed outright. "Outdated mores? What are you some kind of flippin' psychiatrist?"

"I'm just sayin'."

Bris slid off the stool and headed for his dressing room. "I'll catch ya later, man."

"If she has a friend I'd definitely be interested!" Bruno called after him.

Bris lifted a hand in response and kept walking.

"I'd especially like to get to know the spicy kitty with the afro," he murmured. Then he went back to preparing for the evening.

* * * *

The phone rang again and Felicia pulled the covers over her head. She didn't feel like talking to anybody at the moment, particularly Bris. Despite her bravado in Ben's office, Felicia was far from confident she was doing the right thing. It was hard to buck the system. And Felicia had never been known for a willingness to do it.

Maybe Dave and Ben were right.

Maybe she *was* a pervert.

But a little voice screamed at her from inside her head. Then Ben was a pervert for dating Katie. And, for that matter, Dave was a pervert for wanting to date her.

She sighed. Life was so confusing.

The phone rang again and Felicia jumped as someone pounded on the door. Hard.

Namaste My Love

"I know you're in there Felicia! Open this damn door before I create a disturbance and unnerve every last one of your neighbors.

Felicia jumped out of bed and hurried to the door, unlocking the chain and the deadbolt and pulling it open quickly. Sis was standing there with her cell phone at her ear. She slapped it closed as Felicia opened the door.

Felicia grabbed Sis' hand and pulled her into the house. "Are you crazy? You're creating a scene!"

Sis grinned, totally unrepentant. "I knew you were in here pouting. I'm not going to let you get away with that."

Felicia put her hands on her hips. "Oh yeah? How are you gonna stop me?"

Sis held a bag out in front of her. Inside was a large, rectangular box.

"What's that?"

"Take it. I got them for you."

Felicia took the bag from her friend and looked at the box inside. Her eyes widened and she gasped. "Jimmy Choos?"

"Jimmy Choos fuck me shoes."

Felicia giggled, pulling the box out of the bag and yanking the lid off. "Oh my god, Sis! They're outrageous!"

Sis nodded. "Yes they are and they're too good to waste. Get yourself prettied up and let's go to the club. I know a certain gorgeous stripper who's probably dying to see you."

Felicia's face fell. She put the shoes back into the box. "I can't."

Sis grabbed her hand to stop her. "You didn't just say those words. I didn't even hear you say you couldn't."

"I think you did."

Sis gave Felicia the eye. Sis had grown up in New Orleans and she insisted she had a voodoo priestess in the family tree. Whether there was magic in Sis' family or not, she certainly had the evil eye down pat. "I'm not going to take no for an answer. If you don't go with me I'll get my Auntie Mina to hex you."

"I just can't, Sis."

Sis cocked a hip and crossed her arms over her abundant chest. "Why can't you, sugar? If you can give me a good reason why you can't I'll walk out this door and never bother you again." She grinned. "Until tomorrow."

Felicia went to the couch and sat down, pulling the sexy black shoes out of the box and slipping them on. They felt like heaven on her feet. "How do they look?"

Sis sat down next to her. "Like they belong in a club, where they can entice a sexy man to ravage you."

Felicia leaned over and kissed her friend on the cheek. "Thank you for the thought Sis but I..."

"Don't...say it again. Tell me why you can't and I'll leave."

Felicia's mouth opened and words tumbled through her brain, but none of them seemed important enough to voice. Why *should* she stop seeing Bris?

They liked spending time together. She didn't give a rat's patootie what men like Dave and Ben thought of her. She grinned as she realized that was true. And her family? Well, her daughters were grown up and had their own lives.

She turned to Sis and grinned. "You're right. There's absolutely no reason why I can't go to the club with you tonight." She stood up. "I'm in. Just give me a half hour to get beautiful."

Sis nodded, watching her friend disappear into the bedroom. She murmured, "It's about time you started thinking about yourself, sugar." Then she wandered into the kitchen in search of alcohol and munchies.

* * * *

Bris was just finishing up his "I love America" set when he saw the two women walk into the room. He actually had to reach down and pull a well-padded brunette off his leg before he could head toward the bar and greet Felicia. "Sorry darlin', this cowboy's got a wild Mustang to tame."

The woman whimpered as if he'd physically harmed her and sat back in her seat, pouting like an adolescent. He tipped his white cowboy hat toward her and turned

away, giving her a parting jerk of his butt to make her feel better.

Women all along the stage squealed with delight.

* * * *

Felicia turned toward the stage when the women started screaming. She spotted Bris ambling toward her wearing only cowboy boots, a flag colored thong and a white cowboy hat. He had a gun belt around his waist with one pistol in it.

He jumped down off the stage and swaggered toward them, tipping his hat. "Ma'am. You look like you might need to ride a cowboy."

"Save a horse?" Felicia offered.

Bris tipped his hat to her. "Exactly what I was thinking."

Sis ordered them two glasses of white zinfandel and leaned on the bar next to Felicia. "I love cowboys. You look downright edible."

Bris fondled the gun, which Felicia hoped was just a toy, and frowned at Sis. "Ma'am, I expect you to misbehave while you're in these here parts."

Sis leered. "If you let me get into them thar parts I'd be happy to misbehave."

Bris threw back his head and laughed and Sis joined him. She gave Felicia one of the glasses of wine the roughly handsome bartender handed her. Felicia fake laughed, feeling unaccountably jealous of Sis' playful flirting.

Bris pushed the hat back on his head and cocked his head at her, his clear blue gaze penetrating. Felicia panicked. She'd never met a more perceptive man.

It was unnerving, especially when you were trying to hide the fact that you were feeling jealous of him.

Fortunately for her, the bartender pulled his attention away from her.

"Bris, buddy. Are you gonna introduce us?"

Bris slapped the man on the back. "Bruno Hench, my name is Bris Holcomb. Nice to meetcha."

The women giggled and Bruno shook his head. "Very funny man."

Bris turned to the women. "This very ugly dude is Bruno. My oldest friend and a

true reprobate. I'd advise against letting him corner you near the ladies room."

"Or the men's room." Bruno added.

Sis' brown eyes sparkled with amused interest. "Oooh, I just love bad boys. Don't I Felicia?"

"Yes she really does. The badder the better."

Bruno leaned over the bar until his face was very close to Sis'. His smile was equal parts playful and predatory. His teeth were large and white.

The better to eat you with, my dear.

He reached across the bar and captured one of her hands, pulling it to his lips. "Why don't you come to my dressing room with me and help me change out of this outfit? I might need some help."

Felicia fixed him with an assessing look. "Yeah, I can see that. The thong looks especially complex."

"You have no idea. I have a mail order engineering degree and I still can't get the thing off without help."

Felicia licked her lips, feeling decadent and happy about it. "Well, I've never been one to refuse help to those in need."

"Oh, I need." He told her as he gave her hand a tug and pulled her across the bar. "I need lots of help from you, beautiful lady."

She shivered with sensual delight and her knees suddenly felt like butter. It was all she could do to put one Jimmy Choo in front of the other and follow him to the back of the bar.

Chapter Six

Bris pulled her through the door to his dressing room, a ten by ten cubicle with no ceiling, and spun her into his arms as he slammed the flimsy door behind him. His lips covered hers hungrily.

Felicia's pulse shot into the danger zone as she melted against him. His sensual aura enveloped her, pulling her into its addictive core and cocooning them in a world where no one else existed.

On some level she was aware of sounds nearby—doors slamming and the sound of hangers being strung on metal bars—but her body was on fire and it was all she could do to retain an ounce of sensibility.

Bris reached down to the hem of her little black dress and slid it upward, running his warm palms along her thighs as he lifted it to her waist.

Felicia pulled her lips from his and glanced down. "No roadrunner today?"

"Cowboys don't wear cartoon characters on their crotches."

She lowered her head and nuzzled his neck. It was warm and slightly bristly from the shadow of his beard and smelled like man. Inhaling deeply, she swept her tongue from the base of his throat, over his Adams apple and up to his chin.

Bris groaned and captured her lips again.

Felicia slid her hands over his exposed buttocks, enjoying the warm, smoothness of his skin. She hooked her fingers in the top of the thong and peeled it down, stepping back so she could watch him spring free.

Licking her lips, she dropped to her knees and pressed her face against the hard length of him.

"You're killin' me, darlin'."

Felicia smiled at the cowboy twang. She decided to play along, adopting her own

drawl. "You ain't seen nothin' yet, cowboy." She parted her lips and slid them over the thick head of his penis, drawing him into the heated cave of her mouth.

Bris' head dropped back on a moan, his hands fisting in her hair. Felicia moaned too, thoroughly immersed in the explosive heat of the moment and enjoying the sweet, salty taste of his skin in her mouth.

Bris pulled her to her feet. "I can't take any more of that, Lissy."

He grabbed her under the buttocks and lifted her off her feet, sliding her down over his hard, throbbing flesh.

Felicia gasped and wrapped her arms around his neck. She laid her head on his shoulder and lost herself in the incredible sensation of his flesh scraping wonderfully over the sensitized skin of her female core and the feel of his hard body against hers.

Her release built steadily and quickly. Pleasure swept over her in waves. Beneath her arms his shoulders were rigid as he lifted and then lowered her hips, plundering her body with deep, toe curling thrusts. Her body tightened and throbbed as she approached that elusive peak. She savored the mind-numbing rhythm, her breath exploding from her chest in frantic bursts, until finally, she threw back her head and cried out, shuddering into release with his name on her lips.

Bris buried himself deeply within her and stiffened in his own violent release. As his orgasm shuddered into gentle waves of residual pleasure, he found her lips again in a still hungry kiss. When he pulled his lips from hers a moment later, he lowered his head to rest his forehead against hers. His hot breath bathed her with its sweet musk.

"Darlin' that was incredible. I haven't had a ride like that since I broke that wild filly with the silver tail and the bad attitude at the ranch last year."

Felicia, still breathing hard, smacked him on the arm. "Put me down, you ass. I'll give you wild filly."

Bris allowed her to slide to the ground but kept his arms around her waist. "Promise?"

Felicia giggled like a school girl and bit her lip with embarrassment. "You're a very naughty boy, Bris Holcomb."

"Ooh sugar, I like the sound of that. You gonna spank me?"

"I just might. You never know."

A fist hit the door hard and they both jumped. "Five minutes, Romeo."

Felicia felt color swamping her face as she realized the whole damn place had probably heard them making love. Bris kissed the tip of her nose. "Don't worry about it, darlin'. They won't tease you. It's me they're after." He waggled his eyebrows and turned away. "Stay with me while I get dressed, then I'll walk you back out front before I start my set."

* * * *

Felicia sat back in the corner at a table by herself to watch Bris' show. Sis was seated at the bar, flirting outrageously with Bris' young friend, Bruno.

Bris had replaced the cowboy outfit with a Roman soldier getup. He wore a short, pleated leather skirt, leather sandals with straps criss-crossing up his legs, and not much else. He brandished a plastic sword in various suggestive ways that made her giggle.

She observed the women, mostly drunk, screaming and throwing themselves at him with decidedly mixed emotions. She was pleased that other women found him irresistible and proud that he seemed to have chosen her above all of them. On the other hand, she wasn't confident enough in their relationship to sit there smugly without suffering some pangs of worry and fear.

It definitely helped that he occasionally looked her way and smiled.

"Are you saving that seat for me?"

Felicia glanced up at the young man bending over her. He was dressed conservatively, in a black turtleneck and nicely pleated grey slacks. He wore his dark brown hair very short and he was attractive. Very attractive.

But the smile he offered her didn't quite reach his dark green eyes.

"Sorry. I'm waiting for a friend."

Unbelievably, he pulled out the chair next to her and sat down. "I could be that friend."

"No. I mean a particular friend."

"Turns out I'm very particular."

She glanced toward the stage but Bris was busy trying to extract the leather tie of one sandal from between the teeth of a tall, attractive and very determined redhead.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

She kept her gaze fixed on the stage, hoping the guy would get the hint and go away.

No such luck. He leaned close and grabbed her hand off the table. "How about you and I go someplace quiet and talk?"

Felicia jerked her head around, her mouth falling open in shock. "I don't even know you. I told you I'm waiting for my boyfriend to join me."

The man lifted one eyebrow and smiled again. Felicia shivered slightly from that smile. It was predatory and didn't quite reach his eyes. "No. You said a friend. A friend could be anyone." He turned toward the bar. "Like that beautiful black woman for example."

Felicia gasped and stood up, reaching for her purse.

The man rose too and grabbed her arm. "Now, if you'll just come with me quietly I promise I won't hurt you. I just want to have some fun. I've been told you like to have fun. You do like to have fun don't you, Felicia?"

She tried to jerk her hand away from his but he wasn't letting go. "Stop it! What the hell's wrong with you! I'm not going anywhere with you."

"I think you are." Unbelievably the man pulled his fist back like he was going to punch her.

He never got the chance.

Bris finally managed to extricate himself from Polly, the aggressive and horny legal secretary who was a regular visitor to the club, and looked toward Felicia's table. At first he didn't see her. She'd left her seat.

His first thought was that she'd gone to the ladies room. But movement in the shadowed corner made him squint in that direction and he saw something that made

his blood boil. A man was trying to pull Felicia toward the door.

She was struggling to get her arm free and looked terrified.

Bris lost awareness of everything else in the place as he leapt off the stage and stormed toward them. He heard Bruno call his name but ignored him, his full attention focused on the tussle still going on in the shadowed corner.

Suddenly the man cocked his arm as if he would hit Felicia. Bris lost any semblance of control he might have had left and launched himself at the creep.

* * * *

The first thing Felicia was aware of was a growling sound. The next thing she felt was a painful tug on her arm as something large slammed into her attacker, sending him flying into the wall.

Bris grabbed the guy by the front of his shirt with one hand and punched him in the face with the other. She could tell he wanted to keep punching but he restrained himself.

Bruno arrived with Sis closely in his wake and wedged himself between Bris and the dazed-looking jerk who'd accosted her.

"Okay, Bris ole' buddy. That's enough."

"He attacked Felicia."

Bruno nodded. "I got that, man. I don't blame you for hitting him. But that's where it stops. This scum isn't worth jail time, man."

Two of the club's dancers grabbed the guy under the arms and "escorted" him from the club. An arm encircled Felicia's shoulders and she looked over at Sis. Her friend gave her an understanding smile. "Hey, honey. You okay?"

"Yes." Felicia cast a worried glance toward Bris.

Bruno had apparently been successful calming him down. His shoulders looked more relaxed and he no longer clenched his large hands in fists.

Two times he'd saved her from a questionable situation.

Two times he'd been her knight in shining armor.

Sam Cheever

She felt her pulse pick up. She was thinking like a romantic teen. The last thing she wanted to do was romanticize her relationship with Bris.

He turned around and the pain in his eyes almost undid her. She watched him walk toward her with a sense of relief and something else that she didn't want to examine too closely. He wrapped her in a hug that stole her breath and held on tightly. "You all right, Lissy?"

"I am now. Thanks for saving me...again."

She felt his warm breath against her cheek. "S'okay." He didn't say anything else, but his arms tightened around her even more.

* * * *

Sis, Felicia and Bris sat at the bar and watched Bruno close it down for the night. The place had long since cleared out and the doors were locked. They'd been enjoying a companionable chat while waiting for Bruno to finish up so they could go out for an early breakfast before going home.

Except for a couple of short trips to the men's room, Bris hadn't left Felicia's sight since she'd been accosted. That had been just fine with her. The event had unnerved her.

"Are you sure you've never seen the guy before?" It wasn't the first time Bris had asked Felicia that question. In fact it might have been the tenth. She forced herself not to sigh, knowing he was just trying to help.

"Never."

"He was probably just some jerk looking for a good time." Bruno contributed.

"No. He knew my name and he knew Sis was my friend."

Bris reached out and rubbed Felicia's arm"I don't like this at all."

"Somebody must have sent him."

All eyes swung to Sis, who was checking her lipstick in a small mirror.

Bruno asked, "Why do you say that?"

She shrugged. "Felicia doesn't know the guy, but he seems to know us. Which

means somebody filled him in on us."

Felicia felt the blood drain from her face. "Dave."

Bris swore quietly. "Had to be."

Bruno came out from behind the bar and placed a hand possessively on Sis' back. "We need to do something about that guy, Bris."

They slid off the stools and started toward the door. Bris' back and shoulders were stiff with tension. "Don't worry, man. I fully intend to do something about that asshole."

Alarm bloomed in Felicia's chest. She grabbed Bris' hand. "I don't want you to put yourself in any danger, Bris. Obviously there are some mental issues there."

He opened the door and guided her out with a hand on her back. "Don't worry, Lissy. I've got this under control."

Felicia doubted that any of them had control over the current situation. Maybe it would just be better if she and Bris didn't see each other anymore. Being together was getting so complicated.

The thought made her stomach clench.

"Where do you guys want to go for breakfast?" Bruno stood with his arm thrown over Sis' shoulders, looking very comfortable and happy to be there.

Sis looked pretty happy to have him there too.

Felicia leaned into Bris. "You guys decide, you know this area better than we do."

They discussed their options for a few minutes and then picked a place.

Bris walked Felicia to her car before heading to his. Sis and Bruno were riding together in his car.

When they reached Felicia's car Bris leaned down and gave her a soft kiss on the lips. His gaze on hers was searching, as if he'd heard the doubts in her mind. "We'll work this out, Felicia. I don't want you to worry about it."

She knew it wouldn't be that easy, but felt reluctant to get into it at that moment. "I know. I'll try not to worry."

He stared at her for a heartbeat longer, then stepped away from her so she could open the car door and climb inside. He grabbed the handle of her door and was ready

Sam Cheever

to close it when he heard a shout from the other side of the parking lot.

It was Bruno, calling out to him.

Bris jogged toward the sound of his friend's voice. Felicia followed. When he reached them Bruno was bending over something on the ground. Bruno's car was a few yards away with the door open, the interior light painting whatever was on the ground in a soft light.

Bruno stood up and Bris could finally see the silent, bloodied form on the ground at his feet. It was the man from the bar and somebody had beaten him badly.

Felicia gasped and threw a hand over her mouth. "Is he..." she swallowed hard.

"He's still alive. But he's a mess."

Sirens split the silence of the night, getting louder as they approached. Bris looked at Bruno. "Did you call the cops...or an ambulance?"

Bruno's dark gaze locked on his friend, filled with meaning. "I think we might want to get hold of a lawyer, my friend."

Bris swore softly.

Chapter Seven

The police car tore into the parking lot and screeched to a stop beside them. Both doors flew open and the two uniforms inside slid out, crouching behind the doors with their guns trained on the four friends. "Hands up where we can see them!"

Bris moved in front of Felicia, protecting her with his body. "Take it easy, officers. We just walked out here and found this guy. You won't need those weapons."

The cop who'd spoken jerked the gun toward Bris. "You let me worry about when I need my weapon, sir. I need you to place your hands on your head and turn around." He glanced at Bruno. "You too, sir."

Bris did as he was asked, but he stayed between Felicia and the cops. Felicia lifted a hand toward him. Tears filled her eyes. "Oh, Bris..."

He gave her a smile. "It's okay, honey. It'll be fine. I have nothing to hide. We all know I didn't do this."

The cop jerked his arms around behind his back and reached into his pocket, pulling out his wallet. Bris noticed the other cop, a woman, had done the same to Bruno.

"I got him," the male cop with Bris' wallet said.

The female cop checked Bruno's wallet and then unlocked his cuffs, handing him back the wallet. "What's this shit?" Bruno asked.

The cop Mirandized Bris. "You're coming with us, sir." He turned to Bruno and the two women. "Don't leave town. Give these officers your addresses before you leave." Then he jerked Bris' arm and drew him toward the cop car.

While they'd been cuffing Bris, two more cop cars had squealed into the parking lot.

He heard Felicia screaming his name and tried to turn around, but the cop holding

his arms wouldn't let him turn. "Watch your head, sir." He was pushed down and into the cop car. And the door was slammed shut.

His arms hurt and he couldn't get comfortable sitting with them cuffed behind him. But nothing hurt as much as watching Felicia's face as they drove him out of that parking lot to take him to jail.

* * * *

Felicia grabbed Bruno's arm. "What just happened here, Bruno? Why were they looking for Bris?"

Bruno jerked his head at the cops. "We'll talk about this later. As soon as we can get out of here."

Sis wrapped her arms around Felicia's shoulders. "It'll be okay, honey. We know he didn't do anything. We told the cops that. They'll have to let him go."

Felicia's eyes filled with tears. She looked up into her friend's wide, brown eyes. "And if they don't?"

"Then we'll get my Uncle Guido involved." Bruno said with a grin.

Sis cocked her head at him. "Guido? Are you shitting me? You have an Uncle named Guido? How clichéd is that?"

"His real name's Gabriel, but he doesn't think it sounds intimidating enough."

Felicia's eyes widened. She remembered Dave introducing her and her exhusband, Philip, to a powerful lawyer once at a party. The man had had dark hair and flashing black eyes and he'd joked about being a member of the local mob. "Gabriel Vitale?"

"The Gabriel Vitale?" Sis asked.

"The one and only," Bruno answered with a sense of real pride. "Uncle Guido'll get Bris out of jail. Or da guy who done dis'll be swimmin' wid da fishes."

They all laughed at Bruno's bad mobster imitation, but Felicia said a silent prayer of thanks for Uncle Guido...mobster or no they might need his very talented services.

* * * *

Bris slouched in the chair across from Detective Hanks, a burly cop with curly brown hair that stood up tall at the top and was sliced off micro-short on the sides, giving him an elongated look from the chin to the top of his massive head. Bris decided he looked like a buffalo.

Hanks worked laboriously over his report, a well-chewed pencil clutched in his meaty fist. Bris looked around the room, seeing a mixture of uniform and street dressed cops, and a few civilian types who may or may not have been criminals.

"When was the last time you saw Mr. Rogers?"

"I was probably about five."

Hanks' buffalo face contorted in confusion over this. "Five?"

Bris leaned forward and, in his best Mr. Rogers voice said, "Can you say huge mistake? I knew you could."

This did nothing to clear things up for Detective Hanks, who made a dubious notation on his report and continued with his questions. "Why did you and the victim fight?"

"We didn't fight. We had a mostly verbal disagreement in the bar when he accosted one of my friends."

Hanks' eyes widened in delight. Here was something he could work with. "Mostly verbal?"

"I might have punched him once."

Hanks hunched over his report, the pitiful pencil clutched expectantly in his meaty fist, "Name?"

"Bris Holcomb."

Hanks blinked. He blinked again. Then he shook his massive head in disgust. He just couldn't believe how stupid Bris was. Bris coughed to hide a smile.

"Not your name, sir. The friend's name."

"That's not important."

Hanks' small, hazel eyes got a speculative glint. Even Neanderthals occasionally

catch a coherent thought. "Why are you protecting this friend?"

Bris leaned forward. "Because she's my friend."

Hanks blinked again and his pencil drooped.

Bris sat back in his chair. "I'd like to go now."

Hanks shook his head. "I'm not done with you."

Bris sighed. He'd been afraid of that. Felicia's lawyer friend would have made sure they held him as long as possible. To send him a message if nothing else. They had no evidence so they couldn't arrest him. But they could make him suffer for twelve hours or so. "I'd like to make a phone call."

"That won't be necessary."

Bris and Hanks both looked up at the man who'd just arrived. Only one of them smiled.

Bris stood up and extended his hand. "Guido. Nice to see ya, man."

Gabriel Vitale was tall and slim, with an abundance of slick black hair that was combed back from his face, and a crooked nose that fit his Guido persona perfectly. His handsome face was unlined; the only sign of his fifty-some years was a touch of grey at his temples. His eyes were so dark they looked black and he used them like a weapon.

Guido was well-known for his ability to weaken a witness' bladder on the stand just by fixing an intense, cold gaze on him. He was even better known for his ability to make witnesses cry under questioning.

Vitale shook Bris' hand. "I'm sorry to see you again under these circumstances, son. But I'm happy to help in any way I can."

Bris inclined his head. "I'd appreciate that, sir."

Guido slapped Bris on the shoulder and turned to Hanks. "I'd like to see the evidence against my client, officer."

Hanks' mouth dropped open and his eyes went blank. "Um. I can't do that, Mr. Vitale."

Guido Vitale went completely, perfectly still. His cold gaze fixed on Hanks for a full minute before he spoke again. Then he smiled, and it was even worse than his eyes.

Bris was pretty sure he heard Detective Hanks whimper.

Namaste My Love

"I'll be taking my client home now, Detective Hanks."

Hanks' massive head dipped in what could have been acquiescence. Bris wasn't sure Hanks even knew he'd nodded.

Guido didn't wait for him to figure it out. He touched Bris on the shoulder. "You ready, son?"

"I believe I am."

* * * *

Felicia ran to Bris and he wrapped his arms around her. She had been so scared that he'd be thrown into jail for that poor man's beating.

Bruno shook his uncle's hand. "Thanks Unc. I owe ya one."

"You do, yes. I'll expect you to throw your golf game next Saturday to make me look good in front of your Aunt."

"That's an awfully steep price, sir."

"It is. But I'm a very well paid lawyer. I'd say you got a bargain."

Bris reached a hand toward Guido Vitale. "I'd have to agree with that assessment, sir. Thank you for coming in tonight. It means a lot to me."

Guido shook Bris' hand. "My pleasure, son. I hate to see people getting pushed around by arrogant assholes."

Bris lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "I guess you know Dave Foust?"

"Unfortunately." He slapped Bris on the back. "You young folks get out of here now."

Sis smiled at this and glanced at Felicia, who was fighting a grin herself.

Bruno placed a hand on Sis' back and turned to his uncle. "Aren't you coming?"

"No. I'm going to talk to a friend of mine. Chief Barris and I go way back. He's gonna get to the bottom of this charge for me and put it to rest."

* * * *

Sam Cheever

They left Guido to his machinations and headed toward their cars. "Breakfast?" Bruno asked hopefully.

Felicia grimaced. "I just want to go home. I'm exhausted."

Sis glanced at Bruno, grinning widely. "I need to get to bed too. Will you join me?" Felicia gasped at Sis' outrageousness. Bris chuckled appreciatively.

Bruno nearly swallowed his tongue. "I could probably slide you into my schedule, beautiful."

Sis gave Felicia a little finger wave. "Talk to you tomorrow, sweetie."

Bris' arm dropped around her shoulders. "Let's get out of here before they change their minds and come looking for me."

Felicia was so tired she thought she might drop on the spot. She'd been one giant emotion for the last few hours and it was starting to wear on her. "Maybe you should stay at my house tonight, just in case."

Bris felt a moment of panic at the thought of spending the night among the trappings of wealth. But he quickly shook it off and kissed the top of her head. "Good idea."

* * * *

When Felicia woke up the next morning Bris was sprawled all over the bed next to her. His thick, dark gold lashes formed a perfect arch on each cheek and his lips were slightly parted as he snored softly.

He was sound asleep and he looked adorable.

She fought an urge to run her hands down his smooth chest, toward the tell-tale tenting of the sheet. She supposed he needed his rest. She *had* kept him up much of the night. She climbed out of bed. He was probably drained after what he'd gone through the night before.

Dave Foust was getting seriously out of hand. She needed to do something to stop him. The question was—what could she do?

Sighing, she pulled on yoga pants and a tight, stretchy tee and headed to the

kitchen. She'd start her day the way she always did, with a glass of juice and a muscular power yoga workout. She figured that by the time she'd showered, Bris would be up and ready for breakfast...or something.

This happy thought carried her through the first twenty minutes of her hour-long workout. She was panting hard through her nose and had a nice sheen all over her body by the time the warm up was over and the workout began.

She was in a muscle straining down dog position, and so deep into the zone that she didn't even know he was there until she felt strong hands on her hips and something long and hard against her butt. "So this is how you stay in such great shape."

Felicia started to stand up but he stopped her with a hand at the small of her back. "No, stay there, I like this position." His hands skimmed the top of her loose fitting pants and slid them down her hips. "I like it a lot."

Her soft pants puddled around her ankles. Felicia felt the hard length of him against her exposed flesh. She groaned as he pulled her back to snuggle against his engorged cock.

"What's this position called?" His voice was raspy with lust. He positioned himself between her thighs, the hard tip of his manhood nudging gently into her.

She sucked in a breath. "Down dog."

"I can't back down right now honey, I'm in heat." He drove into her, hard and deep.

Felicia cried out with pleasure and deepened her dog to bring him further into her body.

The instructor on the DVD told her to keep breathing.

Felicia was panting.

He told her to deepen the position and hold.

Felicia did as she was instructed.

He didn't tell her to fall screaming into an orgasm. But she did that anyway.

Bris groaned as her body milked his cock. He slammed into her several more times and then threw back his head and stiffened as his muscles locked into orgasm.

Sam Cheever

Felicia felt every jerk of his hard flesh inside her body. She tightened around him, offering him an extra jolt of pleasure as he rode his orgasm to its culmination. She shivered under the aftershocks of her own orgasm and sighed as Bris leaned over her, his warm hands reaching around to cup her breasts as he placed butterfly kisses down her back and across the tops of her buttocks.

"I'll never be able to teach a yoga class again without getting a hard-on."

Felicia made an outraged sound and jerked her head around, lost her balance, and fell to the mat beneath him.

Chuckling, Bris dropped on top of her.

She slapped his shoulder. "You teach yoga? You cad! You know what down dog is!"

He nuzzled her sweaty neck. "I just wanted to hear you say it."

"Why?"

"So I could say, 'Not now, bitch.'" He lifted off her. "You know, like a female dog?"

She giggled. "But you didn't say it."

He stood up and pulled her to her feet. "I chickened out." Yanking her into his arms he placed a passionate kiss on her lips. "Namaste, Lissy."

"Namaste."

Now come on." He reached to turn the television off. "You don't need this hack to do yoga. I'll teach you all my best moves."

Felicia lifted an eyebrow at him. "That's what I'm afraid of. Will I even work up a sweat with your workout?"

He favored her with a slow, knee melting smile. "Oh yeah. I guarantee you'll be sweating...bitch."

Felicia's throaty laugh caused an immediate, strong reaction in Bris.

She lowered her gaze to the place where he'd reacted best.

"Mmm, my favorite position," She said. "Up dog."

Chapter Eight

Bris' cell rang as he was helping Felicia clean up the breakfast dishes. "Hello."

"Why'd ya do it, man?" Giorgio's voice was thick with hostility.

Bris frowned. "Do what?"

"Don't play stupid with me. I found your club ID card in the middle of the mess. How could you have done this to us? Penelope's been crying all morning. I've never seen her this upset."

Bris grabbed a towel and walked away from the sink. "Giorgio, buddy, I don't have a clue what you're talking about. I spent the night with a friend. I haven't been near the club since you let me go."

He felt Felicia's presence and turned. She was frowning a question at him. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head.

"You aren't lyin' to me, Bris?"

"I swear to God I'm not lying, buddy. Now tell me what happened."

Giorgio sighed audibly. "Somebody trashed the club last night. Your studio is nearly destroyed. They pulled all the mats into the center of it and set them on fire. The smoke in the place was toxic. One of the cleaning crew who came in this morning has been taken to the hospital." Giorgio's voice broke. "I don't know how we'll recover from this, man. There could be lawsuits..."

"I'll be right there." Bris hung up and gave Felicia a quick kiss on the lips. "I need to go."

"What's wrong, Bris? Who was that?"

"My old employer, at the fitness club. Giorgio gave me my start as an instructor. We go back a long way..." Bris let the words trail away, shaking his head. "Someone trashed the club last night. He thought it was me." He turned to her and there was such

pain in his eyes.

Felicia reached up and laid a hand on his cheek. "I want to go with you." "Let's go."

* * * *

From the outside the club looked much the same as it always had. Fire trucks still sat at the curb, lights flashing and hose coiled like rice noodles in a puddle riddled parking lot.

But as soon as Bris and Felicia entered the club they noticed the smell. It was the smell of burnt rubber.

"You can't be in here!" A firefighter hurried toward them, a mask over his face.

"The air is toxic in here, folks."

Bris held up a hand. "I'm looking for the owner and the manager."

The man jerked his head. "They're out back with the EMTs."

"Thanks, man."

Bris took Felicia's arm and pulled her gently back outside. They walked around the side of the building to the back lot, where the employees parked. It was the closest lot to the yoga studios.

The EMT van was just pulling out of the lot when they rounded the corner of the building. Giorgio and Penelope were standing alone, watching the van leave. Giorgio had his arm around Penelope's shoulders and was rubbing her arm briskly. They both turned as Felicia and Bris walked up.

Penelope looked angry. Giorgio looked like he wasn't sure how to greet them.

Bris walked over to Penelope and pulled her into a hug. She held herself stiffly at first, but then started crying and hugged him back. "Pene, you know I'd never do this."

She sobbed once and then pulled away to wipe her face with her sleeve. "I didn't want to believe it, Bris. But the graffiti..." She sniffed. "You're the only one we've fired in over a year..." She looked at the ground and rubbed her arms, obviously uncomfortable.

Namaste My Love

Bris glanced toward the building, "Graffiti? Where? In the studio?"

"Yes." Giorgio's hands were shaking. He shoved them into his pockets. Bris had never seen him so upset.

"What did it say?"

Penelope glanced at her manager. Giorgio looked at his shoes.

"Tell me, Giorgio."

"All fired up and no place to go."

Bris swore softly. "I promise you, Penelope. Whoever did this is not going to get away with it. I'll make sure of that."

Penelope was crying again.

Felicia made a small sound and Bris turned to look at her. She had tears in her eyes. "What's the matter, honey?"

"Why didn't you tell me Dave got you fired?"

Bris opened his mouth to respond but the words wouldn't come. He'd been afraid she'd run. And looking into her eyes at that moment, he was pretty sure he'd been right to be afraid.

Felicia turned away from him. Panic rose in her chest like bile. Things were way out of control. Dave Foust was ruining their lives.

Guilt swamped her.

"Felicia..." Bris wrapped his arms around her from behind.

She jerked away. "No! This is all my fault. All of it." She turned to Penelope and Giorgio. "I'm so sorry!" She walked briskly away, toward the front of the building.

Bris called after her. "It's not your fault, honey. It's that damn lawyer's fault!"

Bris started after her but Penelope grabbed his arm. "Let her go, Bris. She needs to come to grips with your relationship or it will never work."

He watched her go, his fists clenched against an enemy he couldn't fight. "She's blaming herself for what that monster's done. That's unacceptable!"

Giorgio stepped in front of him. "You think that lawyer guy is behind this?"

"I know he is."

"Then we need proof. So we can get the police involved."

"I'll get your proof." Bris stalked in the direction Felicia had gone, fully intending to pay Dave Foust a visit.

* * * *

Dave Foust finished the brief he'd been reviewing and slid it back into the client's folder. He swiped a hand over his face and stood, moving to a small bar that was built into the mahogany bookshelves which took up an entire wall of his office to pour himself a glass of brandy.

Pouring the expensive, amber liquid into a fine crystal snifter, he carried it to the window overlooking the city. Indianapolis was humming beyond the clean glass of the window, lights twinkling and sidewalks teeming with nighttime revelers.

He sighed. The world played while he worked.

It was time he moved beyond his lust for one woman and found someone more worthy of his well-regarded attention. Felicia was obviously a terribly confused and even perverted individual. She would be an embarrassment to him.

Appearances were everything to Dave Foust.

Appearances and power.

He heard a small sound and turned away from the window, the snifter lifted toward his mouth.

He didn't take that drink.

"Mr. Foust."

The young man stood in the shadows, his hands held down at his sides, fists clenched in anger.

Dave glanced toward his desk, where he kept a thirty-eight special for situations just such as this one. All he needed to do was get it into his hands and power would shift in an irreversible way.

Dave lowered the snifter and moved over to his desk to set it down. He slid behind the desk and sat down in his black leather chair. He never took his gaze from the man at his door. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Namaste My Love

The young man stepped out of the shadows and moved toward Dave's oversized mahogany desk. "I have a score to settle with you, old man."

Dave felt his mouth go dry. He yanked the drawer open and grabbed his gun. He didn't even have time to lift it toward the man standing over him. The heavy marble lamp from his desk descended on his head with a terrible crunching sound and he fell forward with a grunt, his head bouncing off the surface of his desk as he hit.

The lamp descended one more time just to make sure, and Dave was still and silent.

As his visitor slid back out of the office, Dave's hand slipped from his lap and the thirty eight tumbled uselessly toward the floor beneath his desk.

* * * *

Giorgio caught up with Bris at Foust's office building. His friend was leaving when he arrived. He jumped out of his illegally parked car and called out to Bris. "Hey man!"

Bris jerked and looked up. He seemed unsure what to make of Giorgio's presence. Finally he shoved his hands into his jeans' pockets and walked toward the car. "What the hell are you doing here, Giorgio?"

"I came lookin' for you, man. Penelope was worried you'd do something stupid and get yourself into trouble with the law again."

Bris leaned his forearms on the roof of his friend's jeep. His face held a sad smile. "Penelope's a good woman, buddy. You should hold onto her."

Giorgio narrowed his gaze at Bris. "I fully intend to, man. What's the deal? Did you speak with the lawyer?"

Bris shook his head. "I got as far as the lobby and realized I'd probably kill the guy if I saw him in my present state of mind. I'll come back later, when I've calmed down."

Giorgio nodded, looking relieved. "Buy you a drink?"

Bris shook his head. "I need to see Felicia."

"Do you need a ride?"

Bris slapped a hand on the roof of the jeep. "I'm good, man. I have my car. I'll see

Sam Cheever

ya tomorrow, okay? I'll meet you at the club and help you get cleanup started."

Giorgio nodded. "Thanks, Bris. Penelope will be really pleased by that offer. We're gonna do as much of the clean up and repair as we can ourselves...save some money."

Bris nodded. "See ya tomorrow, buddy."

Giorgio climbed into his car and drove off. Bris watched him go and then turned toward Dave Foust's building one last time before he left.

Chapter Nine

Felicia visited the Cougar Club site, looking for answers to all the doubts and questions spinning through her mind. She was comforted to learn that her doubts were normal. Most of the women online seemed to have encountered them at some point in the course of their new relationships.

None of them had experience with a psycho rejected lover who felt threatened by the woman's new relationship and was trying to ruin peoples' lives as a result.

After giving it some thought, Felicia typed a note to the group, asking if anyone had ever experienced violence as the result of their relationships. Maybe it was just something they didn't divulge unless asked directly. She chatted back and forth for a while with several of her new friends on the group but nobody had any specific experience with the type of thing she was dealing with because of Dave. Most of the women were very happy and living satisfied lives with their younger men.

One woman had dated a young man who had anger issues. But that wasn't necessarily an age thing.

After an hour of chatting, Felicia shut down her computer and turned off the desk lamp. She headed toward her bedroom, thinking that she'd need to confront Dave in the morning. It was one thing for him to go after her, but getting Bris fired was totally unacceptable. She'd threaten him if she needed to. She had dirt on him that he wouldn't want out.

Felicia had carried the secret around with her for years, never intending to use it. But maybe it was true...things did happen for a reason...and her overhearing Dave and her ex-husband talking about what he'd done had seemed just a tacky revelation at the time.

He'd taken money from a disreputable business man once. The money had been to

keep Dave from representing a long-time client against the business man.

The firm where he was partner had lost an important client when Dave had refused to take the case and his partners would be very displeased to learn the truth.

Maybe Dave's tacky little secret would come in handy after all.

The front doorbell rang as she was washing her face. She walked to the door, drying her face with a hand towel, and peered through the narrow window at the side to see who was there.

She almost didn't open the door.

She needed time to think. To decide what to do.

But her heart melted at the look on Bris' face and she found herself reaching for the knob.

Bris was leaning against the doorframe. "Hey!"

"Hey yourself."

"Can I come in?"

Felicia bit her lip. Her mind warred with her heart for the decision. Finally, her heart won. She reached for his hand and pulled him close. "Always. You'll always be welcome here, Bris."

His kiss was intense and hungry. When he pulled away a few moments later he laid his forehead against hers and sighed. "I was so worried, Felicia. I thought you'd run. I'd never see you again."

"I'm still feeling pretty jumpy. What we're doing...what we have..." She stepped away, wringing her hands. "It feels so right when we're together, but the world thinks it's bad."

He shook his head. "Not the whole world, Felicia. Only a very small portion of it. The people with closed minds. You need to remember that."

"You're right. I need to focus on that." She walked away, wringing her hands nervously. "I've made a decision. I'm going to see Dave Foust in the morning. This has gone way too far. It has to stop."

"No you're not! You're not going within ten miles of that man. It isn't safe."

Felicia bristled. "Don't take that tone with me, Bris!"

Namaste My Love

He stepped further into the room and pulled the door shut behind him. "I'm sorry, Lissy. I'm just worried about you. Let me come with you at least so he won't be tempted to do anything rash."

Felicia thought about that for a while. It would definitely set Dave off if Bris were there. But it wouldn't really matter since what she had to say should put an end to Dave's manipulations and destructive behavior. "I think that's a fair compromise."

"Good. Now that that's settled, do you have a cold beer for a weary ex-yoga instructor slash exotic dancer?"

"I do. But..." She pressed herself against him and took his bottom lip between her teeth, sucking on it gently. "I was thinking dessert might be nice. I have some caramel sauce in the cupboard."

"If you have chocolate we can make turtles."

Felicia grabbed his hand, pulling him toward the bedroom. "I'll be the ice cream and you can be the nut, sprinkled on the top."

"My mouth's watering just thinking about it!"

* * * *

Felicia sat at the bar and watched Bris perform. He was dressed as an Egyptian Pharaoh and had a fake cobra around his waist, flicking it suggestively at the ladies who were packed around the stage. She'd wavered between laughing at the antics going on and wanting to scratch the eyes out of a couple of the more insistent women.

Especially the cute little blonde who was just about Bris' age and looked like she wanted to eat him for dessert.

Felicia forced herself to stay at her table, away from the stage, and take comfort from the occasional wink from Bris as he managed to evade the clutching fingers and occasional stage hopper with practiced ease.

Sis strolled over from the bar, where she'd been in close conversation with Bruno all night, and slid into the seat next to her. "Cute costume, huh?"

Felicia saw the suspicious sparkle in her friend's eye and nudged her with an

elbow. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to seeing women throw themselves at him."

Sis cocked her head. "Ever? As in long-term relationship? Dare I hope you've joined the sisterhood and the twenty-first century?"

Felicia pinched her friend's arm. "Maybe."

Sis let out a whoop that had people at several nearby tables glancing their way. Felicia ducked her head with embarrassment. "You go girl! I'm proud of you."

"It's not like it's a huge hardship dating Bris you know."

Sis guffawed. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Felicia could feel herself turning red.

"Felicia?"

She turned and looked at the woman who'd spoken. For a moment she couldn't put a name with the vaguely familiar face. Then it clicked. It was Susie Walters. She'd been a friend once, before Felicia's divorce.

"Hi Susie. How are you?"

The woman looked embarrassed. "I...I'm good. I'm surprised to see you here."

All the old feelings of rejection resurfaced. Susie Walters was part of the group of women who'd rejected her after the divorce. Felicia had thought Susie, and a few others, were her friends. She'd learned differently once she was no longer part of a couple. Felicia opened her mouth to give the woman back a smart retort...but then she realized she didn't really care about all that anymore. She had real friends now, people who liked her for herself, not because she was married to one of the wealthiest men in the county.

"I'm here to watch my lover dance."

Susie Walters staggered comically, her hand going to her heart. "Are you serious?"

Felicia laughed at the woman's shocked face. "I am. That's Bris." She pointed toward the stage and Susie's gaze swung to where Bris and his...snake...held the roomful of women entranced by their athletic swaying, bumping, and grinding.

Susie's face, when she turned back, was filled with awe. Her mouth opened and she just stood there, as if unsure what to say. Finally she lifted a hand toward Felicia. "Give me five, honey, you are one lucky bitch!"

Felicia patted the chair on her other side and Susie sat down.

"So," Felicia asked the other woman, "What are you doing here?"

Susie had to wait to speak because the music stopped and the room erupted in applause and ribald cheers. When it quieted down, Susie said, "Some of my friends and I have been coming here for weeks. It's fun, and we feel a bit like we're getting away with something."

Sis nodded knowingly. "That's how it started with me too. Then it became an addiction. Now I come here several times a week."

Susie's eyes sparkled with pleasure. "I'm thinking about coming on Wednesday nights. I understand they have customer sandwich night on Wednesdays."

Sis laughed, leaning closer. "Honey, let me tell you, they *do not* skimp on the meat in that sandwich."

Felicia narrowed her eyes at Sis. "What the hell is a customer sandwich?"

The two women at the table with her shared a knowing look. "Oh, you'll see. I'm bringing you here on Wednesday. You haven't lived until you've become the middle in a male stripper sandwich."

Felicia's eyes widened as she realized what they were talking about. "Oh my!"

Sis stood up and offered to go get drink refills. They gave her their order and she sauntered back toward the bar, looking like she was on the prowl for a certain sexy bartender.

Felicia watched her go with a smile. "She's dating the bartender."

Susie said, "Ah. Hey, did you hear what happened to Dave Foust?"

"Something happened to Dave? I called his office this morning to get an appointment and was told he'd be out for an extended period of time. They wouldn't tell me why though. What happened?"

Susie sat back in her chair, her face filled with horror. "Somebody came into his office the other night and beat him pretty badly with a lamp."

Felicia's mouth went dry and her pulse shot into panic range. Stars sparkled in front of her eyes as the blood flooded from her face.

"Are you okay?" Susie's face swam for a moment behind the stars but Felicia took

a deep breath and managed to keep from passing out.

"When did this happen?"

Susie's face screwed up as she thought about it. "Friday night, I think.

Felicia's world crashed around her. She looked up to see Bris, looking handsome and sexy in his street clothes, striding toward her with a smile on his face. Suddenly she felt as if she would throw up.

The night after his friend's place was trashed, when Bris had accused Dave of being responsible. Bris had vowed Dave wouldn't get away with it. Maybe that hadn't been all talk.

Felicia moaned and stumbled up, running toward the ladies room to throw up. She only hoped she made it in time so she didn't add abject embarrassment to the horror that her life had just become.

Chapter Ten

Bris waited anxiously outside the ladies room. He'd listened to the sounds of retching and then sobbing through the door. He'd sent Sis in there several moments earlier and was just about ready to invade the sanctity of the ladies room to check on Felicia.

He'd already decided he was going in if she didn't come out in five minutes.

When the door finally opened he looked up expectantly. It was Sis. Her dark eyes looked serious and wary. Bris stepped forward. "Is she okay?"

Sis stepped back, glancing toward the bar with something that looked like fear in her eyes.

"Sis? What the hell's going on here?"

"She doesn't want to see you, Bris. You need to go away and leave her alone."

He took a step toward the door and Sis stepped directly in front of him, her pretty brown face paling noticeably. "I'm not going to let you in there, Bris. You can hit me if you want, but I won't go down without a fight."

Bris just stared at her, shock making his mind go blank. "Hit you? What the hell are you talking about? I wouldn't hit you. Why would I hit you?"

"I don't know, Bris? Why would you hit anybody?"

He shook his head. "You aren't making any sense, Sis. This doesn't make any sense. Get out of my way so I can go see if Felicia is all right."

She stood her ground, looking terrified. "I can't. Go away, Bris. Leave her alone. She's scared of you."

That stopped him. He brushed a hand over his eyes, trying to make sense of what Sis was saying. "Scared of me? Why? Sis, what's happened?"

"Somebody beat the living hell out of Dave Foust." Bris turned at the sound of

Bruno's voice behind him. He didn't like the look on his friend's face. Bruno should have known better than to think Bris would beat a defenseless older man.

But apparently he didn't.

"The cops just called to ask about the altercation in the parking lot. Seems they're looking at all possible suspects and you're on that list."

Bris felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. "And you all think I did it?"

Bruno's gaze was intent, unrelenting. Sis lifted her chin, looking more confident since Bruno was there to back her up.

Bris expelled a frustrated breath. "Really, Bruno? You've known me for years, man."

His friend's rugged face softened slightly. "It looks bad, man. I just think it would be best if you left now."

Bris stood there for a moment longer, looking back and forth from Sis to Bruno. He briefly considered pushing Sis aside and barging into that ladies room to assure Felicia that he was innocent but he'd probably just scare her more if he did, and he had to admit to a small amount of anger that she would believe the worst of him that way.

Finally he swore softly and left the bar. Heading to his car, he glanced toward the spot where all of the problems started. The spot where he'd caught Dave Foust accosting Felicia and had stopped him.

Bris played the episode back in his mind, looking for things that might make Felicia think he was capable of that kind of anger or violence. All he'd done was make Foust stop bothering Felicia.

He'd barely touched the man, and now they thought he'd tried to kill him.

What kind of woman turns on her lover like that, completely disregarding their history together?

Bris tried not to think about that as he climbed into his car and pulled out of the lot. He had other things to think about at the moment; like clearing his name.

There'd be time enough to deal with Felicia and Bruno's defection.

But he doubted time would make it any easier to get over Felicia turning on him. Bris doubted there was time enough to soften that one. Namaste My Love

* * * *

Felicia refused to let Sis and Bruno come in and sit with her. All she wanted was to be alone with her thoughts. She had to go over everything one more time and try to get it straight in her mind.

Nothing made sense.

Nothing she'd been thinking felt right.

The Bris she'd grown to love would never beat an older man, no matter what the man had done. But, her traitorous mind kept telling her, Bris had been so angry at the fitness club, and he was young and strong. While Dave Foust wasn't. It would have been easy for Bris to overcome him.

Felicia stood up and started pacing her living room. Her thoughts were too uncomfortable to take sitting still.

When her thoughts kept spinning around, getting ever more tangled and less clear, she decided she had to take her mind off of it for a while or she'd go crazy. She wandered around her house for a while, trying to settle into something that could occupy her mind. She even sat down at her computer and tried to go through her emails.

There was another note from the creep who'd called her a pervert. She'd been deleting them all week, at the rate of at least one a day. She didn't even read them anymore.

She hadn't seen one for a couple of days. Since Dave apparently had been beaten.

Sighing, Felicia went to the Cougar Club to see who was online. Four women were in the chat room.

FelicitousFeline: Hello.

Crazycougar: Hi FF!

Bosscougar: Hi Felicia. How's it going?

FelicitousFeline: Not so good actually.

Cublover: Hey Felicia. What's wrong?

FelicitousFeline: I have to ask a hard question.

Silvercat: Go ahead, honey. No question is off bounds here.

FelicitousFeline: Have any of you found that your cubs are more hotheaded than an older man would be?

Silvercat: Is your cub hitting you? You don't stand for that, honey. I don't care how hot he is!

Cublover: Nodding...violence is unacceptable.

Bosscougar: Not so fast, ladies. Why do you ask, Felicia?

FelicitousFeline: I can't explain it all, but some things have happened and Bris has been accused of beating somebody.

Cublover: Oh honey. Do you think he did it?

FelicitousFeline: I just can't see him hurting anybody like that. If they attacked him, or somebody he cared about, yes, but...

Bosscougar: The answer to your original question is no. They're men, no matter what age they are. Some are good, some are bad. But younger men aren't any more likely to be violent than older ones.

Silvercat: Honey, if your gut is telling you he didn't do it, than I'd go with that. If it's your heart...then you'd better look more closely before you decide.

Silvercat: Sometimes our hearts lie to us.

FelicitousFeline: That's the problem isn't it? I don't know what I'm hearing, my heart, or my instincts.

Bosscougar: Good luck Felicia. Let us know what happens, okay?

Felicia promised to get back to them when it was all over and got up, heading into the kitchen to make some tea. Maybe it would calm her nerves. As she filled a mug with water from the tap, Felicia realized there was somebody she could talk to about Bris.

Penelope and Giorgio. They'd known Bris a long time and Bris had told her Giorgio had come looking for him that night. Maybe Giorgio could put her mind to rest about Bris.

Felicia set the mug down and grabbed her purse. She just hoped Penelope and Giorgio were at the club, or she'd have to get creative and try to find their home address.

* * * *

Bris sat across from Detective Hanks again, watching him write laboriously as Bris told him where he'd been and what he'd been doing during the time Dave Foust was being attacked. It was a long, slow process, given the fact that Hanks seemed to have trouble holding onto the tiny, chewed pencil with his sausage-like fingers.

"Won't they give you real pencils?"

Hanks looked up, his small eyes filled with surprise. "I like this pencil."

Bris snorted.

Finally Hanks set the pencil down and stood up. "Let's get you printed."

Bris followed him into the fingerprint area, hoping the cops had some good prints to compare against his. He really didn't relish the idea of getting Guido involved again, especially to represent him against an attempted murder charge.

* * * *

Felicia knocked on the frame of the open front door and stuck her head inside. The club smelled like a combination of fresh paint, bleach and smoke. She wrinkled her nose and stepped inside. From the front door, except for the smell, the place looked fairly normal. But when she followed the sound of music and voices to the large studio where most of the damage had been done, she realized just how badly the vandal had hurt the club's owners.

The wood floor was charred and burned away in a large area in the center of the floor. One long wall was covered with graffiti in blood red paint. Scorch marks stained the white walls and black soot coated the wall of mirrors.

The stereo system at the front of the studio had been smashed to pieces, its large speakers slashed and torn apart. One window at the back of the room was broken. It looked like the vandal had thrown a chair or something through it. Glass still glittered on the floor beneath the window.

Giorgio was sweeping up the glass, and dumping it into a large, rubber trash can. Penelope was wearing rubber gloves and scrubbing hard on the walls, trying to remove some of the graffiti. They'd brought a boom box into the room and were playing salsa music at a tooth jarring level. Penelope's hips swayed and jerked to the music as she scrubbed.

Felicia smiled. It took a very strong woman to dance as she dealt with the wanton destruction of her livelihood and property.

Felicia stepped around the charred floor and called out to them. It took several tries to get their attention over the music. Then Giorgio walked over and hit the power button, plunging them into startling silence.

Penelope pulled off her gloves, dropping them onto a nearby wooden chair, and walked over to take Felicia's hand.

"Felicia. How are you?" She glanced around. "Is Bris with you?"

Tears flooded Felicia's eyes and a sob emerged from her chest.

Penelope and Giorgio each grabbed an elbow as her knees sagged.

They walked her to the side of the room and made her sit down and drop her head between her knees. Penelope rubbed her back and sent Giorgio to get her a bottle of water.

"Take deep breaths, honey. That's good, just breathe. The rest will come in a few minutes. You just need to breathe deeply."

Felicia did as instructed. When Giorgio returned with an icy bottle of water she drank it gratefully. Then she quickly filled them in on the latest news and Bris' apparent involvement.

Penelope was shaking her head before Felicia could finish the story. "Bris would never do that. No matter what that man did."

Felicia felt better until she glanced at Giorgio. His face had gone pale.

"What?" Penelope asked him.

Giorgio shook his head. "I'm sure you're right, sweetheart."

Penelope touched his shoulder, "No. Tell me what's bothering you."

Namaste My Love

He glanced at Felicia as if reluctant to talk in front of her.

"Please, Giorgio. It's why I came here. I have to know."

Giorgio took a deep breath, "It's just that...when I got to Foust's office that night, Bris was coming out of the building. He looked a little shell shocked. I asked him if he'd seen Foust..." Giorgio seemed to be avoiding Felicia's eyes.

"Please go on." She swiped tears from her cheeks, more certain than ever that what Giorgio was going to tell them was important.

"He said he'd decided against seeing him because..." he stopped, glancing at Penelope, "in the mood he was in he was afraid he'd kill the man."

Felicia gasped. She jerked to her feet and started toward the door. She was vaguely aware of Penelope and Giorgio calling out to her but she ignored them and started running.

Chapter Eleven

Felicia headed for St. Vincent Hospital. When she arrived, she asked where Dave Foust was being kept. She told them she was family so they'd allow her to visit him in ICU. The nurse headed for the door when she arrived, whispering to Felicia as she left that she could only stay a few minutes.

Felicia walked over and looked down at Dave. Every ounce of anger she held against him slid away. The man on the bed was unrecognizable. His entire head was discolored and swollen. He looked as if his nose and both cheeks had been crushed and his eyes were swollen nearly closed. One hand was in a cast, probably broken when he tried to defend himself against his attacker.

Felicia sobbed and placed a hand on Dave's chest. The determined pound of his heart against her palm was comforting. She walked around the bed, sat down in the visitor's chair and clasped Dave's large, warm hand.

She sat that way for a while, with tears flowing down her cheeks and wondered when her life had gotten so messed up. She should have never stepped outside the box. She should have never slept with a younger man. She should have never gone to that damn club.

Sighing, Felicia stood up and placed a gentle kiss on Dave's cheek. She turned away and took a step toward the door.

The hand in hers tightened, holding her there.

Felicia turned in surprise and saw Dave's eyes, barely visible between the swollen lids, fixed on her.

She sat back down. "Hello, Dave. Are you doing all right? Can I get you something to make you more comfortable?"

Dave tried to speak but nothing came out. He motioned to the water on the table

next to the bed. Felicia lifted it and placed the straw between his swollen lips.

He looked as if he had trouble swallowing but, clearing his throat he tried to speak again. "I shouldn't have done it. He...he never saw it coming."

Felicia leaned close to hear the words, certain she'd misheard. "Done what, Dave?"

He just shook his head, repeating the words. His eyes fluttered closed. But before he drifted off he said, "Can't blame him."

Felicia sat back in the chair, thinking. What was it that Dave was feeling guilty about? The notes to her? No, he'd said he didn't blame 'him'. Of course it was probably the trashing of Giorgio and Penelope's club. He definitely shouldn't have done that, if he did.

In that case it looked bad for Bris. He'd be the obvious 'him' on that one. Unless it was Giorgio...

Felicia gave that a moment's thought, playing possible scenarios through her mind. Giorgio going to Dave's law office to find Bris. Bris and Giorgio leaving together. Giorgio returning alone...

It could have happened that way. But Felicia had trouble envisioning Giorgio as the kind of guy who'd beat an older man to a pulp with a lamp.

She replayed Dave's exact words in her mind. *I shouldn't have done it...he never saw it coming...Can't blame...*

Felicia leapt out of the chair. "I know who it was!" She turned toward the door and stopped, giving off a little squeal. A man stood there. He was dressed in a lab coat but Felicia doubted he worked in the hospital. His face was covered in still healing bruises. She recognized the face under the swelling and bruising. She took a step backwards.

He stepped toward her.

Felicia tried to dodge around him but he grabbed her arm, flinging her toward the hospital bed. She landed on Dave and hit her head hard on the metal side rail on the far side of the bed. Dave grunted but his eyes stayed shut. He appeared to be heavily sedated.

"Now just what have you figured out, Ms. Cougar? That you like younger men? I'm younger than you. I think you'd like me much better than that pansy ass dancer

boy."

Blood dripped down Felicia's face from a small cut on her forehead. She pretended to be woozy from the head injury and didn't straighten from the bed right away. Reaching into her purse with the hand that was under her stomach, she felt around until she found her cell phone. She tried to feel her way around the buttons to find a nine and a one.

Before she could dial 911 he grabbed her arm and pulled her off Dave. Her cell phone flew out of her hand, landing on the bed next to Dave. Felicia was unable to keep him from dragging her toward the door. Looking both ways down the hall and seeing that nobody was paying attention, he wrapped his arm around her head, covering her mouth to keep her from screaming. He pulled her across and into the elevator, pressing the button for the basement.

As the doors slid shut, he slammed his body into hers, pinning her to the side of the elevator. "I wasn't planning on dealing with a nosy bitch today. But maybe it won't be so bad after all, huh? You're pretty. You smell great too. You older bitches are very appreciative of a man's attention aren't you?"

Felicia swallowed down bile and kneed him in the crotch, hard. The elevator doors slid open and she ran out, leaving him gasping and retching on the floor.

* * * *

Brian Hanks narrowed his eyes on the computer as it searched through millions of available fingerprints looking for one that matched Bris' freely given prints. They'd managed to pull a partial thumb print off the doorjamb leading into Dave Foust's office that didn't match any of the employees' prints.

It could be a thousand other people. Cleaning crew. Clients. Family members of personnel who snuck into the boss' office looking for paper and scissors. The list was endless. But police work was built on certain methods and ways of doing things.

First weed out the obvious. Then look for the less obvious in the newly filtered arena.

Bris stood up. "I'm gonna go get another cup of liquid blacktop. You want some?"

Hanks looked up and grinned, handing Bris his mug. "Thanks." He watched the young man walk across the bullpen, looking decidedly less cocky than he had the first time Hanks had brought him in, but still giving off the vibes of an innocent man.

Hanks was trying not to like the guy but it was getting increasingly difficult. He dealt with a lot of people in his line of work. Victims, scam artists, violent thugs, and even the occasional good guy just trying to keep his head above water.

He'd stake his career on Bris Holcomb being in the latter group. He just hoped he could find evidence to prove it. Or rather...prove Bris *wasn't* a violent thug...Hanks didn't need proof that Holcomb was a good guy, he had his gut for that.

And a fine gut it was.

Said gut rumbled hungrily and Hanks ran a beefy hand over it. He stood up and headed toward the snack area. Some cookies would go well with his blacktop. Hanks chuckled. The kid wasn't too far off on that. The coffee at the station was just a hair away from being road worthy.

* * * *

Felicia screamed when a hand grabbed her hair and yanked, hard. She fell backwards and hit the floor, ripping some of the hair from her head in the process.

"Bitch!" He yanked her upright again and dragged one of her arms around her back, cranking it toward her shoulder blades until she cried out from the pain. "You pull any more shit like that and I'll break your pretty arm. You got that?"

Felicia nodded and pressed her lips together to keep from crying out. She didn't want to give the jerk the satisfaction.

"Let's go. I'm parked just outside this door."

Felicia's mind spun, trying to come up with a plan to escape the man before he could get her into his car. Once he had her there she was in deep trouble.

But her mind was locked around the fear and the pain and she couldn't think. There was nothing she could do to get away.

* * * *

Hanks' phone rang as he got back to his desk. Looking at caller ID he saw Felicia Jeffries' name on the display. Ah yes. The lovely love interest in the violent triangle he was currently trying to sort out.

Bris Holcomb arrived back with two steaming mugs as he reached for the phone. "Looks like your girlfriend is calling me. Wonder what she wants."

Bris swore. He had deliberately come there without telling Felicia about it because he didn't want her involved. He'd just wanted to clear his name so he could face her again. He dropped his butt into the chair as Hanks picked up the phone. He should have known the woman wouldn't be able to stay out of it.

Hanks' face showed his surprise. "Mr. Foust? Why are you calling me from Felicia Jeffries' phone?"

Bris' mug hit the tile floor and he was on his feet reaching for the phone almost before Hanks got the question out. Hanks slapped his hand away and glared at him.

"Uh huh." Hanks grabbed his all-suffering pencil and scribbled painstaking notes on a pad of paper.

Bris came around the desk so he could read Hanks' scribbles. He gave up after only a couple of minutes. The man wrote like a monkey.

"Please try to calm down, Mr. Foust. I'm having trouble understanding you."

Bris made a play for the phone again and Hanks punched him in the chest. Bris was knocked backward a couple of steps from the punch. He rubbed his chest and glared at Hanks.

Hanks just glared back.

"When did this happen?" Hanks made some more monkey scribbles. "And the man's name?" He tucked the phone between his beefy shoulder and his ear and bent over his computer to type the name Foust had given him into a search database.

Bris moved closer, still rubbing his chest, and saw the name Garth Brooks on the screen. "Is that some kind of joke?"

Hanks shushed him.

"Okay, thank you for calling us, Mr. Foust. We'll be in touch."

Hanks fairly threw the phone back into its cradle, hit the print button on the screen, and grabbed his gun and badge from his center desk drawer. "Come on, we'll grab the print-out on the way."

Bris ran after him. For a big guy, Hanks sure could move fast when he needed to. "What's going on, Hanks?"

Rather than waiting for the elevator, they pushed into the stairwell and took the stairs to the underground parking level where the detectives kept their cars. "Dave Foust witnessed the kidnapping of Felicia Jeffries." Hanks looked at him. "Apparently she was taken by the guy who beat Foust up."

Bris only heard that Felicia was in danger. It didn't make sense. "Why? How?"

They burst through the parking level door and ran toward Hanks' car. "I'll explain it all to you in the car. Let's just hope this Brooks guy still lives at his latest known address and that he wasn't smart enough to take her somewhere else, or we might not find her in time."

Chapter Twelve

Felicia tugged her wrists, trying in vain to loosen the duct tape wrapped around them. The man had left her alone for a few minutes and gone into another room. He seemed to have gone a little mad. She wasn't sure if it was from the beating he'd obviously taken or all the pills she'd seen him popping for the pain.

All she could think about was Bris.

If this guy killed her, Bris would never know that she trusted him implicitly. That she never really doubted him for a moment. Not in her heart. Not in her soul.

He'd also never know that she loved him.

She stopped pulling on the tape for a minute and her eyes widened.

She'd surprised herself.

Yes, she realized. She did love Bris.

Tears fled down her cheeks. She'd probably never get a chance to tell him.

The phone rang again in the other room. She could hear it through the door. He'd stuffed her in some kind of closet, filled with clothes that smelled of sweat, cigarettes and moth balls. The phone had been ringing every ten minutes or so for the last hour.

Selfishly Felicia hoped it was somebody looking for her but she knew it wasn't. It couldn't be. They'd never know where to find her.

* * * *

Bris slammed his cell phone shut and glared at the traffic on the road ahead.

Hanks glanced at him. "No luck?"

Bris swiped a hand down his face in frustration. "He's not answering. Or he's not there." Blowing out a frustrated breath, Bris pounded a fist on the dashboard. "Why

Namaste My Love

couldn't Foust have regained consciousness sooner? Then maybe we could have grabbed this guy before he got hold of Felicia."

Hanks couldn't help smiling. "We?"

Bris had the grace to look embarrassed. "I know. I'm just along for the ride. You've only told me that about a hundred times."

Hanks chuckled. "Then why don't I think you believe me?"

They pulled up in front of a small, yellow house that was badly in need of paint. Brooks lived in one of those neighborhoods that had once been cute and respectable, but had over the years traveled down a path to become seedy and disreputable.

It was a known hotspot for crack addicts and drug dealers.

Bris' phone rang and he grabbed it, foolishly hoping it was Felicia. "Hello?"

"Bris? Buddy, where are you? You're on tonight."

Bruno. Damn! "Sorry man. I can't come in. Something's happened to Felicia."

Bris heard a quick background discussion and recognized Sis' voice. A second later the phone changed hands and she was on. "Bris! What's wrong? What have you done to Felicia?"

Hanks climbed out of the car and stood outside the house, looking up at its darkened windows. It sure looked as if nobody was home.

Bris climbed out too. He bit back his frustration at Sis' immediate assumption that he'd done something to Felicia. She was worried about her friend. He got that. He just didn't get how everybody had assumed he was capable of beating an older man near death.

He'd never get that.

"Bris!"

"Sorry, Sis, look it's complicated. I'm with Detective Hanks. We're trying to find Felicia. I'll have to fill you in later." He hung up, certain he'd left poor Bruno with a huge smoldering turd of a mess.

Sis would not only be mad, she'd be crazed with worry.

Bruno would have his hands full.

Bris didn't envy him.

* * * *

The closet door was wrenched open and Felicia squinted against the bright beam of a flashlight, focused right in her face.

"Come on, kitty cat." He jerked her arm and pulled her onto her feet, out of the closet. Her feet stung with needles as blood worked its way back down to them. She felt as if she'd been sitting on them for hours.

With her feet numb and clumsy, Felicia tripped over them and fell, catching him off guard so that he lost his grip on her arm.

A loud pounding sounded from another part of the house.

His head jerked in that direction and he swore. "Hurry up. They've found me. We need to get the hell out of here."

Felicia kicked at his hand as he reached for her and heard a very satisfying crack as his hand wrenched backwards on his wrist. He screamed in pain. She rolled and managed to get herself underneath the bed, scooting as far from his grasping hand as she could.

Dust balls and more disgusting things assailed her and she sneezed. The smell of something rotting near her head made her eyes water.

He got down on his belly and managed to get one shoulder under the bed so he could reach for her, catching one of her ankles as she kicked at him.

Felicia kicked frantically but he didn't release her. He managed to pull her halfway out from under the bed and she had no way to stop him.

Her hands were taped together behind her back and he had hold of both feet now.

Something crashed at the front of the house and he let go of her.

Felicia quickly scooted back under the bed, closed her eyes and cried quietly, praying it was help that had arrived, rather than more trouble.

A deep voice called out, "Put your hands in the air and lie on the floor. Now, Brooks!"

Silence followed this command, then the sounds of scuffling and a muffled cry of

pain.

Then footsteps, heading for the bed.

Felicia's eyes flew open and she waited, silently praying her ordeal would be over soon.

"Felicia! Where are you?"

Bris!

She tried to call out to him but the tape over her mouth reduced the words she gave him to mumbling sounds. She started scooting, suddenly desperate to get out from under that horrible bed.

Strong hands grabbed her arms, pulling her gently out from under the bed. She sobbed as she looked up into Bris' beautiful, worried face.

He grabbed the edge of the tape over her mouth. "I'm sorry, honey, this is gonna hurt."

She nodded, suddenly finding it hard to breathe with the tape on her face. Her eyes pleaded with him to remove it quickly.

Bris ripped the tape away and immediately covered the tender skin with kisses. "Oh my God, Felicia, I was so scared. Are you okay, honey?" He held her arms and looked intently into her tear filled eyes.

"I..." she cleared her throat. "I'm okay, but I think I might have wrenched a shoulder. She tried to lift her hands to show him the tape and winced.

"Damnit!" Bris moved around behind her and made short work of the tape.

When her wrists were free, Felicia slowly pulled her arms forward, rolling her shoulders carefully. Bris rubbed her wrists gently as the needles found their way into her numb fingers.

The deep voice from earlier said, "Is she all right, Holcomb?"

Bris looked up. "I think so. We need to get her out of here."

"Let's go."

Bris stood and reached for her. "Can you stand?"

Felicia grinned at him through her tears. "To get out of here? Just try and stop me."

Bris chuckled, feeling some of the crushing fear sliding away under the force of her

smile. "That's my girl."

* * * *

Sis grabbed Felicia in a crushing hug when they arrived at the police station. "Are you all right, sweetie?"

Bruno hugged her when Sis finally let her go. "You had us pretty worried."

Felicia nodded, unable to speak through the tears clogging her throat.

"Bris! Felicia!" Giorgio and Penelope rushed into the room. Bris kept his arm around Felicia but reached to shake his friend's hand.

Penelope clasped one of Felicia's hands in both of hers. "I'm so glad you're okay. Bris would have been devastated if something had happened to you."

"Thanks!" It was a stupid, mundane response but she found herself tongue-tied under all the loving support.

She had friends, new friends, and they didn't care about her money or her status. They didn't judge her because she was in love with a much younger man. They liked her because of who she was, rather than what she could do for them.

Hanks hung up the call he'd taken shortly after they'd arrived and looked up at the crowd, his small, brown eyes widening in surprise. "Looks like we'll need more chairs."

Felicia fully expected her friends to excuse themselves and leave. But instead they helped the detective pull chairs from around the room and they all sat down around her, like a support group.

She felt the shock and horror of the last few hours sliding away under a newfound hope that things would be better now. Now that she had someone to love and new friends to share that love with.

Bris had seemed withdrawn since finding her at Garth Brooks' house. He hadn't spoken three words to her, and not many more than that to Hanks and his friends. Looking at him now, she saw an intensity in his gaze that was disconcerting.

As if he felt her gaze on his face he turned. He squeezed her hand but didn't smile. Felicia clearly read the hurt in his pretty blue eyes.

She nearly gasped.

She *had* hurt him. They'd all hurt him. They'd assumed he'd beaten Dave Foust, judged him without even asking him about it first or taking into account all they knew about him as a man.

It was inexcusable.

Looking at his face now, Felicia began to worry that it would be irreparable too.

"Okay, Dave Foust has been placed under medical arrest. He'll stay in the hospital until he's well enough to go to jail."

Felicia looked away from Bris and gasped. "What? Jail? Why?"

Bris didn't look at her when he said. "For beating the living crap out of Garth Brooks and then trying to pin it on me." Finally he did turn and his gaze swept all the people assembled there. They were his friends, and they'd all thought the worst of him.

Bruno and Giorgio both swore under their breath. Penelope reached for Bris and squeezed his forearm. Sis couldn't look him in the eye.

Felicia just sat there, guilty as charged. She didn't know the words to make it right with Bris again. Anything she said there...in front of all those people...would just turn the knife deeper. So she only whispered, "I'm so sorry, Bris."

He turned away and looked at Hanks. "What about Brooks?"

"We have a partial print placing him in Foust's office. And Foust's statement that Brooks beat him in retaliation for what he'd done at the club that night. They'll both be spending some time in jail."

Felicia found her voice. "But why?"

Hanks focused small, hazel eyes on her. "Why did Foust beat Brooks? I'm guessing it had something to do with pinning it on Mr. Holcomb, as he said. The man was most insistent that night that we round up Holcomb because he'd threatened his client prior to the beating."

"His client?" Bris' lips twisted with distaste.

Hanks nodded. "Yeah. Brooks was a client of his at one time. Brooks was working for Foust when he accosted Ms. Jeffries in the club that first night. It was apparently all a plan by Foust to set up the scenario where Mr. Holcomb got blamed for beating

Brooks."

"Brooks figured it out and went after the lawyer."

Hanks looked at Giorgio and nodded. "Foust insists he attacked from behind and hit Brooks with a baseball bat before he could see him. Something must have tipped the man off."

"Nice guy." Sis mumbled, glancing at Bris guiltily.

Felicia suddenly felt sick to her stomach. Turning to Hanks she said. "I'm not feeling well, Detective Hanks. Can I go home now?"

Hanks stood up. "That's a good idea. I have enough information from you for tonight. I'll call you tomorrow and get your complete statement."

"Will you give me a ride home?" She asked Bris.

Bris shook his head and turned away. "I need to go." He walked out of the room, leaving all his friends behind, looking shocked at his abrupt dismissal of them.

And breaking Felicia's heart clean apart in her chest.

Chapter Thirteen

Felicia stared glumly at the computer screen and fought tears. The excited words of a newly converted Cougar stared back at her. She remembered the thrum of excitement from those first looks, that first, tentative touch, and the thrill of knowing that a young, sexy man would find her attractive.

The experience, though terrifying at first, had been incredible. Felicia knew she'd never be able to replace it. She knew now that she was in love with Bris. She probably always would be. He was a wonderful man.

And she had treated him horribly.

Her heart twisted in her chest and she stood up, eager to get away from the evidence of another woman's joy at having found a new love in a most unexpected place.

Felicia moved restlessly around the house. She'd been at loose ends for the past two weeks, since Bris had walked out of her life and left her alone and feeling stupid.

She'd received a conciliatory call from Ben Miller at the Children's Hospital. Apparently his young wife had discovered what he'd done in firing Felicia and had given him no end of grief about it. He'd obviously been trying to get back in his wife's good graces by bringing Felicia back.

Felicia hadn't committed herself to anything. She didn't think she wanted to go back. She needed to move forward, put the past behind her, and try something different, something that would stir her senses and give her a new purpose in life.

Sitting down at her computer with a sigh, she started searching for a job that would fit those parameters. An hour later she gave up and headed into the kitchen, hoping to find something to eat.

The cupboard was bare.

Felicia grabbed her purse and headed out. There was a deli downtown that she and Sis liked. It had a truly stupendous salad with chicken and a warm, spicy dressing. She couldn't wait to taste that salad again.

It was the first thing she'd been excited about in weeks.

She parked on the street outside the deli and headed inside. An attractive woman sat hunched over a stack of papers at a small table in back, chewing despondently on a large salad.

Without stopping to examine her motives too carefully, Felicia headed toward the woman. "Penelope?"

Penelope looked up, her pretty face brightening in a smile. "Felicia! How are you?"

Felicia indicated the empty chair at the table and Penelope nodded. Sitting down, Felicia placed her purse on the table in front of her. "To tell you the truth I've been better."

Penelope reached across the table and touched Felicia's hand. "You haven't heard from Bris?"

Felicia struggled to hold back tears. She sniffed, determined not to make the visit about Bris. "How are you? Did you get the club back in shape?"

A shadow fell over Penelope's face. "The insurance Company is dragging its feet. They want to wait until the legal issues are ironed out before they'll pay for the damage." Her pretty green eyes lifted to Felicia's face, filled with frustration. "That could take months or years."

Felicia felt responsible for what had happened to Penelope and wished she could help somehow. "I'm so sorry, Penelope. I know how much that business means to you."

Penelope forced a smile. "It'll work itself out. At least I'm rich in love."

"How is Giorgio?"

The shadow finally fell away from Penelope's face. "He's wonderful as always! I'm so blessed..." Her smile faded as she realized that her happiness might not be exactly welcomed by the woman sitting across from her. "Oh, I'm sorry..."

"Don't be silly. The world can't stop just because my heart's broken. I'm glad you and Giorgio found each other. You're both wonderful people."

Penelope grasped Felicia's hand. "Thanks. You're pretty great too."

Felicia looked away, all too aware of her guilt about Bris.

"I understand you like yoga?"

"I love it. It keeps me sane."

Penelope took a bite of her salad. Silence reigned as she chewed and swallowed. "I feel the same way. You should come to the club a couple of times a week. We have really awesome classes." She determinedly kept her gaze on her salad. "And the best instructor in town." Her gaze slid toward Felicia's face, sparkling with mirth.

Felicia stood up. Not sure how to take Penelope's playfulness. "I just might do that, Penelope. It would be good for me to get out of the house a few times a week."

Penelope looked truly pleased.

Felicia ordered her salad to go and left, waving goodbye to Penelope and feeling the other woman's eyes on her back as she returned to her car.

Had Penelope been trying to tell her something about Bris? Was there a chance? Felicia shook her head, refusing to set herself up to the kind of pain those hopeful thoughts would bring her.

Bris was gone. She'd just have to learn to live with that.

* * * *

The studio was filling quickly. Bris had been moved to the smaller studio until his was repaired, and it was sometimes a little tricky fitting all of the participants into the room. The overcrowding had spurred some interesting entanglements and the occasional mass collapse, domino like, during some of the balancing poses.

Overall the practitioners in Bris' class had been good natured about it, though Penelope had been fretting because they'd had to limit the class sizes until they could find a way to get his larger studio repaired.

Bris checked his music and switched out the CD he'd had in there from that morning's class to one that fit his mood better. He used upbeat rock music for the morning class, but his current, slightly depressed mood said classical to him.

He kept himself apart from the social interactions going on behind him as long as he could. He just didn't feel much like interacting. He probably should have given the class to Giorgio or Penelope and taken the night off.

He was having trouble getting over Felicia.

Bris had thought he could walk away from her and never look back. He'd thought his hurt pride would be enough to help him make that break. He didn't want to be with a woman who could think that badly of him; a woman who would assume he'd not only beat a man near to death out of temper, but who would also hurt her if he got angry.

He'd been sure his pride would make the separation easy.

But pride was a poor partner and it did nothing to heal the pain of a broken heart.

"Namaste, Bris."

He dropped the blocks he'd been getting ready to distribute and turned, the blood running from his face as he looked at her. He frowned to cover up his shock. "Felicia."

She looked wonderful in her snug little top and sleek yoga pants. She'd pulled her dark hair back into a smooth ponytail that made her look about twenty. Her eyes were sad and she had her hands clasped in front of her, nervously twining her long fingers.

She was a feast for his starving eyes.

"How are you, Bris?"

Grabbing up an armful of blocks, he stepped down from the raised platform and started laying them out beside the mats.

He could feel her eyes following him around the room. He fully expected her to walk out. He was being rude and he knew it but he had nothing in his armory of accepted behaviors that told him how to react to her sudden reappearance in his life.

He was surprised to find her sitting on the edge of the platform, waiting for him, when he returned to the front of the room.

"Bris, I'd like to talk..."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the studio, shocking both of them. Stalking across the lobby with her in tow, he opened the office door and glared at Penelope until she stood up from her desk and walked out, squeezing Felicia's hand

supportively as she slid past.

As soon as the door to the office closed Bris turned to face her, running a hand through his hair so that it stuck up in spots.

Felicia fought the urge to reach up and straighten it, feeling a tender tug on her heart at the sight.

"Why are you here, Felicia?"

She wanted to wrap herself around him and hold on. She wanted to murmur that she was there for him...but she didn't. "I just signed an agreement to partner with Penelope. I'm now co-owner of the club."

His eyes widened at that. She watched emotions play across his handsome face as he assimilated all the more obvious outcomes of her announcement.

Finally he nodded. "I guess I'll be looking for another job then?" He put his hands on his hips and glared at her, daring her to fire him.

Unbelievably Felicia felt the urge to giggle. She bit her lip and shook her head. "I hoped you would stay."

He stared at her for a moment before expelling a frustrated breath. "Well. I'm happy for Penelope. That takes a load off. With your money..." He stopped suddenly and jerked his gaze toward her, his eyes softening a bit.

Felicia took a step closer, her hand coming up to touch the side of his face. "I've missed you, Bris."

He stiffened and closed his eyes. For a long moment he didn't move or speak.

Felicia held her breath.

Then he turned his head and placed a soft kiss in her palm. "I've missed you too, honey."

Tears fled down Felicia's face. "Oh God, Bris I'm so sorry. I was such a bitch..."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "I was wrong too, Felicia. I just realized I was blaming you for a moment of weakness, when I'd been guilty of exactly the same thing. I withdrew from you because I thought you were rich."

Felicia shook her head, burrowing deeply into his chest. She felt as if she was home

again. She wanted to stay there forever. "What I did was much worse..."

"Shhh!" He grabbed her ponytail and pulled her head back gently, dropping his lips to hers.

Felicia made a little sound and tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling him more deeply into the kiss. The air in the little office heated and sparked under their hunger. Felicia forgot to breathe for a moment as her body melded and throbbed against his.

Bris' lips left hers and trailed down her throat. His hand skimmed across her buns and along her hips, his fingers tucking beneath the tiny top to rest on the silky skin of her waist.

The door opened behind them and Penelope stuck her head into the office. She was grinning. "You've lost your class for tonight Bris. I'm taking it. And Felicia..." Her grin widened. "There's just no room in the class for you. I'm sorry." She started to close the door and then opened it again, her pretty green eyes sparking with mischief. "Maybe Bris should take you home and give you a private lesson." She giggled as she closed the door.

Remembering the last private yoga lesson they'd shared Felicia licked her lips. "I'm up for a private lesson if you are."

Bris grinned and gave her ponytail a tug before tucking her under his arm. "I'll race ya to my house."

Felicia squealed and surged out from under his arm. "You're on!"

We hope you enjoyed this latest addition to our Cougar Club series by Sam Cheever. Be sure you read the other sexy stories about Cougars and their cubs, like *The Cowboy and the Cougar* by Helen Hardt or *Barely Legal* by Lizzie T. Leaf, as well as our full selection of erotica at Aspen Mountain Press!

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