

A close-up photograph of a pregnant woman's belly. A wide, textured pink paper band is wrapped diagonally around her torso. A hand with light-colored nail polish rests gently on the band. The background is a soft, out-of-focus mix of pink and white.

Dee Tengrio

*All of
You*

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He found the right girl...too bad he's the wrong date.

The Lonnigans, Book 1

Kyle Lonnigan can't say he hasn't enjoyed the bachelor life. Good times and good money have always come easily to him. But now he wants something more, maybe even—gulp—a wife and family. Always the man with the plan, he consults the expert in boring, his identical twin Lucas, who suggests secretly switching dates for a night. Kyle never expected to meet his dream woman...and now *she* thinks he's someone else.

Career-minded Jessica Saunders fully intends to break up with Lucas, but the man who meets her for dinner is soooo delicious, she can't resist seducing him first. When she learns she's been duped—worse, that Kyle wants more than a part-time lover—she sends him packing. Jessica doesn't believe in happily ever after. If her early life taught her anything, it's to trust no one but herself.

Yet for a man who's done everything wrong, wants everything she's not and drives her absolutely insane, Kyle is getting under her skin. And into her bed. And, if she's not careful...into the heart she thought no longer existed.

Warning: Contains a playboy with skills who attempts to seduce his way into the heart of his lady—watch out for screaming Os!

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All of You

Dee Tenorio

Dedication

For Zoe Nichols, because no one loves a good story quite like her...

Chapter One

Well, there's four months of my life I'll never get back.

Jessica sat in the same booth she and Lucas always met for their dinner dates with a decided lack of excitement. Then again, who looked forward to a breakup? The sense of being free, yes. She always looked forward to that. The frown of confused rejection from the man she was cutting loose? That never got easier.

Still, she doubted tonight's news would be any kind of surprise. They'd both known upfront they weren't looking for anything serious. As it was, their casual dates could barely be described as dating. More like dinner and business. Well, business and dinner, if she were honest. They hadn't even gotten around to a decent makeout session—and apart from her growling, deprived sex drive, she hadn't really cared too much.

But God, she could use a little interest these days. Something fast and hot, wet and delicious. Something with stamina, so she could have him again, slow and deep. So very, very deep. She shivered, languishing for a few long seconds in the sensory fantasy. If she gave herself permission, she could almost feel strong male hands coursing over her skin, rolling her nipples into hard nubs before stroking over her quivering belly to the moist folds waiting below...

Jessica shook herself out of her imagination before something embarrassing happened. Like Lucas walking up and asking her in his direct, tactless way why she was so flushed. And really, she shouldn't have to tell him. Four months was a long time to go without being pinned by a hard body that knew how to turn hers into a satisfied puddle.

The only problem was, Lucas never seemed interested in pinning her. Or maybe she just wasn't interested in getting pinned after getting to know him better.

Which left her between a rock and a not hard enough place.

Frowning to herself, she nearly missed Lucas walking in.

At least, it *looked* like Lucas.

But it...didn't.

Same midnight hair, if somewhat longer. Expertly cut too, which wasn't like him at all. Truth be told, it looked a lot better than her own brown tresses ever did. He was wearing a suit as well. A nice one. Dove gray with a jewel-toned blue shirt that made his eyes glow from across the room. She couldn't remember anything about Lucas *glowing* before.

He spoke to the waitress for a moment, smiling so casually that Jessica was glad to be sitting. As it was, her chin fell off her hand, making her jar the table and rock the water glasses. Lucas had *dimples*? If she hadn't seen him eat, she would never have been sure he had *teeth*. Since when did he have dimples?

His easy grin might as well have set off a seismic shift through the restaurant, especially given the drunken response of the teen hostess he was talking to. Jessica's hands suddenly didn't know what to do with themselves, one pressing itself to her suddenly tightening thighs and the other automatically smoothing her hair. That couldn't be Lucas. It just couldn't be.

Even across the distance, Jessica could see countless differences, far more drastic than the eye-catching suit and the stunning smile. His hands were in his pockets, casually dipped in place while he chatted. Chatted! His broad shoulders looked somehow wider. And he wasn't standing with his usual rigid posture, instead swaying a bit as if hearing some kind of music in his head that kept him perpetually upbeat. Lucas Lonnigan didn't have an upbeat bone in his body.

In short...he looked like someone had finally flipped his switch and lit him up. Jessica stopped wondering who when Lucas's eyes met hers and he walked across the room to her, smile still intact and growing warmer by the second.

Somewhere in her head—faint and from a nearly forgotten warning system—a Chastity Alarm started sounding.

"Hello Jessica," he said softly, bending down to kiss her cheek—did his lips give her a caress?—sending shivers from her now-flaming cheekbone through her neck to her spine and on down to regions that did not need the tingling buzz of pleasure.

The pitch on the alarm warped in speed and scale, starting from its mild *do* and shifting to a breakneck, warbled *la*.

He slid into the booth across from her, not bumping her feet even once, though he always had before. A new equation to calculate better body positioning in average booth confines?

"Hi," she said, and she felt flames rise higher on her cheeks when her voice sounded breathless. Good lord, she was here to break up with the man! She had no business getting all flustered because he'd found some way to embody candy-apple sex when he walked. At least that much was pure Lucas—the timing was completely off.

Somehow, acknowledging that fact was not reassuring.

"Did I keep you waiting long?" He caught her gaze and leaned forward as if her answer was important to him. Had his eyes always been this blue? And God, was that cologne *his*? It hinted at sophistication, a cool but inviting scent teasing her senses. Masculine, but light. Fresh.

She forced her eyes to open, hoping he hadn't noticed how she'd leaned closer and inhaled deeply. "No, only a few minutes." She hastened to correct herself when his smile turned sheepish. "I'm always early, you know that."

He nodded and reached for his water. Oh, to drop her head in her hands right now. But no, she had to remain poised. She could not watch his jaw tip up slightly, or stare at his Adam's apple as it moved up and down while he swallowed. When had that become sexy? The man was drinking water, for Pete's sake. And yet, her awareness of him—of the lips that had gone from merely sensual to hypnotizing, the cleanly shaven jaw with the slight shadow of dark beard waiting to escape, the tanned throat leading to the hollow where his shirt parted, revealing a secret curling chest hair or two—refused to tamp down.

So he was wearing a suit. So he'd smiled. He was still Lucas Lonnigan, boringly bored financial analyst.

See, she told herself as she sighed in relief, *he's playing with his tableware. Who other than Lucas does that?* She'd noticed his quirk for keeping everything at right angles at about their second meeting. He lined up his pencils and his papers like a religious fanatic. Whenever they ate together, he rearranged his place setting automatically, pushing the dish and bowl into a precisely straight stack on the linen placemat and squaring it to the table. The process would be repeated on the napkin and utensils. By the time he finished, he'd have ignored most of what she'd said and she'd be debating using her own fork to get his attention.

Good old Lucas. He hadn't really changed, she was just looking for things to notice because she apparently needed a hard body more than she'd realized. He was as completely uninteresting as ever. A man uninspired by her and she was equally uninspired by him. All they really did was work together and she needed that to become the recognized focus of their relationship.

Breaking up now would keep things even between them. No harm, no foul. He wasn't her last chance for sex in the world, but he *was* her best chance at winning her cases for a long time to come. Nothing mattered to her more, raging hormones or no. His body might be fabulous, but his brain was priceless.

And until she replaced him, she had an amazing vibrator at home.

She smiled, her center returned. *This is the best course. I'm not sleeping with you. I'm not thinking about sleeping with you. I'm thinking only about reaffirming our mutually beneficial professional connection before kicking you to the curb and finding the hottest, most forgettable man for the one night stand of his dreams.*

Then he looked up and grinned sheepishly when he realized she was watching him, stopped what he was doing and blew all her reassurances to hell.

"So how've you been, Jess? Had a busy week?"

She frowned at the diminutive of her name, but figured it was just a slip on his part. She was already breaking up with him, she didn't have to browbeat him. "I'm sure the average superhero still has me beat, but I'm gaining on them."

He blinked at her. Surprised? It wasn't like he didn't know what her workload was like. There *was* a reason they only met on occasional Saturday nights. He recovered in a flash by clasping his hands together in front of him and offering her his entire attention. The sensation was enough to stagger her.

"Anything particularly interesting or just your run of the mill?" Those eyes that had never seemed so bright blinked at her, patiently waiting for her to pick up the discussion, but his tone set off other kinds of alarms in her ear. Run of the mill *what*? He'd trailed it off faintly. Waiting for her to fill in the blank?

"You know, same old, same old." She frowned. Something strange was going on, she could feel it. If she could only get the desirous fog out of her brain, she might be able to put her finger on what. "Writing wills, helping tax dodgers, saving stodgy old men from accounting software. I might have a few references for you in that department, actually."

"Uh—great." The light in his eyes dimmed at the sound of work.

Okay, this was getting weird.

"Lucas, are you okay?" she finally had to ask. "You look...different."

"Really?" That seemed to perk him back up. "I'm trying a few new things."

"Like the suit?" And the personality?

"You like it?"

"It's certainly...different." There had to be another word to describe him, but she couldn't think of one. He looked so disappointed that she smiled and went for honesty. "Yes, I like it. It's very professional."

He almost seemed to preen. "It's my favorite."

"And you wore it for me? I should be touched." She would be, but she had the strongest sense that he wore it for himself. She just couldn't be sure if that was good or bad.

"But you're not." No offense showed. If anything, he looked amused. "Hmmm, guess I'll have to find something else to satisfy you."

Banter. Interesting. She risked propping her chin on her hand again. "So how about you? What have you been doing in the last three weeks?"

"Three weeks?" His eyes widened with what could almost pass as genuine shock. "I'm not dumb enough to have left you alone for three weeks, am I?"

She couldn't resist it. "I guess you are."

Again, no offense. Instead, the corner of his mouth turned up, slow, as if pleased to be challenged. *Oy vey*. "You must be reading your calendar wrong, I'd never be that stupid."

"Come on now, Lucas," she chided, wondering when he'd learned to play games. And with who? "I refuse to believe *you* of all people can't count to three."

That made him laugh. Startled, Jessica's elbow fell off the edge of the table. She looked around the room to see if anyone else was noticing the miracle, but no one was particularly interested.

"I know it probably doesn't mean much now, but I'm really sorry. I should have called to explain. I guess time got away from me, is all."

"Along with a few other things," she murmured. Like his mind. First a laugh, then an apology. She was tempted to pinch herself.

"I'm trying to better myself. What do you think?"

Jessica eyed him suspiciously. He'd sounded startlingly close to requesting a compliment. Odd considering Lucas once told her that compliments were an unusable commodity. "I think the body snatchers got a hold of you." She leaned forward again, but this time, he leaned back. "Are you on medication?"

His expression darkened, looking a little grim and a lot more like himself.

"Okay, maybe not the body snatchers, but something is definitely off about you." More like everything.

"I'm sure I'll be back to my old self in no time," he groused, going back to rearranging his napkin.

Wouldn't that be a shame? But how could she say that to him?

Thankfully, she didn't have to because the waitress came and took their orders. She requested a small steak and potato plate, he ordered the seafood platter. A platter...from a man she generally had to push into ordering more than lightly flavored pasta. She raised an eyebrow but didn't comment.

"So tell me what else I've been an ass about."

She blinked. "I wouldn't say—"

"I would," he interrupted, almost cheerily. "There's no reason to beat around the bush. I'm a pain in the neck most of the time. Always calculating things that I should just accept. My idea of scintillating conversation is arguing over how far into infinity prime numbers actually go." He shrugged, his mouth once again stealing her attention as it quirked into a self-mocking grimace. "Believe me, it's a boring conversation."

"Not if you love numbers," she felt compelled to argue.

His bright eyes widened. "You love numbers that much?"

"Well, no—"

His commiserating nod was softened by an effacing grin. "See? Ass."

She shook her head. "You're being too hard on yourself."

"Okay, then, let's be hard on you. Did I ever ask you why you decided to become a lawyer?"

Her enjoyment in the conversation froze. "No, but it's not a very interesting story."

"Sure it is." He dive-bombed her with a full-fledged smile, his even teeth, dual dimples and mischievous eyes setting the chastity alarm squealing until it died a loud, overworked demise. Beneath her blouse, a flush rose up her chest while she shifted in her seat to offset the sudden fluttering of her sex. Dear God, one look and she was wet. She hadn't known that was actually possible.

Why? Why did he have to suddenly be sexy? Was this his revenge? Some pesky man-pride trick designed to make her regret what she was about to do? Well, she wouldn't regret breaking up with him and she certainly wouldn't regret not sleeping with him just because of a grin.

She watched him take another quick drink of water and bit back a gurgled groan when he licked his lips afterwards.

Stop it. I am not going to sleep with you. I already made up my mind.

"So, come on, spill. What made you want to be a rebel with a cause?"

"I'd hardly call finance law a cause." It was a means to an end.

"So I guess that means young Jessie wasn't a lawbreaker? No heinous juvenile records or handmade shiv collections?"

She made a face. "Please, don't call me Jessie. It makes me feel like a five-year-old. Or a man." Which, in her experience, was often the same thing.

His gaze coursed over her, leaving tingling trails of awareness everywhere it touched—her hands, her breasts, her throat. Damn the table for being in the way of everything below the waist. "Believe me, honey, no one could confuse you with a man."

I am absolutely not going to sleep with you.

"Or are you trying to sidetrack me from the shivs? Got a little Sharon Stone in you I don't know about?"

She was a lot of things he didn't know about, a fact that finally gave her a dash of sobriety. Things no one would ever find out about. "I swear. I don't even own an ice pick."

"Oh good. So tell me about being a lawyer."

"I'm starting to think *you're* the lawyer," she grumbled. Lucas had never been this tenacious before. If she didn't want to discuss something, he never bothered asking again. And he never pouted the way he was doing now, giving her a nearly hangdog expression she couldn't help chuckling at. "I'm not being difficult, there's nothing to tell. I wanted a long-term career. It was either be a lawyer or be a cop. Since I have the upper body strength of a gnat, I went for law school. Too bad I underestimated how heavy the books were going to be."

He laughed, the sound another sensual stroke she could almost swear she felt slide down the side of her throat before heating the flesh between her breasts. "You should try carting around some of the SEC regulation manuals."

She frowned, losing the seductive sensation at a stray thought. "I didn't know you did any trading."

For a second, his smile faltered. "Hobby."

"Uh-huh." Okay, this was getting beyond weird. "Lucas—"

"So what do you think about kids? Do you like them?"

The subject change threw her. "I—what?"

“Nothing. Tell me more about you. What do you do when you’re not working out with law books?”

She was about to dig into him for answers but the waitress arrived with their food and he looked so deliriously happy to see it she had trouble holding on to her irritation.

What followed then was only slightly less disturbing than their conversation. Poking at her own baked potato, she could only stare and feel slightly voyeuristic while Lucas began making love to his food. First came the expressions of ecstasy when he inhaled the aroma of the lobster bisque. He actually licked his lips at the mere sight of a calamari and crab salad and, unless she was wrong, he mumbled a brief, altogether too lustful prayer over the baked whitefish and oysters on the half-shell.

Good Lord, she’d had entire sexual relationships with less foreplay.

He made quick work of the two oysters, managing to make them look delicious while the slimy little puddles slipped out of the shell and into his mouth with a quick sip.

“I hope those things don’t give you any ideas,” she murmured. She already disliked the ideas watching him drink them had given *her*. Images of him sipping at her breasts exactly the same way, licking all the way down between her thighs where he would suck at the pearl he found there, drinking down every drop she’d give him...

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry,” he replied so casually she wondered if she should be insulted. “I started having ideas the second I saw you sitting here.”

Her fork clattered to her plate when he gave her a quick wink before spearing a piece of coconut shrimp.

“But you have to promise not to ask me what they are, because I won’t tell you,” he continued, his cheek full on one side, giving him an endearing chipmunk look. “I know it’s going to take all your willpower to control yourself, but I’m a man with ethics. I’d never allow a woman to take advantage of me until at least the third date.”

She sputtered with unexpected laughter. “This is our eighth date.”

“Oh, then by all means,” he said, the invitation in his eyes nearly as compelling as the slight husky tone of his voice. “Take advantage of me.”

Her hand shook as she took hold of her fork again, determined to eat without making a fool of herself. “Maybe next time.” With a start, she realized there wasn’t supposed to be a next time. “I mean...oh, can’t you be quiet and let a woman enjoy her meat?”

His grin spread wider and she realized what she’d said.

Poise, Jessica, her mind ordered when she felt her eyes begin to bulge.

“Far be it from me to come between a woman and a little hot beef.”

She bit her lip and decided maybe poise was slipping out of her reach. She just had to hope self-control didn’t disappear along with it.

Chapter Two

As they ate, Lucas kept up an easy flow of conversation, thankfully letting her off the meat hook, as it were, but not any of the others. Finally, she gave in and started answering, just to make him stop.

"I like plants," she finally admitted, stirring sugar into her coffee after their plates were cleared.

"What kind?"

She blinked at him. "The plant kind."

Did he have to look so adorable when he was trying not to say something to hurt her feelings? Usually, it never seemed to occur to him whether she had any to worry about.

"There's all kinds of different plants. Ones with flowers, ones with colored leaves, miniature kinds, there's even one that's a carnivore. I don't recommend that one for you though. They bite."

She shrugged off the corny joke. "I don't care about botany. I just collect them because they're pretty." And without legs, they at least could be trusted to stay where you put them. "I'm a girl, I like pretty things."

"What other pretty things do you collect?" He set his elbow on the tabletop, leaning his temple on his knuckles. She stared at him, wishing she could feel as comfortable in her skin as he seemed to. Nothing deterred him. Veiled insults spilled off his back. Sarcasm only encouraged him. And yet, despite all the dodging, she couldn't remember the last time she had a conversation last so long when it wasn't a deposition.

What would it be like to get dressed in the morning, knowing people would see what you wore and like it? To enter a room, be noticed and be absolutely comfortable about it? There were few things she craved in the world, but confidence was one of them and Lucas Lonnigan's radiated off him in sensual waves, wrapping around her like a lover's arms. It lured her to lower her guard, to give him anything he wanted, because he'd return it ten times over with indescribable pleasure.

If she hadn't decided to break up with him, she might just be tempted.

"Stamps," she nearly barked, the lie jolting her back to reality with the mental screech of car wreck. She stifled the urge to shake herself at her own obviousness. What the hell was so pretty about stamps.

But if he noticed she'd slipped out of his spell, he didn't show it. "Do you have many?"

She shook her head. "But I seem to be starting a lot of new things lately." Like lying. And lusting to the point that she might actually have an orgasm all by herself...

His eyebrows rose faintly. "Turning a new leaf?"

Ha. As if anyone would believe that. “No, nothing so drastic. I have goals, *important* goals. Things I want to see and do and be.” Things no amount of lectures from her well-meaning but...*eccentric* secretary would derail her from achieving. Though she could steal an oft-given quote of Dory’s, before he started asking questions about her goals. “But I don’t want to be *just* my goal when I get there. A new hobby from time to time helps round me out.”

His head picked up, his eyes taking on a gleam of something she was tempted to call recognition.

“Everyone should try new things every once in a while. Experiment.” Eying his interested expression nervously, she added, “Eat some of those gourmet foods that sound scary when you hear what they’re made of but taste amazing once you give them a try. Go on a trip somewhere you’ve never been before.” That would be just about anywhere for her. Her one hidden fantasy slipped through her lips before she could stop it. “Shop like money is no object.”

He laughed and she blushed at her own vehemence. “You could combine all those things into one trip, if you wanted. They say the shopping in Hong Kong is the most amazing in the world. You could go there, get some stamps, try the food and buy anything you want.”

She smiled. “Well, we don’t usually get what we want just because we ask for it.” She knew that better than most. “That’s why I said every once in a while.”

“How do you get what you want, then, if not by asking?”

“You earn it,” she replied simply. He was old enough to know the truth about life. No one handed you anything for free. If they did, it usually meant they were going to take more from you than you would have agreed to pay.

He nodded, seeming to understand her. But why did she get the feeling he was about to disagree? “So, if I said, ‘Run away with me to Hong Kong tonight’, what would you do?”

“Turn you down.” Obviously.

“Because?”

Her amusement melted away. “Are you serious?”

“About the invitation or the question?”

“Both?” God help her if he meant that haphazard invitation.

He watched her for a few pregnant moments before sighing in resignation. “Much as I’d love to take you to Hong Kong, my boss would probably have a fit.”

“You’re self-employed.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine, *I* would probably have a fit.”

“I think you’re having one right now.”

Finally, she got him to frown. It looked wrong on his face and she felt a curious dismay at putting it there. “Why would you turn me down, Jess? Truthfully.”

“It’s Jessica. And I’d turn you down—*truthfully*—because flying off to Hong Kong at the drop of a hat is a ridiculous idea. Rational people do not drop everything just to go have fun. They have responsibilities and duties and...and...”

He leaned his head to the side, as if measuring her features.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she finally said.

“Like what?”

Like you want to kiss me. Or maybe she just wanted to be kissed. Wanted an excuse to keep her thoughts to herself. An excuse to touch his mouth with her own, just for a second. Just to know how he felt. How he tasted. Was he as playful a kisser as he had been a person tonight? Or was he intense, the way she’d known him to be over the last several months?

She’d never know because she was there to break up with him.

“Like you think you’re getting the better of me. I don’t lose arguments.”

“I’m starting to see that.” He straightened in his seat. “There’s a right answer, you know.”

“To running off to Hong Kong with you?”

Nodding, his gaze grew hot again when she inadvertently pulled the edge of her bottom lip between her teeth. “Do you want to know what it is?”

Yes. She held in a gasp as the impulse nearly made it to her lips. “I think I’ll claim the Fifth on that one.”

With a disappointed tsk, his grin slipped back in place where it belonged. “Maybe next time.” He gestured to the waitress for the check.

This was it. Her cue to tell him she wanted to end the “romantic” aspect of their relationship. Assure him they could remain friends and professional acquaintances. She even opened her mouth to do it.

But she couldn’t get the words out.

Why? Why did he choose tonight to be the most interesting man she’d ever met? The most attractive and interesting? She stared at his mouth as he spoke to the waitress in a kind undertone. From the moment she met him, she’d had an appreciation for his mouth. Tonight appreciation had become temptation. Possibly obsession. Would it soften the way it had when he’d kissed her cheek? Could she still turn him away if she found out? Where else would she want those lips if one kiss led to another?

She shifted in her seat, the flutter in her sex a full-on clench of desire now. It would be so good...to feel his skin, hot and slick against hers while his mouth suckled and nibbled and fed on her one inch at a time. To finally touch his chest, to taste every muscle of that perfect body. To have him pounding into her with all that latent power she sensed, driving all thought and tension away with orgasm after orgasm. She panted as silently as she could, her head down so he wouldn’t see what her own imagination was doing to her.

She had to get off this sexual kick. She wasn't going to sleep with him. It wasn't right to drop him—and she *was* going to drop him—after she'd gotten her rocks off. If she went with him now, he'd think there was something more to their relationship but there wasn't. Apart from this one dinner, they'd barely had conversations. Of course, that didn't stop her rocks from clamoring for some offing.

Could women even use the term “rocks”?

The slight mental digression had her considering Lucas's rocks and it all went downhill again from there.

With a struggle, Jessica finally dragged her mind from the gutter.

“I'm not going to sleep with you,” she whispered, eyes closed, belly tightening in rejection, because saying it mentally was not working anymore.

It didn't help. She might say she wouldn't sleep with him, but she definitely wanted to. The tingling sensation Lucas's gaze evoked, the prospect of being ridden to bonelessness and coming so many times she lost her voice was sounding more and more like a rational thing to do. But it was wrong to use him. To encourage him. When he was uncaring and in need of the nearest flat surface in the worst way, she might have been able to do it and leave without much conscience. Lord knew he had needed the de-stressing as much as she did. But this warmer, charming Lucas that attracted her mind as well as her body?

“Not a chance in Hell. I don't care if you beg, I'm not going to sleep with you,” she repeated.

“Jess?”

She looked up, horrified to find him standing closer than she expected, waiting for her to rise, hand out and an eyebrow raised. As she reached to take his hand, she felt the flush that had never quite left her chest rise to the embarrassing heights of her face

Lucas helped her to her feet then reached down for the check she hadn't even seen arrive, so he could study it intently.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking to see if I'd ordered kneepads with dinner. Nope, no begging planned tonight, but I'm always open to changing things up a little. What did you have in mind?”

She pulled it from his hand and set it back on the table with the crisp bills he'd already placed there, checking around briefly to make sure no one else had heard. Her cheeks were already burning, she didn't want utter humiliation to cause spontaneous combustion. “I'm sorry, that just slipped out.”

His dimples made another appearance. She almost whimpered. “So were you trying to convince yourself or me?”

Placing a cool hand to the side of her face, she blew out a shaky breath. “Honestly, I'm not sure.”

“Any particular reason you need convincing?” He led her out of the café, nodding at the waitress smiling after them. Once they cleared the front doors, he looked around, as if trying to decide which

direction to go. Which was just ridiculous. Lucas always knew exactly where he was and where he was headed. Usually so did she.

For the first time in years, she didn't.

All she knew for sure was that she wanted him. Not plastic. Warmth. Laughter. Passion. Seduction. Yes, that was it. He'd been working a slow seduction all night, as if he'd come to her with the express purpose of sliding into her bed, into her body and into every fantasy she could think of. The only thing holding her back was her conscience.

She could admit when she was ready to be had. She couldn't begin to explain how ready she was.

She stared at him until he met her gaze again, his friendly smile slowly fading. Judging by the expression on his face, he could see it without her saying a word. So why didn't he act on it? Why not push his advantage? Why did he look both interested and cautious?

And yet, his uncertainty sent a slight thrill through her. After all his flirting, *he* was the one pulling back? Oh no, not after all that flirting and stimulating and promising, however unspoken. Something predatory twined inside her at the thought of going home without him.

"Jess?"

Deliciously predatory.

"I want you to come home with me," she said, smoothing a tendril of her hair back behind her ear. The wind and the air from the traffic beside them kept the rest of her hair whipping at her back, but she ignored it. She kept every ounce of her attention on him.

His eyes remained clouded. "What happened to your determination not to sleep with me?"

She shrugged, hoping to cover the shivers...and the fears that he would turn her down. As if his rejection had the power to hurt when she'd set herself up ages ago never to be hurt again. "When you're getting to the point of talking yourself out of something, it's because you've already decided to do it." And she had. Probably the second he'd walked in the door of the restaurant.

She wanted this man, *this* Lucas, in her bed more than she'd wanted anyone, ever. She'd settle for the floor of her foyer if she had to, but eventually, she wanted him on any bed she could find. As many beds. Her mind quickly went wild with possibilities while her panties grew damn near soaked.

She tugged on his hand, leading west, toward her apartment. "Come on."

"Aperitifs?"

"I was thinking sex, but if you'd like a drink first, sure."

Again that laugh of his. He didn't pull away, as she half-expected, but he didn't exactly keep pace. With those long legs he'd have no trouble outdistancing her. Which probably meant...

"Um, Jess?"

She should have known being brazen was a mistake with Lucas. The man had prudence in his DNA. New clothes or not, he wasn't the type to rush. She spun around, looking into his eyes and seeing a definite

response to her. She wasn't bad looking, really, and there wasn't anyone she trusted of the male persuasion the way she did Lucas, even if she did mean to break up with him. He probably needed reassurance.

"I know we haven't had this kind of relationship, but don't worry. I won't expect anything from you afterwards." She smiled up at him, hoping he'd understand everything she implied in that one sentence. "I promise."

He didn't appear to be as soothed as she expected. Good lord...was it possible he hadn't done this before? It would certainly explain a lot about his usual grumpy personality, not to mention his sudden uncertainty.

"I'll be gentle," she added, smiling at his obvious misgivings.

He smiled back, wryly. "It's not that. I'm kind of liking your aggressive side."

"But?" A man didn't slow a woman intent on sex unless there was a *but* somewhere.

"There's something I haven't told you."

That he was going to break up with her? No, no, no, not yet. Once he got those words out, he'd go all noble on her and she'd go home frustrated.

"Tell me later." She rose up on her toes to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him.

She'd never kissed Lucas before, not apart from the occasional cheek kiss. She'd never even held his hand. It was different than she'd imagined. Softer. Gentler. Perfect. Unwilling to think about why, she closed her eyes and licked his lips, craving a deeper taste.

He'd been too surprised at first to respond, but he warmed up quickly, meeting her kiss with his own, flirting with her, stroking and soothing her before tilting in a different direction and daring her to follow.

His lips took over, commanding, rewarding her when she did by rolling their hips together, leaving no question in her mind as to his interest now. The thick length of his cock teased with every swivel, causing an almost painful throbbing in her own moistening folds. Never enough to let her know exactly what he was offering, instead it hinted at the satisfaction he could give and she pressed closer, aching for relief.

Oxygen became a thing of the past and she couldn't have cared less. She slipped her fingers into his hair, sampled the silkiness at his nape. He slid his hands fully over her ass, just resting there a second before caressing it in a way that made her whole body leap. Strong fingers slipped over the bottom curve, pulling her apart enough to make her wish he could slip them between her thighs right then, but he retreated and she groaned against his lips.

"Say you're coming home with me," she whispered when she finally pulled away.

He looked down at her, looking dazed and hungry, shocked and awed. That might have had something to do with the grip she had on his lapels, but she didn't think so. For the first time ever, Lucas was seeing a woman when he looked at her, and he wanted her.

"Honey, I think I might just follow you anywhere you lead."

She smiled, letting go of his coat and smoothing her hands over his chest. She didn't say another word, just turned around and let him do exactly that.

Chapter Three

This was *such* a bad idea.

Kyle watched his twin's date stroll ahead. He had to remind himself that Jessica Saunders was Lucas's girlfriend. Sort of. Just yesterday he'd been in his brother's kitchen, assuring Lucas that he had purely innocent intentions and now, here he was, seriously thinking about taking this woman to bed.

Who was he kidding? Thinking had gone out the window when he agreed to pretend to be Lucas for this date. Her swaying hips entranced him as she walked a few paces in front of him. A car might hit him and he probably wouldn't notice.

Lucas was going to drop this woman?

Kyle made a mental note to have his brother's sanity checked. Again.

When he first arrived, he thought he'd have to ask for her by name. Lucas had been pretty sparing in his description: mid-back-length brown hair, fair skin, brown eyes, most likely wearing a gray dress, generally preferred the third table on the right side of the room. He'd said nothing about the full thickness of that hair, looking more like a mane with hints of red to it. Fair skin? Kyle had dated models who had to get theirs chemically peeled for such fresh-faced smoothness. Her eyes were *not* brown. Brown was the color of mud or leather. Hers were more of a hazel, with hints of color all over the iris, and they shone with intelligence. He hadn't seen that in a while, especially when it wasn't coupled with greed. She'd zinged him again and again all night long, making him actually work to keep up with her wit. As for her dress...

About the only thing Lucas got right was the color.

Until tonight, Kyle had never realized he had a fetish for the sexy teacher look. When she'd been sitting, of course he'd noticed the way the square cut of the dress molded its fine tweed to full breasts, how the crisp white shirt beneath it—covering her from collar to shoulders to wrists—probably protected her skin from the fabric's scratchiness. When she stood up and he saw the dress hugging her down to her knees in a pencil-skirt, giving way to perhaps the most spectacular pair of legs he'd ever seen, all he could think was, "*Hellooo, Miss Saunders, won't you let me dust your erasers?*" Just as creamy smooth as her throat and hands, her ankles looked like they'd fit in the circle of his forefinger and thumb with room to spare.

If she'd been wearing glasses and shiny lip-gloss, he'd have gone down on his knees and begged her to let him test his theory.

Hell, he wouldn't mind getting on his knees anyway.

When she said she wasn't going to sleep with him, he'd been both surprised and dismayed. He hadn't come to dinner expecting to have sex with Lucas's date. On the other hand, he hadn't come on this date expecting to meet someone as incredible as Jessica, either.

So he followed her to her apartment, her sweetly curving behind waving at him, luring him toward her like some kind of spaceship in a tractor beam.

You should have told her you weren't Lucas...

He'd meant to. At dinner, once he realized that he liked this woman too much not to want to see her again, he'd tried to figure a way to work it in. But the proper way never seemed to come to him. He couldn't say, "*Hi, I've been lying to you all night. I'm not really Lucas. I'm his twin brother. Will you date me?*"

She'd have knocked him over the back of the booth.

He tried, on the street, knowing he couldn't go to bed with her and not say who he was. She wanted Lucas...didn't she? He got a little confused when she said they didn't have that kind of relationship. Then she kissed him and he decided then and there he'd be dryer lint if she wanted him to.

So here he was, at the stoop of a brownstone apartment building, about to do something very wrong if he went inside. "You're sure you want me to come up with you?"

She nodded again.

Here's your chance. Tell her now.

Jessica's eyes were smoky in the moonlight. Her hand found his lapel again, tiptoeing over to his shirt collar and touching the skin just beneath it. He shuddered, catching them both by surprise.

Tell her.

Go away, he thought back.

Tell her!

Jessica touched him again, the tingle just as strong when she placed two fingertips on him, sliding her hand around to his nape. He closed his eyes, inhaling the soft honey scent of her and the flowers on the vines climbing up the front of the building, willing his hormones to stop trying to make decisions for him. Her soft lips grazed his cheek, a sliding kind of kiss that was almost innocent and so much more seductive than the overt come-ons he'd had in his time. She wasn't fragile. She didn't fake her response or her sensuality. Her gracefulness wasn't a pose.

When was the last time he'd had a little grace in his life?

"Come up with me." If this was what the spider sounded like, he suddenly understood why a fly might listen.

"I have to tell you something," he managed, just as her kiss finally found his mouth. She teased his upper lip with the tip of her tongue. Both arms slid around his neck again and firm, full breasts pressed against his chest.

“No, you don’t,” she whispered. “You have to come upstairs. Just for tonight.”

Another lick had him turning his face up to hers, had him kissing her back, tasting her smile and walking up a step to get closer. But she backed up at the same time, step after step. Before he realized it, they were inside the building, moving down the hall to an old elevator at the back. His gut clenched with the first response that had nothing to do with Jessica. He started to brace himself, as he always did, but then she kissed him again, drawing all his attention back to her, her body, her taste. He never got another moment to worry about the elevator.

Just as the doors opened for them, her hand found his zipper and slid it down faster than he could blink. Or his reflexes were slowed by the desire to let her have her way. Next thing he knew, her fingers were stroking the edge of his cock through the smooth cotton of his shorts, a moan of satisfaction purring from her throat as she gripped him.

“My mouth just watered,” she murmured with a throaty chuckle, the ball of her thumb tracing the rounded edge of his cockhead. She tightened her hold through the fabric, pumping once, twice, making his hips jerk toward her. “I don’t know who’s going to enjoy it more when I get my lips around this.”

“Honey, you keep saying things like that and you’re gonna find out.”

Jessica lifted her face to his, licking at his mouth with tiny flicks of her tongue, a teasing smile telling him exactly what she was imagining. Giving in, he sank both hands into her hair and his tongue into her mouth. She matched the pace of her stroke with that of his, pushing her body against his but never letting go of her prize, and if he had his way, she never would.

Then the doors parted behind him, nearly tumbling them into the hall to the sound of their surprised laughter.

A man walking down a hall with his pants open and a raging hard-on should be worried about looking ridiculous. But Kyle could only think of her, dressed all prim and proper, her kiss-swollen lips and lust-glittering gaze the best kind of contradiction. She only turned away once, to look in her purse for her keys and unlock her front door. Then it swung open and he could see her hallway before them. A long, beige mile to a door at the opposite end where paradise waited...if he just held on to the lie.

Inside his head, scales began tipping back and forth.

Beautiful woman...

A lie.

Bedroom eyes, silky hands taking hold of his lapels again and pulling him inside...

A Lie.

Warm breath, delicious scent, and a husky laugh that made his balls ache...

You’re lying!

Kyle made himself jerk away from her too-tempting lips. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t sleep with a woman who thought he was his brother. He’d done some shitty things in his time, but he hadn’t sunk that

low yet. Women always knew the score when he was with them: no commitments, no *lies*, his own personal code of dishonor that had served him well for fifteen years. He'd *never* had to lie to woman to get her into bed and he wasn't going to start now.

He looked down at Jessica's flushed face, her hands pulling him closer with hungry urgency and knew telling her the truth meant kissing her goodbye.

He curled his hands around her wrists and shook his head at her. "Jess, I can't."

The sleepiness faded from her eyes. "Because you were going to break up with me, right?"

"What?" Damn it, her question completely threw off his feeble nobility.

"You think I don't know why you've been avoiding me for the last month? I'm not stupid. I know we're not suited for each other in the long run. I'm not *asking* for the long run."

"I wouldn't ca—"

"The truth is, the only reason I wanted you to meet me tonight was because *I* was going to break up with *you*."

"You were?" Was that a green light flickering out in left field? His faded moral code was getting fuzzy. "Why didn't you?"

She let her hands drop from his sides and wrapped her arms around herself instead. Shrugging, she turned away from him. He closed the front door and stepped closer to her. Closer to the door at the end of the hall, too, though he tried to ignore that part.

"You were so different tonight. So vivid. We've never clicked before. Suddenly you were smiling and laughing and interested in me. Suddenly..."

"Suddenly what?" he asked, still following her, pulling her around to face him. Why her answer meant so much, he couldn't say. It wasn't as if he hadn't been turned down before. Or been left wanting. Usually, sex was a take-it-or-leave-it experience. He'd had plenty enough not to go home licking his wounds if he didn't get any. But tonight—no, *she*—was different.

She smiled weakly, her eyes meeting his. She wasn't the confident lawyer now. Nor the pleasantly prickly date, evading questions with surgical precision. She was a woman, soft and unsure, her voice faltering while she stared at him as if she could see every vulnerable place inside him too.

She leaned into the hand he didn't realize he'd brought up to cradle her cheek, her lashes casting a dark shadow on her cheeks. "Suddenly sexy."

His conscience silenced its yelling. "You didn't think I was sexy before tonight?"

She frowned, looking more uncomfortable than ever. "Well, you've always been good-looking...but, no, I'm sorry. You were just Lucas."

Just Lucas? "And now?"

She sighed, her breath brushing his face. "Why are you asking me this?"

"Please, Jess. It's important."

Her lashes lifted and Kyle could have kicked himself. Lucas would never say please, not without severe blood loss.

Slowly, she curled her lips between her teeth, struggling with options he could only guess at. Would she throw him out now? Had she finally figured out all his mistakes? Or was she simply trying to find the words to explain?

“It’s like you’re someone else entirely and...”

Deep in his chest, hope licked a flame to life. If only he had a clue what he was hoping for her to do.

“Whoever you are tonight is someone I want to be with. Someone I think really wants to be with me.”

He smiled, relief washing through him. His fingers stroked her cheek, amazed by the silkiness of it, excited by the tingle traveling up his arm. She put her hands back to his sides, rising on her toes to meet his descending mouth, holding on to the folds of his shirt to maintain her balance. He hadn’t exactly made the decision to kiss her, but he knew he had no other option. It was kiss her or stop breathing.

Her hands started working on his shirt buttons and his found the zipper at her back. She moaned into his mouth when the dress loosened, then moaned deeper when her palms found the heat of his chest. He might have done a little moaning too, when the stiff dress parted enough for him to slip his hands inside and cup the smooth globes of her ass, blocked not at all by the satiny thong his fingertips passed over. If he weren’t hamstrung by the restraining sides of the dress, he’d have peeled that away, too, so that he could trace the crevice all the way to the soft, slick folds between her thighs. But first things first...the dress. And he’d have this whole hallway to peel her out of it, stitch by stitch, lick by lick.

She guided him backward, her hand leaving him long enough to turn a doorknob behind him. He pulled away from her, giving a fleeting glance to the door at the end of the hall.

“That’s my office,” she explained, pulling him back to her kiss. “*This* is my bedroom.”

So much for the best-laid plans... For once, he couldn’t give a shit about his plans. She had his shirt halfway down his arms and her dress was falling down one shoulder and gaping in the back. Deciding to sacrifice getting her naked first for getting her naked at all, he let go and the shirt all but threw itself across the room. They fumbled a little in the dark, tugging at clothes, dropping things and bumping into furniture. Something broke, which made her laugh, which made him hotter. The shoes were tricky, but within a minute or two, they were finally both naked, falling onto a soft dark comforter, twining together, her body pliant beneath him.

Smooth legs, toned and endless, surrounded him, one curving up the side of his body until her knee was just behind his shoulder. A whole body caress, setting his senses on fire. He wanted to press into her, to mold her against him from head to toe, and he tried, but for every touch he gave her, she glided away.

Silken breasts grazed his arm when she twisted to lead him higher on the bed. He retaliated by dragging his chin down the length of her neck. She gasped, looping her arms behind his shoulders, her back arching into the caress. His hand coursed down her flank until he could grasp her hip, letting his fingertips

move slowly over the firm muscle of her ass. Her gasp against his shoulder brought out the devil in him. He searched out the innermost curve at the top of her leg, where her skin felt untouched and, yes...wet. She shuddered and he pulled her thigh wider, opening her against his belly, hissing at the hot kiss as their flesh met.

So this is what it's like to play with fire...

Pressing her to the bed, he stopped thinking of what would please her the most. He stopped thinking entirely. His mind simply took a back seat to sensation. He willingly drowned in the scent of her, the powder-smooth hollow of her throat, the vibration of her soft mewls against his lips. Her taste—warm honey, tart strawberry—mocked every flavor he'd ever known. He ran his tongue over her nipple once, twice, before drawing the tight flesh into his mouth. She jerked at the first nip of his teeth, but soon her hands were in his hair, holding him to her. Pulling. She needn't have bothered, he wasn't going anywhere. Not when she tasted so sweet and firm against his tongue. The only thing better was when he switched from one breast to the other, pulling a moan from her, mixed with a sob of relief.

He wanted more of those sounds. Craved them. Rolling them both so he was on his back and she was crouched above him, he granted himself full, two-handed access to her. Her spine was especially sensitive, the right caress making her arch and press her hips down to where his cock bobbed, trying to get to her all by itself. The need to slip inside her, to fuck her into a screaming orgasm that would squeeze him into oblivion, almost overwhelmed him.

But he still wanted more.

He grazed his hands down her sides, grasping her hips from either side, showing her a teasing rhythm of rolling. She picked it up as if born to it, pressing her wet pussy against the hard cock waiting there, an intimate kiss of another kind. He slid easily, eagerly, between the folds that glided back and forth over the head. He couldn't stop the twitch as his flesh tried to join her, groaning when she added a dip that inched him into heaven before pulling away again. He ached to be inside her, but damn if he'd last more than a moment when he got there. Not ratcheted this high. He wouldn't be enough for her.

He slipped his right hand beneath her, keeping hold with his left on her hip, pulling her forward just enough to let his fingers slide over the hard little clit seeking attention. Since her knees were on either side of his legs, the fastest option was to simply spread his own and lock her into a wide-open position over him. She gave a soft shriek of surprise. He grinned. Gathering her moisture on his fingertips, he began the torture.

"Oh my God," she whispered, her thighs tightening on either side of him, but unable to close. She didn't fight him, moaning louder while he inspected every crevice, learning what made her sigh, what made her cry out. Did she like it when he circled the straining nub of her clit? Or when he parted her, teasing the outer edges of her opening, whispering encouragement while taking his tongue back to her nipple?

She braced herself with one hand next to his chest, the other next to his head, lowering her breasts to his mouth and lifting her hips to give him room to work. Room to move. He finally eased one finger inside her, surprised at the tightness of her muscles gripping him, nearly sucking at him. Another finger joined the first, sliding in and out together while the butt of his palm returned to the nub.

She cried out again.

He smiled.

He continued to stroke, she continued to ride. Feeling her movements growing erratic, he waited for the moment, listening to the ragged sound of her breathing, then when she tightened around his fingers, he applied a sweet sharp pressure to the suction at her nipple and sent her wildly over the edge. Her cries vibrated against his mouth and her muscles clenched on his hand in a series of ripples and contractions that felt so damn good he was almost satisfied already.

Almost.

He eased her orgasm, bringing her down gently on her side next to him while her heart tried to find its original beat and her slick body tried to cool. Finally, he pulled away to find his pants.

“Where are you going?” she asked, almost sounding afraid.

“My wallet. I need a condom.” And he damn well better have one in there. Hadn’t he put one in last week?

“I’m on the pill.”

He frowned. “You are?” Hadn’t she said she and Lucas never—

“Yup, doctor’s orders. Something about curbing my bad moods when I’m left unsatisfied.”

He laughed at her kittenish displeasure, her grasping fingers curling around his neck. At least, five of them...

“I should still—”

“All I want to feel is you. This first time, believe me, all you’ll want to feel is me.” The five fingers of her *other* hand reached for a decidedly different head, encircling his shaft like the last spear in the Amazon. She squeezed, tearing a groan from him. “Trust me,” she murmured. “I’m as safe as a Swiss bank.”

When was the last time he’d laughed this much in bed? He wasn’t sure he ever had. Bringing fingertips of his own to walk across her warm belly, he decided never to go without it again. “Do I need a special account number?”

She giggled, tugging at him, pulling him above her for a deep, sensuous kiss. “I think that one might work.” Firm strokes glided up and down his cock, jacking him so well he had to grit his teeth not to come then and there. “Why don’t you try your key?”

“My key, huh?”

“You’d be surprised what you’d unlock.”

He was sure he would be. He kissed her again, still drowning in the flavor of her when she guided him into her wet slit. With a sigh, he slid home.

It was exactly that too. Home. Exquisite liquid heat, tight and throbbing, comfort and demand, give and take, all at once. The most perfect feeling he'd ever experienced. His whole body trembled and so did hers, as if they were truly one.

"Oh my," she whispered, her eyes open wide, shimmering in the blue light of the moon through her filmy curtains. He didn't know how long he stared down into her eyes, watching emotion after emotion cross her face. Elation, fear, confusion, denial, then a careful mask that showed nothing at all.

He tried to calm himself with a breath, but there wasn't enough air in the world. Overwhelmed by the urge to cry, to cheer, to hold her close and savor her, console her, he did what his body begged for. He moved. A slow, easing stroke against the tight grasp of her pussy, then back again. And again. And again.

She clasped him close, throwing back her head and tightening her legs around him. The bed squeaked, the headboard rattled and their breaths became gasps as everything began to spin, to tighten. His muscles ached, but they couldn't stop. The pressure to stay fought with the pressure to meet his release and he couldn't decide which would give the greater pleasure.

The decision disappeared, though, with her keening cry, her muscles quivering around him like a thousand kisses all at the same time, and he exploded into her, incapable even of saying her name, though it chanted through his mind over and over again.

This was it. The moment, the woman, that would change everything about him. He knew it in his heart and mind, body and soul. This was the magic he'd always heard about and never known. A true, one-in-a-million kind of woman.

"Oh, Lucas..." she murmured, kissing his cheek and turning his blood cold.

He'd found his one in a million, all right.

But *she* thought he was someone else.

Shit.

Chapter Four

Okay, it was the coward's way out. But since he'd already done a hell of a lot of other things he wasn't proud of that night—enjoyed them immensely, of course, but he wasn't proud of them—he put the cap on it by tucking Jessica into her bed, finding his clothes and hightailing it out of her apartment.

She thought she'd just made love to Lucas.

He thought he might throw up.

Could he blame her for his own idiotic behavior? Should he feel guilty? Should he feel ashamed for what was clearly the best night of his life? God, he didn't know. Right now, he felt like a criminal. Like a kid who'd snuck out and didn't know how to get back inside the house without getting caught.

Getting caught...

Dammit, how long might it be before she tried to reach him and ended up getting Lucas? He couldn't let her—or Lucas—find out that way. Which meant, of course, he'd have to tell Lucas what happened.

He could see it now: *Hey man, can I crash on your couch? By the way, I just had the best sex of my life with your date. But she thinks she slept with you. Blankets still in the hall closet?*

Kyle groaned. His brother was going to punch a hole right through his head. And he'd deserve it. So, no. No telling Lucas until he absolutely had to. For now, he'd just head over there and run interference until he could think of a way to get out of this with his head—and his balls—intact. He just needed a plan. The chuckle that escaped him was almost bitter with disbelief. It'd have to be a fucking *perfect* plan, woven by fairies and delivered from on high, because even he wasn't that good at spinning things.

He miserably made his way to Lucas's building, inwardly awaiting execution because not a single viable thought came to mind. Of course, the lights were off in the apartment. Not to be deterred, Kyle rang the bell. No answer.

He checked his watch, scrunching his eyes in the not-so-bright light of the hall. One in the morning. Lucas slept light, the doorbell should have woken him.

Unless he wasn't home.

But in order for Lucas not to be home...he'd have to still be on Kyle's arranged date with Belinda Riggs.

That took a whole minute to sink in.

When Lucas offered to swap dates with him, it hadn't been hard to figure out why. Lucas wasn't exactly a generous soul. But Kyle had plans to meet his friend Belinda that night. Watching Lucas and

Belinda screw up what should have been an inevitable happily ever after had become something of a spectator sport for him. Every few years, the two of them would accidentally remember they were in love with each other and Kyle did his utmost to make those accidents happen in a positive way. The problem was that both of them were stubborn, cranky, miserable and determined to remain that way.

For a second, Kyle could only grin. Maybe for once they'd managed to work things out without trying to kill one another?

Then he realized that if his brother didn't come home, *he* was stuck sitting on the doorstep until Lucas returned. Damn, damn, damn. Now he not only had to find a way to explain the truth to Jessica and hide said truth from Lucas, now he had to come up with an excuse for waiting at the door all night.

Groaning, he let his body slide down the glass-and-wood door until his ass landed on the threshold. At least he was collapsing on *Lucas's* doormat. It was probably vacuumed daily. Hell, he was probably the only person other than Lucas or Belinda to ever step on it. He leaned his head back on the door and crossed his arms to get comfortable while he waited. He didn't even notice dozing off...

Until the earth moved.

The door shifted and he fell backward so hard that his head cracked on the parquet flooring of his brother's apartment. With a pained moan, he looked up at the towering figure of his twin. His sallow, angry, *rumpled* twin.

Uh-oh. "Morning, Lucas."

Lucas grunted and stepped over him.

Yup...this promised to be a fun discussion. Kyle rolled over onto his belly and let his forehead rest on the cool ground for a moment. *Note to self: do not sleep on doorsteps again.* His spine complained, his neck was tight enough to string fence and he couldn't feel his ass at all. All of which were small blessings compared to what Lucas would do to him once the truth was out.

Kyle dragged himself to his feet with the help of the doorknob. "Should I take your effervescent welcome to mean you won't be saying thank you?"

All he heard in response was another door slamming.

"I guess that means you *didn't* have a great night then," he said loudly, closing the front door, as if Lucas would listen. "Here I was hoping you and Belinda had finally settled things. Especially since you're getting home at—" he consulted his watch, "eight thirty-two in the morning. Which means you either got lucky or she locked you in her trunk again."

Nope, no response. He knew he wouldn't get one either. Lucas was already a clam. Involve him with Belinda and the man could double for an armored car. The good news was that it probably meant Lucas wouldn't care too much about Kyle's love life—not that he ever cared much in the first place.

The bad news? Who else would he talk to about it?

"I had a *great* time, thanks for asking," he yelled down the hall when he couldn't think of anyone. "Jessica's amazing. If you weren't possibly the stupidest man on Earth, you might have noticed. And while we're on the subject of your dubious intelligence—" he put a hand on the wall while he tossed off his shoes one at a time, making as loud a clunk down the hall as he could, "—I *knew* you were up to something when you came up with this stupid date swap idea. I didn't know what, but I knew you had something up your sleeve. I've met rocks more giving than you, but I went anyway, didn't I? Don't see me complaining because you figured out Jessica was going to break up with you last night, do you? No. I'm happy I went. You hear me, *happy*!

"Jessica *loved* me," he called out a little louder because Lucas hated being thwarted. "She thinks I'm *sexy*. She thinks I'm *interesting*."

She thinks you're Lucas, his conscience reminded him, stopping him mid-rant.

Damn it.

"She's going to kill us both." All the false cheer seeped out of him. He dropped his head into his hands and then ran his fingers through his hair before pulling at whole clumps, which turned out to still be sore from when Jessica pulled on them while she came apart beneath him.

What a mess.

"I thought she was great." He didn't yell this time, talking more to himself than to his truculent sibling. "Really great. Like, the-best-great-there-is kind of great. And she's going to hate me." His voice trailed off as he looked miserably around the room. No miraculous arrival of his brother. Just the phone, which he vaguely remembered hearing ring through the night, on a long slim table, sitting next to the answering machine, a few feet away from the front door. Mr. Analytical's keys were in the bowl there too, probably so he could unload his personality while collecting messages.

The machine was blinking rapidly. Mesmerizingly. He had a feeling that the frequent phone calls were from Jessica. On the one hand, he wished he could have picked up the phone and reassured her. On the other, he was so damn grateful there had been a locked door between him and the phone. What would he have said? How would he have explained? *Could* he explain?

Kyle walked to the table, looking down at the blinking light and the two-digit message counter. Twelve messages. How many had been there last night? Probably not many. Lucas never left things like this for long.

Kyle looked back over his shoulder toward the silent bedroom where Lucas had locked himself away. Would the sound carry? He inspected the machine, grateful that Lucas cared more for efficiency than technology, and turned the volume dial down, hopefully far enough so that no one but him would hear. Crossing his fingers and shrugging, he pushed the playback button.

There were several messages, including one from Belinda, which he ignored.

“Lucas?” Jessica’s warm voice sounded slightly plaintive, slightly panicked, dousing him with the cold water of his reality. “Are you there? Maybe you’re not home yet. I’m not sure when you left... Call me when you get home, okay? I’m not trying to be needy or anything... I just...I don’t usually do this—”

Kyle’s stomach plummeted. He’d known she wasn’t the kind who’d understand when she woke up alone, of course, but hearing the soft confusion in her voice reminded him abruptly. Yet another thing to feel crappy about. He never slept with women who expected to see him in the morning. Hell, half the time, they left *him* with little to no prodding at all. Jessica was completely unprepared for such a bastard move and it showed in her voice. How the hell was he supposed to fix this?

The next few messages were hang-ups. The four a.m. message was short: “Lucas, you don’t have to hide from me. I—I know you don’t usually have these kind of things happen to you. It probably seemed scary, the first time. But you don’t have to worry. We’re still friends. We can talk about it. Really. Call me, okay?”

She was upset, but not for the reasons he thought. She was upset for him. No, for *Lucas*. Kyle began to laugh a little, putting pieces of the night and her odd comments together. She seemed to think Lucas was a sexual martyr...or maybe just a virgin. God, he *had* to get his brother out more often.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Kyle jumped at the boom of Lucas’s voice behind him and spun around. Crap, he hadn’t even done anything yet and Lucas already looked mad enough to kill.

The machine announced the next message was at six that morning.

Okay, maybe he’d done *something*. “I can explain—”

“You’ve got no right to be playing my messages. That’s my business phone.”

Kyle frowned, looking at the plain black module as if it were going to make his brother sound like a human being. “You gave your *girlfriend* your business number?”

“Jessica isn’t my girlfriend, she’s a business contact. There was no reason to—damn it, Kyle, you don’t see me pushing every damn button I see in *your* apartment.”

“I never see you in my apartment.” *Way to stick to the point, moron.*

His brother must have thought the same thing because he leveled him with a sour glare that could only be translated into “No shit, Sherlock.”

“Lucas, it was just sex.” Jessica’s voice interrupted the silent conversation. “Honestly, we can be adult about this.”

Lucas’s eyes widened to the point that Kyle wondered if they might fall out. Well, that officially ended the evade-and-escape plan for the day.

“I can explain—”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t hear you explaining,” Lucas replied, not seeming to draw breath. “You *slept* with her?”

Did Lucas have to look as if he couldn't fathom the possibility? Kyle might not be an MIT graduate, but he wasn't a troll. Jessica was a beautiful woman. His only crime in sleeping with her was not staying longer to make love to her again. "Um...yeah."

"But she thinks you were *me*?"

Okay, two crimes.

Kyle decided not to mention how her confusion wasn't entirely out of the realm of possibility. Thanks to the mystery of biology, they did look reasonably alike. But Lucas's eye-bulging shortage of oxygen was already of concern. "Yeah."

"How...wh..." Lucas closed his eyelids—probably to get those eyeballs back in place—and pushed out another breath. "Explain."

"I went on the date, like we agreed." Better to remind Lucas of that upfront. Summing up the rest of the night wasn't as easy. "We hit it off."

"I think that goes without saying." At least Lucas's sarcasm was still intact. God forbid they have a conversation without that.

"I tried to tell her before things got too carried away." It was the one thing he'd done last night that he could feel good about. Well, aside from the orgasms.

"That's where this gets confusing."

Where? The orgasms? Those had been pretty clear cut actu—

"How hard is it to say that you're not me?" Lucas demanded.

When up a creek without a paddle, do what any sane person would do. Jump out and swim like a maniac. "Amazingly hard, thank you very much."

Lucas didn't seem to be buying it.

Secondary option? Turn the tables. "Didn't you ever tell her you had a twin?"

"What does *that* have to do with anything?" Lucas asked, eyes open again and starting to look a little wild. That couldn't be right though, Lucas was never wild. "Was I supposed to tell her I'm an organ donor while I was at it? We had dinner for a few weeks. It wasn't a confessional."

Kyle winced. *I'm digging a hole to friggin' China*. And yet, he couldn't seem to stop the words from continuing to come out of his mouth. "You don't have to go to a priest to talk about yourself."

"Telling her I'm a twin isn't talking about me." Lucas glowered. Things never boded well when Lucas glowered. "It's talking about *you*."

"Whatever. The point is that Jessica is probably the most interesting woman I've ever met in my life. She's smart and beautiful and different. I wanted to get to know her better. Didn't you?"

The jerk just shrugged. Was he really so mechanical? Why didn't it occur to Lucas to be less appalled by his brother touching his business phone than Kyle touching his *date*? "Sounds like you got what you wanted."

There he went again, reducing things to their most common denominator. There was nothing *common* about a night with Jessica.

“It’s not like that,” Kyle snapped, his temper slipping to the fore. “Last night was special. If I’d told her who I was, she never would have spoken to me again.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew they were true. He’d wanted to be with her, any way he could. If the lie had bothered him so much, he would have told her the truth from the get-go. Would have stopped their intimacy before it went too far. But he didn’t. Because for all the women he’d slept with over the years, all the pointless relationships and all the wild adventures...he’d never had intimacy. Not until Jessica.

“Thanks to you, it looks like she won’t be speaking to either one of us again.” Lucas sounded put out, but no more irritated than a man who couldn’t find his keys.

Tension tightened every muscle in Kyle’s body, regret and remorse swirling through him. If he never felt intimacy again, he had no one to blame but himself.

“Lucas?” Jessica’s voice called into the silence. Lucas tsked irritably and reached over to hit the stop button. “Fine. If you won’t pick up, I’m coming over.”

Their jerked gazes collided at the abrupt hang up.

“When was that?” Kyle asked.

They converged on the machine. Lucas hit the back button and the machine reported a seven fifty-five recording.

Lucas checked his watch. “It’s eight fifty.”

They both looked at the door. Even with miraculous amounts of traffic, it took no more than twenty minutes between Lucas’s and Jessica’s apartments.

Cautiously, Kyle stepped toward it and turned the knob. Standing there, color high on her cheeks, a cardboard box holding two steaming Styrofoam cups and a couple of donut bags in her hands, was Jessica. Her slack mouth looked shocked. Her pink cheeks looked embarrassed. Her blazing eyes looked pissed.

Shiiiiiiiiit.

“Hi Jess,” he whispered, feeling his own cheeks start turning pink, holding on to a feeble smile because despite how bad he must look to her that second, she looked great. Those incredible legs were bare up to mid-thigh, where they met a pair of khaki shorts. She had a cream sweater tied around her waist and a simple, soft yellow polo shirt that complemented the reds in her hair. She looked fresh and sweet and soothing while he felt cramped and wrinkled and wrong. But it didn’t seem to matter in the slightest; his heart tripped all over itself trying to beat and jump at the same time, just because she was there.

The door was yanked from his hand and suddenly Lucas was next to him, looking her over as if to make sure Kyle had left her with all her arms and legs attached.

She gasped, seeing the two of them side by side, her eyes darting back and forth between them. Her trembling mouth moved a few times, but words didn’t come out. Kyle took a step forward, wanting to wrap

her in his arms and comfort her, wanting to explain in a way that wouldn't hurt her. Maybe, if he was lucky, not hurt *him* either. But he never got the chance.

Jessica shoved the cardboard box into his hands, unbalancing the hot coffee so it splashed all over his hands. With a howl Kyle dropped the box entirely, splashing more hot coffee on his bare feet and the floor mat while he hopped and swore.

"Maybe you two should make sure the door is soundproof before you start yelling at each other, you bastards," Jessica finally said, then spun on her heel and moved like a speedwalker down the hall.

Kyle ran to the stairwell, leaving Lucas grumbling about the mess, not at all surprised to find Jessica already more than halfway down. He had to catch her. He had to explain. Somehow. "Jess, please, wait."

"No!"

They skittered along, he gaining, she slipping every few steps with a squeak of shoe rubber. If he could just reach her, just touch her, maybe he'd find a way to tell her—

"Go away, Lu—" She had half-turned to yell at him, her eyes going wide when she cut off the name. Then she stumbled again, shifting sideways, her arms grasping wildly while she bumped against the wall, trying to grab for safety.

Kyle's blood pressure skyrocketed like heated mercury before she caught herself and her footing three steps down. He froze, still about six steps above her, not wanting to spook her into falling again.

She held on to the banister, then looked up the stairs at him accusingly, her breath coming out in violated puffs. "I slept with you and I don't even know your name."

"Kyle." He doubted she would appreciate his relief in finally telling her. "Kyle Wellem Lonnigan." He came down another step, earning himself a suspicious glare. "I'm not going to chase you, I promise. You almost gave me a heart attack there. Are you all right?"

She waited a little before nodding grudgingly.

"I'll wait until you're at the bottom and break my own neck catching up, okay? Just, for God's sake, promise you'll go down slowly."

She looked down the remaining flight and a half to ground level, nodding again. She didn't loosen her grip on the banister, so Kyle risked a deeper rush of air and took the momentary pause for the opportunity it was.

"How much of that, exactly, did you hear?"

"Why?" she all but spat. "What could be more incriminating than hearing how you lied to me to get into my bed?"

Man, this wasn't going to go well. "Come on, Jess, you know that's not how it was."

"Do I? How do I know you didn't play me into thinking the sex was all my idea? I have never...I mean, I just don't—" She turned redder. "I don't attack men like that," she whispered, bowing her head. "I trusted you...*him*...oh, God, I'm going to be sick. I *know* Lucas. Do you get that? I know who he is and

what he's like, what he'll say and who he'll say it to. I know where he's *been*." All the blood left her face. "Oh, God, we didn't even use a condom!"

"I'm healthy, Jess—"

"How am I supposed to believe *you*?" She covered her eyes with her hands. "I don't know anything about you at all. I should never have asked you up to my apartment. Why didn't I listen to my instincts? Why didn't I just break up with you and go?"

He desperately wished he could come up with an argument. The only reason she was probably still standing there was because she didn't know his past. If she knew what he was hoping for his future, she'd probably run screaming. So he went with the only argument he knew she couldn't refute.

"Because you didn't want Lucas." If she had, he'd have left her apartment and never looked back. "You *never* wanted him."

It took her a few moments before she shook her head. When she looked up again, her eyes so vulnerable and sharp at the same time, it made something in him crack to know he'd put such a look on her face. "My feelings didn't seem to have mattered to you last night. All I feel now is used."

"No, I didn't use you. I swear." He could see why she might think so, but it hurt to categorize their experience as some cheap thrill. "What happened last night was the most incredible experience of my life."

She shook her head, seemingly stung. "Please, you've already been in my bed, you don't have to get stupidly poetic now."

"It's not poetry." He could see on her face that she'd already closed her mind to whatever he might have to say. Still, she deserved to know why. "I didn't tell you the truth last night because I couldn't. I wanted to, but you would've slapped my face and never given me the time of day."

"At least you'd have been honest."

"I should have been," he agreed. He almost wished he had. "I should have let you slap me and then camped out in front of your office until you talked to me again. Then I'd have talked to you until you agreed to go out with me again. *Then*, maybe, I could have made love to you until we were both too tired to be anything but happy."

She looked around nervously, looking for anyone who might be listening. He didn't care who listened. Nothing mattered but her. What she believed. What she accepted.

"I didn't, though, and I'm sorry. But you have to understand—all my life, I've had a plan before I did anything, and if I had planned this, it would have been perfect from step one. Meeting you blew every plan I've ever made completely out of the water. I didn't know my left foot from my right after you smiled. There was no way I was going to be able to say no to you—or myself—last night. I was wrong, Jess. I admit it. I'll do anything I can to make it up to you. Just don't...don't throw away what happened because I was an idiot."

She studied her shoes. They were spotless white tennis shoes, tied neatly in a double knot, her equally spotless white socks folded evenly at her ankles. But he didn't see any answers there. He had a feeling she couldn't see any either.

"There has to be a way past this."

She frowned at her shoes even harder. Then she shook her head. "There isn't. Let's just leave last night as what it was. Sex for sex's sake."

"Don't say that, Jess."

She straightened her shoulders and pulled away from the banister, pinning him with a glare that would have made his mother cringe. "That's exactly what I meant it to be, remember? It was the only thing about last night that wasn't a lie. And my name is *Jessica*." With the bearing of a queen, she walked down the remaining steps and through the hall, out of the building. Out of his life.

Kyle told himself he let her go because he'd promised not to chase her down the stairs, but the truth was his legs couldn't have carried him if he'd tried. Hurt swamped him. If she'd staked him with a javelin, it couldn't have hurt more. So he sagged down on the top step to try and breathe. That didn't go off so well, either. For some reason he couldn't quite explain, but was sure he'd be thinking about a lot later, his heart didn't seem to be beating. Inside, he was a silent, hollow mess.

For the first time in his life, that was a bad thing.

He kept staring where she'd been, replaying what she'd said, thinking about the pain in her eyes as she'd said it. She'd wavered. It might be the imaginings of a desperate man, but he was sure she'd wavered. Did she know, like he did, that they couldn't just push last night out of their minds as if it had never happened?

It had happened and it changed everything.

That had been happening to him a lot lately. It needed doing, but change was hard. You had to face a lot of things about yourself you didn't want to face. He winced. It was being polite to call himself shallow. He enjoyed fine things, fine women and fine living, preferably in a constantly rotating order. Sure, he worked hard as an investment banker but for all the years it took to get himself to that position, he'd never let it interfere with his good time.

Until six months ago.

That was when it had truly started, the subtle dissatisfaction with his life. His beautiful, meaningless, responsibility-free life. Somehow, in that creeping, pervasive way of things one never saw coming, he became glaringly aware that something in him was missing. Something important. Something significant. But he had no idea what and it began to drive him crazy. Then came Belinda's family reunion, when he made the tactical error of holding one of the endless supply of babies and bam! There went the neighborhood.

His first impression was panic. People never handed him children. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even touched one. But the baby turned out to be a soft, wriggling weight, fitting into the crook of his arm with no fuss at all; just a toothless grin and a splash of drool.

Something about her smelled sweet and powdery. She was wearing a little white bonnet on her head, shading bright blue eyes that glittered at him, completely devoid of anything but genuine interest. She'd slapped his cheek a few times, trying to get a hold of his face, and he'd laughed as she smiled, obviously proud of herself.

Then it happened.

There was no sound, no pain, no *anything* to signal that his life had broken in half. Just a baby smile, a baby smell, and a sense that *this* was what he'd been looking for. The thing he wanted for his own.

After that he started noticing kids everywhere he went. Not an easy thing, given his lifestyle. No one brought their children to an investment bank, but they kept pictures on their desks. Little girls with missing front teeth. Boys wearing baseball caps, holding bats over their shoulders and grinning as if they knew the next pitch was a homerun. Quick runs to the grocery store put more of them in his path. Jogs he always took in the morning found a whole host of kids walking to bus stops he'd never noticed before. The world was, apparently, utterly full of children.

The bigger revelation was discovering he was dating them.

He'd never cared about women's ages before. Why would he? His only concern was enjoying their company and having some fun together. He cared how pretty they were. How good they looked next to him. How long it took to get out of their apartments. His last date fondly remembering her prom—from the previous weekend—proved the final straw. His other dates weren't much better. The oldest so far was a mind-boggling twenty-four, considering retirement from modeling because her cynicism was starting to show in her pictures.

For the first time, he started asking questions and, to his dismay, they answered him. Did they like children? Know any children? Ever want any?

On the whole, no, no and *no way*.

That was the end of most dates. A few times he got to ask where they saw themselves in ten years. One thought it was a marriage proposal. Thankfully, the maître d' knew the Heimlich or that would have been the end of a lot of things.

He knew there was no shaking the oncoming change when he had a nightmare about dating one of Belinda's other nieces. The *two*-year-old. She was smoking a cigarette, wore enough eyeliner to draw her own cartoon and was telling him that he might want to look into Botox before he started showing his age. It apparently took imagining someone whose age mathematically rounded down to zero to make him admit he had to do something about his life. Immediately.

So, he'd come to Lucas's apartment to see if his brother could help him make sense of his sick, deranged, impossible desire for a family of his own.

Lucas's response—after the suggested lobotomy—had been to suggest a date swap, no doubt to slap some sense into him.

So Kyle met Jessica.

And now he was trapped in a moment again. In a change. Because everything he wanted had just walked away from him without a backward glance.

Kyle forced himself to get to his feet. *Nothing gets done sitting on your ass.* One step at a time, he trudged back up the stairs, willing his brain to think of an idea. Any idea to get her to take a chance on him. To see past the mistake. All he needed was a chance...and a plan.

Chapter Five

“You’re not the Loser,” an amused, smoke-stained voice noted as Kyle knocked for the third time on Jessica’s closed office door in the intimidatingly prestigious firm of Goesler & Groom. It was early morning and he knew Jessica was in because she’d taken what looked like a lot of pleasure in slamming her door in his face. He didn’t have a lot of time at this part of the day, but he’d hoped she’d see him if he just kept knocking. Instead, he found himself turning to greet a thin old woman with a blue-hair rinse and an over-interested gaze glued to his ass. Her arms were loaded with manila folders and she stood at the doorway to the outer office like she owned the place. “But I bet you ain’t getting many complaints.”

“Excuse me?”

She lifted her gaze to his face, finally—why did he sense he was blushing?—and shrugged. “Those you probably have plenty of.” She winked, moving forward with her paperwork clamped to her chest with one arm. “Must have been good if she’s not speaking to you.”

Would Jessica have confided in her secretary? Somehow, he doubted it. Still, stranger things had happened. He turned fully, lowering his bouquet of flowers and taking the few steps to meet her halfway. He extended his hand. “I’m Kyle.”

She eyed his hand briefly before reaching her still graceful—if slightly spotted—one for a surprisingly strong shake. “Dory Pierson. You’re either a Lonnigan or it’s a hell of a resemblance. I’d never have known the difference if you weren’t missing the stick in your ass.”

Kyle inwardly cringed, quickly figuring out who the Loser must be and wondering how bad of an impression Lucas had made on this strange woman. Was it one he could get over? “Lucas is my twin.”

Thin gray eyebrows rose and not in remorse. “I’m sensing a good story here.”

“More of a misunderstanding.”

“Sure, gorgeous.” She chuckled, walking around him with a little too much hip to carry off the grandma look her clothes were projecting. The look-over this time nearly had him covering his genitals and calling for Security. “I’ll just bet it was. Kind of like the Cuban Missile Crisis was a misunderstanding.”

A surprised burst of laughter escaped him. Not many people brought up Castro these days. “Maybe, if you take out the Cubans.”

“Now I *know* it’s a good story.” She abandoned her paperwork entirely. “Let me see if I have the basics. You like Jessica. For at least five minutes—” She must have heard his ego squishing because she caught herself with a mock gasp. “Oh, a ten-minute man, are we? Fine, for at least *ten* minutes, she liked

you back enough to forget all her dumb rules. What'd you do to her attention, throw your brother under a bus?"

"Not yet." But he should, if only for not mentioning Dory when Kyle had dragged the name of Jessica's law firm out of him.

She shrugged, unimpressed. "As long as he's out of the picture. You'll get nowhere with Jessica if she has to pick between you."

Considering she'd been about to break up with Lucas, Kyle figured blurting out "Why not?" wasn't too big of a tactical error.

"Because my girl isn't one to take risks. She knows your brother is about as interested in her as he is in getting the clap." Blue eyes skimmed him from his haircut to his manicure. "You have that desperately clingy look to you. Even I wouldn't touch you."

Kyle felt his jaw drop. Clingy? *Him*? He'd never been desperate for a woman in his life. Well, okay, except for when Jessica ran away from him. Or maybe when he stayed up half the night trying to think of a way to get her to change her mind. But that wasn't really desperation.

It took a few hours, but it'd finally hit him around three a.m. that he'd already laid out a plan there on the stairs. What Lucas generally referred to as Kyle's Demand and Destroy maneuver—basically, relentlessly drive a person nuts until they give in. It had worked with petitions, with sales, with debate. Never taking no for an answer had always been his strength. But how much chance would he have with it if he couldn't get past her door?

"You're going to need help," Dory said suddenly, reminding Kyle he wasn't alone in the outer office. "By the look of you, a lot of help."

He stared down at himself, wondering what the hell she kept looking at. "What do you mean a *lot* of help? Jess and I got along fine before—"

"The Misunderstanding?" Dory blinked too knowingly. "You have *smooth player* written all over you, kiddo. Probably never met a woman you couldn't talk into bed other than your mother."

He'd never thought of it as talking them into anything.

"If I know Jessica—and I do—about the only thing she misunderstood was that you'd want more than a quickie."

Well, hell, she had sized him up right.

Dory's eyes narrowed. "You poor sad sap. I can tell just looking at you that there's no talking you out of this, but you're cute, so I have to warn you—boy, did *you* ever pick the wrong girl."

Funny, she could tell everything about him except the fact that he had no idea what she was talking about.

"Jessica Saunders does not do happily ever after. I'm pretty sure Jessica doesn't do *happy*, unless she's getting promoted. I keep telling her, either get a better boyfriend or get a better vibrator, because

there's no way she'll let me talk her into getting a life." Dory sighed and moved around her desk to plop into her plush-looking leather chair. "So if you're serious about wanting to see her again, do yourself a favor. Don't tell her."

A shiver went up his spine at her shrewd gaze. "Don't tell her what?"

Her smile could have passed for the Sphinx's, but was it because she could tell she was making him sweat or because she just enjoyed being cryptic? "You probably fool a lot of people with that innocent look. Maybe even yourself from time to time, but you can't fool old women and you certainly aren't getting one over me. But I tell you what. You do exactly what I tell you from this point on, I'll help get her to give you a chance."

Instinct told him to play this very carefully. Jessica wasn't going to be happy if she found out her secretary was helping him out. "Why would you do that?"

"Honey, I've been around too many years and lived through too many things to see someone with as much to live for as Jessica go around wasting herself. If she has her way, she'll be partner in the next ten years and won't have a thing to show for it but money and loneliness. I like her too much to let something like that happen to her."

"But why are you willing to let someone like *me* happen to her?"

"Because every girl should have someone like you happen to her."

On the other hand, he wasn't getting anywhere by himself, was he? He held out the bouquet to Dory, whose eyes lit up. "Lead the way, Mistress."

"Oh honey, if you were ten years younger, I probably would." She breathed in the blooms and smiled. Then, squaring her shoulders and blowing out a breath, her eyes took on a gleam of utter mayhem. "Here's what you do..."

Kyle Lonnigan is a few sandwiches short of a lunchbox.

He had to be. Any other man on Earth would be thrilled to have a night of wild sexual abandon and never see the woman again. But no, Jessica had to find the one guy on the planet who thought a good round of nipple tweaking meant undying devotion. For the last three days, he'd done everything humanly possible to get her to talk to him, to forgive him, and so far, all he'd achieved was to drive her nuts.

He'd come to her office at nine the morning after their stairwell debacle, knocking on the door as if she were really going to give him the time of day. Afterwards, Dory spent the whole day wagging her eyebrows to indicate she knew something interesting had happened. Jessica refused to see him and especially refused to explain to the blue-haired sex fiend demanding details. She figured Kyle, at least, would pick up on the not-so-subtle clue.

He didn't.

It didn't take long to discover why not, either. He'd made friends with Dory—the traitor sold her out in less than an hour for a bushel of roses and a sexy smile. He sent restaurant deliveries of her favorite dishes, helped along, no doubt, by his new secretarial best friend, who also most likely clued him into her lunch and dinner schedule. The man she could ignore. Fresh manicotti from Santori's she could not. But she didn't send him any thank-you notes. In fact, she made it a point to thank Dory instead.

"My pleasure," the older woman replied without missing a beat in her filing. "God knows I'd have paid for dinner *twice* just to get that brick out of your ass."

"I had nothing of any kind in my ass, thank you very much." Jessica said stiffly, hoping to God no one else had heard anything through the outer door, which was closed for once.

Dory only raised an eyebrow, the demonic glitter back in her eye. "You could if you'd talk to the man."

That officially ended any expectation of support from Dory.

The second day, as soon as the doors opened to the public, the first plant arrived. In a wide round pot, it was probably some kind of bush with flowers, beautiful sprays of purple petals on long green stems growing to waist height. It'd be hideous if it weren't strangely appealing. A few hours later, some kind of cactus arrived, this one with a note the delivery guy was instructed to ensure she read.

For The Collector Of Pretty Things.

The man handed her a thick horticultural picture dictionary. Only after Dory hummed her way out for the day did Jessica allow herself to creak open the book and look at the glossy pictures inside. She felt like a felon, but she looked. She nearly jumped out of her seat when a flat flash of orange slipped out of the middle. Picking it up, she saw the tiny flower had been carefully pressed so that the petals folded back on one side, keeping the life of the bloom preserved. There were three other flowers in the center, along with a small note: *Honeysuckle. These reminded me of you.*

Jessica closed the book and stuffed it under the cushion of the small loveseat she never used. But she couldn't stop looking at it.

More strange plants arrived the third day, a name written in Latin on their tags, invoking guilty treks to the couch cushion, just so she'd stop wondering what the names meant. But it wasn't as if she needed either the plants or the meals or even Dory's innuendos to keep the man on her mind. Kyle Lonnigan was proving impossible to forget all on his own.

How could she have gone so long without sex, yet after one night decide she couldn't live without it? It was as if he'd slipped her some kind of permanent aphrodisiac. Sleep had all but disappeared from her radar and in its place was a constant craving for more of his touch, his taste. Her body stayed tense, sensitized. As if instead of sating her, he'd simply whetted her appetite, leaving her with an unrelenting need that grew with each thought of him. And she couldn't stop thinking about him.

Every time she dressed, the slide of silk over her skin reminded her of his palms gliding over her breasts before firmly squeezing and taking the aching tips into his mouth. The whisper of fabric reminded her of the slide of her sheets beneath their overheating bodies. Worse, her bedroom felt too big, too empty, too quiet, since he'd gone, though he'd been there only an hour.

She'd stripped her bed, but she could still smell his cologne on her pillows. She took a sleep aid only to discover her dreams were all about him. Wanting him. Having him. Tying with him. Her subconscious never replayed what had actually happened between them. No, her imagination opted to consider all the things she'd *wanted* to do with him. The things she'd been deprived of when she woke up alone in a tangle of sheets and confusion.

Even now, angry as she was, her mouth watered at the thought. Wrapping her fist around his cock, pumping him toward her open lips, letting him think she would lick, but missing her tongue by just...that...much. Then, when he least expected it, wrapping her mouth around the head and swallowing him whole, sucking him down over and over again until he gave her what she wanted. And when those fantasies ended, she moved on to the things he could have been doing to *her*...

Every morning since, she'd woken up with her fingers deep in her sex, straining close to orgasm, her clit straining for a wet kiss it was never going to get.

For that alone, she wanted to kill him.

Almost as much as she wanted to drag him into her office and demand he finish what he started.

The fourth morning was peculiarly quiet, which explained—she supposed—why she answered the phone while Dory was out to lunch. The caller ID left no question who was on the other side of the line. But if she had to be brutally honest with herself, the truth was she just wanted to hear him again.

"I'm getting to you, aren't I?" he asked without preamble.

"Not really," she replied in her firmest voice, staring at the crooked cushion across from her desk, wishing she could squish it further down. Along with every instinct screaming at her to see exactly how far he was willing to go for forgiveness.

"Yes, I am. I can tell."

Smug schmuck. "Get to a lot of people, do you?"

His laugh nearly curved her own lips, sending millions of little sparks of pleasure through her. Sparks she didn't want. "If considering harassment charges means you're getting to me, then yes, Kyle, you're getting to me."

"You feel harassed?"

Why did he sound so surprised? She longed to be a better liar. Since she wasn't, she dodged. "I feel exhausted. I have hours of work to do. I don't have time for your games."

"This isn't a game for me, Jess."

She also hated how her whole body continued to preen at the hated nickname. From anyone else, it brought back memories she'd rather not rehash. From him... No, not thinking about it. "It isn't a game for me either. It's my life and you're ruining it. Why can't you just let what happened be a mistake?"

He gave her the benefit of mulling over his answer. "Because I could never consider meeting someone like you a mistake."

Then, very quietly, without any kind of goodbye, he hung up.

Which meant he was smart enough to quit when he was ahead.

She put the handset down, staring at it for far too long before she took her hand away. He might be shy a few sandwiches, but if he kept saying things like that, she was going to have to start worrying that her own lunchbox was just as empty.

Chapter Six

Kyle stepped into the elevator with more than his usual shiver. What the hell was he doing here? Goesler & Groom was the last place he should be at noon in the middle of the week. But one call from Dory and he found himself exactly where she told him to be. To be honest, it was more than one phone call. Since this whole siege began, she'd called him a total of forty-seven times.

Most of the calls were vaguely cryptic instructions left on his voice mail. A few were cackled calls of success about his gifts. Well, Dory's idea of success. "If she doesn't set it on fire, honey, it's a win."

So far, manicotti and plants were supposedly the way into Jessica's heart. Not that he was entirely sure that was where Dory was trying to get him. Still, she'd called, and against his better judgment he answered. "Get here and be in the west elevator at twelve fifteen, *exactly*. I'll do the rest. You got me, kid?"

Here he was, at twelve fourteen and forty-five seconds, traveling up to Jessica's floor. Whatever Dory's plan was, Kyle just hoped it didn't involve Jessica kicking his ass in front of her colleagues.

The door opened and he only had enough time to take a breath before he realized the woman on the other side was none other than his favorite redhead and her ancient Girl Friday.

For a second, Jessica's brown eyes lit up, as if she were excited to see him before she reminded herself she wasn't. Then her slim brows came together and her full lips flattened. "I'll take the next one," she said through lips that didn't move.

Kyle switched his gaze to Dory in question for a second—the second it took Dory to shake her head minimally—but it was long enough for Jessica to register. Her dark eyes narrowed and her mouth pursed. He'd kind of figured Dory intended him to cross paths with Jessica, but that expression had "backfire" written all over it. Before he could get out any words of apology, the doors started to close and that's when it all slowed down.

Jessica let out a squawk when Dory suddenly shoved her inside the car with the force of a middle linebacker. It was all he could do to catch her as the doors shut in front of Dory's wagging fingers.

"I'm not sure who to kill first, you or her," Jessica said into his shoulder, still regaining her balance. She found her footing, accepting his help only because she had to or fall down in an ungraceful heap. She'd just leveled him a dirty look when the elevator gave a sickening lurch and tumbled them into each other all over again. The lights flickered overhead and the bottom of Kyle's stomach disappeared entirely.

"Her," he heard himself saying, never afraid to throw an old lady under a bus when she had it coming. "Definitely her."

As last words went, they probably weren't all too heroic, but Kyle didn't have much time to take them back. The lack of movement was registering in his brain and he expected the panic to follow as soon as it did. His throat was already tightening. He watched his hands claw around Jessica's shoulders, denting the felt fabric of her coat. Against his will, he looked up at the sealed doors. Sealed. Like a tomb. Like the cold, metal box of death it was.

"Kyle?"

Dory wouldn't lock him in an elevator, would she? *Could* she? She wouldn't do that to him. Not that he'd gotten around to telling her about his problem. His usually insignificant, fairly-easy-to-ignore problem.

"Kyle, you're hurting me," Jessica said quietly. Or maybe she just sounded quiet. Distant. It was hard to hear anything over the blood starting to rush through his ears. "Kyle!"

"What? Oh...sorry." He pried his fingers off her and took the two steps backward he could.

Her frown reshaped into a softer expression. He wedged himself into the corner of the car, finding small comfort in the cool mirrors at his back and even less in the decorative handrail. It was so thin it wasn't going to do anyone any good should the car suddenly plummet to the...not a positive thought. Was it Dr. Rosen who'd said to think positively? Or Dr. Joden? He confused their psychobabble all the time. Besides, positive thinking wasn't going to open those doors until the power came back on.

"Does this happen often?" he asked. He didn't think a place as image-conscious as Goesler & Groom was going to have a broken elevator for long. They wouldn't be in there long. Five minutes, tops. Right?

"Does what happen? Timed abductions of lawyers?"

"Wouldn't I have to get you out of the building to abduct you?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to check with our criminal department when the doors open."

She didn't sound terribly put out. He, on the other hand, could feel that cold tingling at the base of his spine. Soon, his throat would close entirely and the edges of his vision would turn black. But not before his lungs turned leaden. Air would stop coming in and then there'd be that embarrassing hyperventilating scene. If he was lucky, he'd pass out before she realized he was a frothing, lathering idiot.

"Well, point me to your best guy." He forced himself to keep talking. Stave off the humiliation a little longer. "This is a double ambush, as far as I'm concerned."

"Oh, I don't doubt that," Jessica grumbled, her tone dark and foreboding. Not wanting to think what that could mean for him—or for Dory—Kyle concentrated on the carpet.

He'd read that if you focused your attention intently on one thing, breathing carefully, you could maintain your control. It was in his recent spate of reading about pregnant women, but he didn't have a whole lot else to do. Frowning, he stared down until he could see the faint repeating pattern of the carpet loops. He focused tighter, counting the number of loops before it began to repeat.

Amazingly, the trickle of cold sweat felt less like acid and his throat stopped squeezing itself so tight. Air swept into his lungs as he saw all the space between the loops. Tons of space. Miles and miles and miles—

“But that doesn’t make this any less your fault.”

The room shrunk again. “*My* fault?”

“If you hadn’t been stalking me—”

“I’m not a stalker.” Horror made him meet her gaze. Why did she look smug?

“All Dory ever needs is an excuse. She’s impulsive and occasionally insane. You trying so hard to see me again was all the incentive she needed to try something this stupid.”

“It’s not like she could stop the elevator. She’s just a secretary.”

Jessica barked a laugh. “That’s like saying Stalin was *just* a Soviet.” He must have looked as bad as he felt at those words because she kept going. “Dory keeps Victor, the maintenance guy, on a string. He’d do anything for her.”

“So you’re saying...”

“We’re here for the long haul.”

“Couldn’t let me have my hopes and dreams, could you?” he asked, for the first time wishing he’d found a woman with a slightly smaller mean streak.

Her smile still had the effect of discombobulating his thinking. “You should really sit down. It’ll help.”

“Help what?” Smooth, smooth. She’d never guess he was hanging on to the railing as if it were supplying his life’s blood.

Her mouth quirked. “I had a brother once who hated small spaces. Especially elevators.”

Just once? You mean you can trade them in somewhere? “Who said I hate small spaces?”

“Considering you broke into a sweat the second the car stopped and you’re barely looking me in the eye, I put it together. My brother used to throw up. You’re not going to do that, are you?”

God, he hoped not. “I won’t if you stop talking about it.”

“Sounds fair.”

His breaths were coming in short pants. “You’re being awful calm for someone who just got knocked into a metal box with a man she hates.”

“I don’t hate you.”

Kyle decided not to get his hopes up. She had that cool, robotic tone Lucas used when he was about to be a bastard.

“When I’m not absolutely enraged with you, I actually think you’re funny and interesting. Since I have no idea how long we’re going to be stuck together, I see no reason to waste energy being angry.”

Yup. Smart conservation of optimism. “Not until you know you can walk out sometime soon.”

“Exactly.” She scrunched her nose and dropped her heavy bag to the ground. She sat next to it, her long legs extended in front of her, crossed at the ankles. She couldn’t have looked more comfortable if she were on a pillow. “By the way, that counting thing you’re doing will only distract you from your problem for so long. If you don’t find a way to get past it, eventually, you’ll run out of spots in the ceiling or cracks in the wall. Then it’ll just be you, three walls and two locked doors.”

“If you’re looking for revenge, you’re getting it.”

“This isn’t revenge. Revenge would be telling you we don’t have one of those state-of-the-art braking systems that keeps us from skidding slowly down the elevator shaft to our fiery doom.”

Kyle swallowed at her cheerful tone.

“I’d be lying, but that’s not the point.” She watched him evenly for a few seconds before chuckling to herself. “It’s no fun if you don’t faint, Kyle.”

“I’ll have to do better the next time we get hijacked in an elevator.”

“Careful what you wish for. If Dory finds out you’re claustrophobic, she’ll find a way to trap us in a shoebox together.”

“I thought she liked me.”

“Oh, she does. She’ll just be hoping my inner Florence Nightingale will come out and take care of you.”

“Would it?” It might be worth faking an injury for that.

“Not even if you were on fire. Apple slice?” Jessica flipped open her satchel and pulled out a plastic container.

He shook his head as she opened it, snatched a fruit slice and crunched into it without batting an eyelash. For the first time he could remember, he wasn’t hungry.

“How’d you end up this way, anyway? You’re usually so easy in your skin.”

Which didn’t sound like a compliment. But it *was* interest. “Spend nine months in a small dark place with Lucas and no way out. Believe me, you’d be permanently scarred too.”

She laughed, this time with none of the underlying anger. This could be positive. Oddly, his chest lightened a little at the sound. “Yes, but I doubt that’s what caused your problem.”

“Why are you so interested in my psychological problems?”

“I’m not, but it passes the time. So, what happened?” She waited, as if he were actually going to tell her.

“I don’t think so.”

“Joykill. Your brother would tell me.”

It was his turn to laugh, albeit uncomfortably. “Lucas doesn’t admit weakness. He definitely doesn’t know about this.” The sarcastic ass would bring it up every other day if he did.

“If I promise not to tell him, will you tell me?”

“Isn’t that extortion?”

“Yes.” She shook her head at him. “Don’t look so surprised. It’s not as if you really know me. We had a nice night together, but good sex doesn’t mean I’m not capable of eating a man alive.”

Even in his strained state, Kyle had to smile as she realized what she’d just said. Her hand stuttered on its way to her mouth. She popped the remaining apple bit into her mouth and with wide eyes began chewing as if her next breath depended on it. She’d almost had him for a second there. Right up until she choked on her double entendre.

Why was she working so hard to make him think she was unfeeling? She was right, one amazing night didn’t mean he knew everything there was to know about her. He didn’t know her favorite color or why she ate in those tiny, nibbling little bites. True, he didn’t know what motivated her or what she did in the quiet times of the day. But did she think he didn’t remember those hours they’d spent before trying to devour each other in her bed? She hadn’t wanted to, but she’d shown him her personality, her interests, a tantalizing peek of the woman behind the professional mask.

Enough to make him want answers to those other questions.

He wanted to understand why just looking at her made him feel like the world stopped spinning. Or why sparring with her verbally gave him such an adrenaline rush. Why touching her felt better than touching anyone or anything else in the world.

Why she was so damn scared of him.

“We could always talk about us.”

“Oh no you don’t. Every time you talk about us, it’s some new approach to get back in my bed.”

He slid down to the ground, still holding on to the rail but feeling less desperate. “You have a nice bed.”

“I know. And I don’t plan to share it.”

“Ever?”

She munched another apple piece. “Allow me to rephrase. I don’t plan to share it with *you*.”

“Why not? You didn’t have any complaints last time.”

She made a choked, incredulous sound. “I’ve had nothing but complaints!”

“Not about the sex.”

Her mouth pursed tightly, but rather than admit the truth, she shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to sleep with you again. So all your elaborate plans, the meals, the plants, the ambushes...there’s no point. Set your sights on easier game.”

“Hey,” he replied, his temper sparking. His life up to this point might have been superficial and okay, somewhat wasteful, but he wasn’t a predator. Ever. “I don’t *hunt* women. The women I sleep with know what’s going to happen and they’re equal participants. Even you. And they all knew there weren’t any promises. No commitment. No happily ever afters.”

She didn't look like she believed him. "What about what you said in the stairwell? And everything else you've been doing the last few days? What do you call that?"

A change of heart. But Dory had warned him expressly against letting Jessica in on his hopes. She offered him another apple slice and this time, he took it. Handling it gave him time to think of the right answer. Or it would have if he weren't thinking how the tart fruit fit her—always a sting before the sweetness.

"You're different," he finally said with a shrug, not wanting to lie, even in this. Maybe especially in this. "I've never been with a woman who challenged me on so many levels. A woman like you brings a whole other dimension to the word stimulation." He paused, watching her until he was sure she was taking him seriously. "The truth is, one night with you just wasn't enough for me."

She stared at him, her blasé mask finally gone. But she didn't look happy. "It was hardly a *night*."

He made an effort not to raise his brows, but one might have gotten away from him because she sighed.

"Fine, since you're never going to let this go, yes, I liked what happened between us. But all I want in a man at this point in my life is one who can be good in bed and good enough to leave when we're done without taking it personally."

Well, it wasn't the open-armed acceptance he'd been hoping for, but as Dory said, *if Jessica didn't set it on fire...*

"I can do that."

She rolled her eyes. "It wasn't an invitation, Kyle."

"Wasn't it?"

She was cute when she stumbled through an attempt to speak. Her cheeks colored a soft rosy shade and she puckered her mouth over and over again, trying to find a word.

It was impossible to ignore.

He leaned over, letting go of the rails, and pressed his mouth to hers. He felt her gasp and was careful to keep the kiss gentle. Caressing. He could easily push too hard, move too fast, because of how hungry he was. He let himself breathe in her honeysuckle scent, savored the softness of her lips and felt pure relief that she wasn't pushing him away. He smoothed his hand over her jaw, gliding his thumb over the silk of her cheek, tipping her chin closer. Her lashes fluttered closed, but she didn't return the kiss. No matter how much it pleasure there was in just touching her, it wasn't enough.

He needed more than acquiescence.

He needed her to want him back.

"Say yes, Jess."

Her heavy-lidded gaze met his.

He licked her bottom lip, almost a nip. "You know you want to."

The dreamy haze in her eyes cleared in an instant. Too fast, damn it. He knew it. Too eager. He braced himself for her retreat.

Instead she slid her arm over his shoulder and pulled him down for her kiss.

This is suuuuuuch a bad idea.

But it felt like a good idea. A delicious idea. Jessica closed her eyes and decided to let reason talk to her later. Right now, her body was fully in control and it was getting happier by the second.

Happy to be touched.

Happy to be with *him*.

They sank into the kiss, her body humming to life beneath him. Their hands wandered, caressing, kneading, pulling at inconvenient clothes. But there wasn't much give, not tucked against the corner of the elevator floor. She pushed at his shoulders, taking a much-needed gasp of air when he jerked upward, his sensual mouth poised to apologize. She took another kiss, hard and fast, just to keep him from speaking, then shoved him off her. She didn't want him to talk. Didn't want him to say anything that might remind her why she shouldn't be doing this. She wanted blind sensation and the amazing part was, she was actually going to take it.

Kyle came down on his bottom, back to the wall, this close to frowning in confusion. "Has anyone ever told you that you're mean?"

"You're the only one. Now, quiet." She grinned as she shrugged out of her jacket, tossing it behind herself so hard the fabric slapped the metal doors. His blue eyes had lost that glassy, panicked look from earlier. Now they were heated, concentrating only on her. She didn't let him look away, even as she pulled up her skirt to slide onto his lap.

She watched with satisfaction as one corner of his mouth curved slowly upward. His palms curled around her thighs, warm and invigorating. She shivered, remembering what those hands could do.

But she wasn't ready to let him have his way. All the fantasies she'd had over the last few days were finally going to be satisfied. Especially the one about giving him a taste of his own medicine. She pulled his hands off her, lifting them back to the rail. "You're going to want to hold on to this."

"What? Why?"

Rather than answer, Jessica kissed him again, rubbing her breasts across his chest, wanting to purr like a cat at the friction. She slid down, biting her lip as electric sensation tingled her hardened nipples through the thin white blouse and bra. Was it Kyle or her over-sensitized body's needs that made her feel like a hungry inferno?

Dragging her fingers over his light blue shirt, she found his belt clasp and made short work of removing the metal tongue from the hole in the leather. She continued to the button, unhooking the slide clasp. She made sure to be careful, slow, as she pulled the tab of his zipper over the insistent flesh of his

erection. Disappointed to find his black briefs, she satisfied her want by palming him through the sleek fabric. He leapt against her hand and she considered stroking him to begging right then, but that wouldn't be as satisfying as playing his body as he'd once played hers.

Still, she allowed herself to keep stroking a few moments more before she reached into his shorts for the smooth, hard flesh her body had been craving for days. His hips lifted as she grasped him, his breath pushing out through suddenly tight lips. In her palm, his erection was smooth, thick and urgent. Hers.

Backing up, she lowered her face, running her cheek over the silken head until she grazed it with her lower lip. Carefully, she nuzzled against it, her breath growing fast. Did Kyle know he was sexually addictive? That he could leave a woman wanting more, all the time? Until she was insane enough to go down on a man in an elevator that could open at any time, in a building that didn't even acknowledge sex? He probably did, but just because she'd given in didn't mean she was about to lose control.

She parted her lips over him and slowly slid him into her mouth. Kyle watched her, not even breathing, as she pressed her tongue against him and pulled him just as slowly back out. His hands grappled with the rail and she felt her wicked smile return. Then she went back to her plan to drive him crazy.

Using her lips and her tongue, she took him deep, surging over him and sucking him all the way down her throat before sliding up again right to the crest of his erection. Up...and down, over and over again, and when he'd lift his hips against her, she'd soften and touch him only enough to tease, flickering her tongue under the rim of the head.

The sounds of his groans and her own wet slurps heightened her arousal until her own sex felt as slick as the cock shuttling between her lips. Faster and faster she moved on him, the motion rocking her whole body. Her thighs pressed together and every shift of her raised hips had them adding pressure against her clit. Not enough to give her what she needed, just enough to make her demand more. Demand it from him with every driving thrust over his flesh.

This was what she'd wanted, what she'd craved and needed. Her blood rushed through her, hot and wild, urging her on. She curled her fingers around his width, pumping her fist in time with her mouth, so that her lips met her fingers on each downward thrust. He moved his hips upward, not so much fucking her mouth as desperate for the orgasm she would only let draw so close.

"More," he groaned, lifting his weight with his hands, pushing his hips closer to her face. She pulled equally far back. "Take all of me, Jess, I know you can."

She shook her head, smiling evilly when his eyes rolled back at the sensation. She would...when she was ready. Instead she slowed her pace, running her tongue over the head and sucking it like a ring pop instead of a sensitive part of his body. He all but growled, but, she noted before she drew him back in, he didn't stop her from lovingly running her tongue up the underside, from base to tip.

Eventually, his fingers sank into her hair. "Hasn't anyone ever told you to be good to your toys?"

"I thought I *was* being good to you." She barely recognized her own voice. As if she'd swallowed warm honey. She liked it. Loved it, this whole moment and the heady, lusty delirium of it. For another long minute or two, she prolonged the torture, just so he knew she was in control, then gave him what he wanted, taking him in slowly, carefully, and swallowing around him. After all, it was what she wanted too.

Too soon, he pushed at her shoulders. "I'm gonna come, Jess."

She rumbled her approval of that, but he shook his head and pushed her shoulders away again. She followed this time without thinking, letting him guide her until she was back to sitting on his lap, positioned there by his firm hold on her hips. His hands let go, slipping to her spread thighs, but his smoldering gaze never broke from hers. The heat of his touch moved over her skin, caressing firmly upward and taking her skirt with it. She looked down, blinking away the intensity of his stare as those hands caressed inward, his fingertips slipping deftly beneath the gray fabric to find the panties beneath. Shuddering, she let her head fall back as he moved the silk aside to touch her moist folds. Soon she felt his mouth on her neck and she moaned.

"I want inside you, Jess."

"Yes," she whispered, sliding her own hands into his hair. She wanted his mouth everywhere. Over her neck, on her breasts, her belly...and right where his fingers were gently stroking, sinking into her.

"I want *you*."

Something in his tone had her lashes fluttering upward, but his fingers found that sensitive spot inside her just as his thumb caressed her clit. She clenched around him, panting. Her body coiled tight, her nipples stinging from the fabric of her bra. She pressed against his mouth, a strange sound escaping her throat. It almost sounded desperate. Or maybe relieved.

His free hand was climbing up the ripples in her skirt to the pearly buttons of her blouse, plucking from the bottom to the top. Cool air spread across her skin as each button came undone. When it gaped open, he pulled back, just to look at her. For that instant, she couldn't look away. The moment hung suspended. There was an expression on his face, as if he were looking at the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Part of her, the largest part of her, immediately pulled away. It urged her to yank her shirt closed, get off him and back as far away from Kyle Lonnigan as she possibly could. Claw the walls to get away if she had to. But something else, something small and strangely compelling, made her stay. Made her keep absolutely still and bask in that stare she didn't want to interpret.

Finally, he lifted his hand and touched her, gliding his fingertips over the line of her bra. Back and forth he caressed, teasing her nerve endings until they were almost burning. Just when she was about to grab him and force him to sate the need, he leaned forward, pulled the satiny bra away and took her nipple into his mouth.

At the first draw, he began stroking her again, making her gasp and quake. Inside, she felt herself tightening, getting closer and closer to bursting. So close, just a little...

"Not without me, Jess," he ground out, pulling his hand away. She would have whimpered, but he yanked her hips forward and sank deep inside her, fitting to her as if he were made to fill her completely. She did whimper then, throwing her head back and letting him move her with his hands, lift her with his hips.

He brought her down while pushing up into her. Not the slow, sensuous strokes he'd used in her bed but fast, bucking pumps that bobbed her along his length. Every ridge and ripple of his cock brushed her nerve endings with ruthless intent. Her legs tightened around him and, soon enough, she picked up the rhythm he wanted.

She rode with abandon, letting her body take what he was giving, grinding her clit into him until the small pearl of flesh felt as if it were on fire, ready to send her into ecstasy. Crossing her arms behind his head, she curled him to her breasts and let herself drown in him. The smell of sex and the taste of passion, the sounds of her own small pants of pleasure and his rumbled moans of encouragement all flooded her senses. And when his hot, open-mouth kiss drew on her nipple, the thread of control snapped inside and all she knew was sensation.

Clutching each other, their bodies pounded wildly together with only one desperate goal. Oblivion. One of his hands slipped between them, found the nub of her clit and with the strangely gentle squeeze sent her over the edge, his name nearly a scream on her lips. He had the presence of mind to cover her mouth with his other free hand, but it didn't do much to stifle her because her orgasm seemed to set off his own and he pounded harder than before as he jetted hot splashes into her.

Minutes later, when sanity was finally audible beneath her still-rushing blood, her eyes opened. He was still warm, still within her, and the regrets were already piling up.

What the hell had she just done? Other than come screaming in her office's most-used elevator? Oh God, this was a mistake. A wet, bone-melting mistake. He was going to read more into it than there was, she just knew it. He wanted something more than she wanted to give and, when she wasn't what he expected, he'd hate her and leave her behind because she wasn't the kind who belonged—

Blinking, she forced her mind to stop. She wouldn't let the harried thoughts or old fears control her anymore. Nothing controlled her if she didn't let it.

Besides, what was Kyle going to do? Club her over the head to make her have feelings for him? His best weapon was charm. She could withstand charm. Fighting the urge to tighten her hold on him, she decided being batter-dipped in charm might be worth it. For a little while. And what would he have to complain about? He wanted her. She wanted him. You couldn't find a better win/win situation. As long as she was clear with him, no one would get hurt. Nothing bad would happen.

Something in her chest continued to balk.

Ruthlessly, Jessica ignored it. She was not going to throw away a good lover just because of a few seconds of panic. She had nothing to feel guilty about. Nothing to take any blame for or worry about. Sex was not a promise or a commitment or even binding. It was release. And sex with Kyle was an incredible release. Why not accept what he offered and enjoy it?

She let him go, gathering her shirt around herself as she slipped out of his hold to sit next to him on the carpet in silence. Twice, she tried to come up with the right thing to broach her decision. It was one thing to think it. Another thing to say it with any panache. Especially when one was barely dressed and still throbbing. But she'd never gotten anywhere being shy. Shifting and tugging, she got her underwear and her skirt back in place and just forced the words out. "If we get out of this elevator, I want you to meet me tonight at seven. At my apartment."

Kyle was quiet for a moment, as if he too were collecting his thoughts for a game plan while he readjusted his clothes. Finally, his playful gaze met hers. "If we don't get out?"

She smiled, her awkwardness fading. He always seemed to do that. Take all the discomfort and confusion out of the room until it was just you and him and there was nothing wrong with anything. "Then I guess you won't have far to travel."

"Sounds like a date."

"It's not." She'd nip that idea in the bud immediately. "It's exactly what we were talking about. No commitments. No happily ever afters. Just very good, very satisfying sex."

His expression couldn't be read. He seemed to be considering it, the slightly amused lift to the corner of his lips raising her hopes while his eyes studied her face for some clue she couldn't begin to fathom. "Why?"

Simple enough question, but most answers were too revealing. "Let's just say ten minutes in an elevator isn't enough for me."

His chuckle warmed her. "If you give me a second, I'm sure I could come up with another two or three minutes to top you off."

"Tempting, but no." Strangely enough, two or three minutes with Kyle was probably worth an entire hour of any of her previous lovers. But it wouldn't do any good telling him that.

She had the sneaking suspicion it wouldn't do any good telling Kyle a lot of things.

Chapter Seven

“Don’t stop! Oh, God, don’t stop!” Jessica’s back arched off her bed, her hands fisting the sheets and her eyes squeezed tight. Vaguely aware of the fact that her knees were spread as wide as they could go, she let her curled toes glide over the smooth, golden skin of Kyle’s back with every surge of his tongue into her pussy.

For an eternity now, he’d had her on the brink of coming, taking devilish pleasure in making her practically beg for completion. Since he’d arrived an hour ago, he’d been taking his time seducing her with kisses, touches, undressing her, letting her undress him, ratcheting her need and not sating it. This time, yes, this time, he’d have to let her come. He had to.

His hands smoothed up her open thighs just before he disobeyed and lifted his mouth from her quivering sex. Before she could complain, he pushed her knees together with a wicked grin before pushing them up to her chin, lifting her ass to him like a gift. “Hold on to these for me, will you?”

“Wha—?” But her arms lifted to wrap around them exactly as he said.

And two of his fingers sank into her while his thumb circled her clit.

Lights flashed behind her lids, his curling fingertips searching out and finding the most sensitive bundle of nerves inside her. She strangled out a sound, but she had no idea what she was trying to say.

“What was that?” he asked, pulling out his fingers slowly, then pushing them back in. “You want more?” His hand twisted on the next stroke. “Or was that faster?”

Jessica’s eyes widened at the sudden burst of blurring strokes, each one catching her clit until it felt like it was vibrating.

“Or did you want slow?”

She moaned, each option just as mind-scrambling as the last.

“I have a better idea.” His fingers disappeared, only to be replaced with the slick, broad head of his cock easing through her folds. He dipped for the barest second into her before pulling back out. “How about me?”

“Yes,” she whispered, more than ready to be filled with him.

“What?” He dipped again, the head spreading her open for a longer tease before pulling out again. “I can’t hear you.”

“Yes!” she cried, lifting her hips higher yet.

“Now?” He fed himself into her again, her clenching muscles all but sucking him in...and then he was gone.

“Kyle!”

He filled her solidly before his name finished leaving her lips.

She bit her lip, letting go of her legs because Kyle had taken over, pulling her knees apart before pinning them to the mattress. He leaned over her, grinding his hips against her, rubbing her clit and stroking every centimeter of her pussy with the thick heat of his cock.

She grasped her breasts, squeezing her nipples, which seemed to incense him further because his strokes became full thrusts. She plucked them for him, looking up through slitted lids to find him watching her with single-minded attention. His skin gleamed in the soft light from her bedside lamp, beautiful lean muscles flexing as his hips drove into her.

Giving him a test, she parted her fingers around her nipples, locking the tight nubs between her knuckles. The flush on Kyle’s cheeks burned red and his thrusts sped up.

Thought he’d take control away from me, did he? Jessica smiled, one that felt the tiniest bit evil. His eyes narrowed, no doubt sensing her next play in this sexual game. Let him sense...

She cupped her breasts, offering them up to him. But as he dipped to take one in, she lifted her head, pulling the ample flesh toward her own open mouth. She curled her tongue around the hardened peak, flicking it back and forth, all the while watching his face register shock, thrill...then delicious intent.

“So you want to play like that then,” he growled, letting go of her legs and levering over her completely.

She didn’t get a chance to answer because he was kissing her, his tongue—tart with her own flavor—surging against hers and his hips... Dear God, she’d thought he’d been relentless before. Her arms wound around his neck and she hung on while he pounded into her, the sound of her own cries filling the room.

Holding him tight, her body strung like the tightest bow, they both began moving desperately, the game over as she gave in to the flood of sensation. Just when she thought she’d break, he changed his angle somehow and she broke in a completely different way. Everything shattered, her body clamping down on his cock, which drew his own explosion. Panting, still moving together seemingly because they couldn’t stop, Jessica smiled into Kyle’s shoulder.

Oh yes, she could definitely get used to seven o’clock meetings.

“I may not move for a week,” Kyle rumbled against her neck a full minute or two later, finally rolling off her. Surprisingly, she hadn’t already pushed him off, and she heard herself instinctively complain when he pulled free of her hold to flop next to her. Kyle tugged her close to his side, spooning her back to his front as if he did it every day. For all of a second, she relaxed into him, every cell in her body feeling as if it were exactly where it was supposed to be. Where she’d been born to be. She almost closed her eyes, almost

dropped into a sated sleep, when Kyle's hand found hers and twined their fingers before tucking her the tiniest bit closer.

Her eyes shot open then, panic washing through her.

She lurched up, grabbing desperately for her robe. Not too desperately, though—she couldn't have him noticing that her skin was about to twitch right off her back. The pale blue silk wrapped around her with minimal flapping, thank God, so when she turned around to face him, arms crossed and her best top-of-the-world, I'm-so-not-freaked-out smile, she should have been completely composed. And she would have been, if the man had a drop of shame. But he didn't, sprawled on his side, head supported by one hand, wearing perhaps the most bemused expression she'd ever seen.

Maybe it would have been better if he had anything to be ashamed of.

Against her will, her eyes coursed over his muscled chest, with its sprinkling of dark hair that led to a seductive trail down his golden-toned abdominal muscles to the thatch beneath his only slightly flaccid cock.

Slightly because he was softening or slightly because he was already becoming aroused again?

Her brain stuttered to a stop. She wasn't sure what she'd prefer.

"You're sexy when you're looking for a polite way to throw me out."

She finally unlocked her gaze from his groin and met his as he rolled up to a sit and that incredible piece of flesh slipped out of sight. "I-I have to wake up early tomorrow," she managed to choke out, though she couldn't quite remember what day of the week tomorrow was.

He merely nodded, casually standing and gathering his clothes. "I think I've used that one a few times."

"What one?"

He bent to pull on his underwear and she made a mental note to take a bite out of his ass the next time she got him in bed. She bit her lip to keep from walking over and biting into the round muscle now.

"That line." His shirt came on next. He buttoned it with steady fingers while she was still trying to get her thighs to stop trembling. He gave her a lazy grin and the trembling got worse. "You don't need to give me excuses, Jess."

Her eye twitched at the name. "You've really got to stop calling me that."

He paused while pulling on his pants to look up at her with both brows raised. Shucking them up, he tucked his shirt in and took the steps needed to circle the bed. He reached for her, his mouth quirking on one side when she took an instinctive step backward. Leaning forward again, his hand circled her waist and he leaned down to press one of those soft kisses to her cheek, lingering enough to make her fingers tingle to touch him. "That's our deal, right? A man who can give you everything you need and know when it's time to go home?"

She frowned. "I don't think that was exactly it."

Another kiss, this time to her lips. “See you tomorrow night, Jess.”

She watched him go, her hand twining in the strap of her robe until she heard the click of her front door closing. She followed eventually, to turn over the deadbolts, wondering why exactly she was frowning.

Getting rid of him had been entirely too easy. And definitely too disconcerting. She was supposed to be relieved. He was exactly right. They had made a deal. They’d have no-strings sex and he’d go away, grateful. This was supposed to be what she wanted.

Except... Except she’d been this close to falling asleep in his arms as if she’d belonged there. She’d never had that feeling in her life. Never known anyone who’d wanted her to feel that way. And the first one to inspire it had just blithely walked out the door, oblivious to her confusion.

She rubbed her face, shaking off the odd feelings. They must just be from the strangeness of the day. Getting out of the elevator that afternoon hadn’t been too much of a hardship. Within fifteen minutes of them getting their clothes to rights, the car began a smooth descent to the bottom floor. Kyle’s exit might not have had his usual sleek grace, but no one would have guessed at the clawing panic she’d seen in him earlier. They might have figured out about the sex, but with her frosty reputation, people probably discounted the notion.

Then, right on time, she’d opened her door to Kyle and an armful of potted flowers. Purple ones that had petals with long rippling edges and bright yellow stamens that stood out far from the centers. The flowers were still on her kitchen counter. Kyle, now that she’d had her way, his way, and a few extra ways on top of that with him, was securely on his way home.

A well-laid plan coming out exactly the way she’d envisioned.

So why wasn’t she happy?

The question plagued her long after she turned off the lights and climbed into bed. The bed that felt emptier than ever before. When she woke up the next morning, her face hurt from frowning but she couldn’t stop, not even when she got to work. Something wasn’t right with this plan, but she couldn’t quite figure out what, and asking Kyle or Dory to help her figure it out was not an option. Since she didn’t have anyone else, the best she could do was move on to the next problem that needed tackling.

In this case, that problem would be Lucas Lonnigan and his much-needed punishment.

Oh, he’d sounded outraged that morning she’d overheard him and Kyle—was it really only last weekend?—so she gave him the benefit of the doubt about not realizing she and Kyle would have sex, but he’d still stood her up and set her up to be duped. That alone was enough to make her want to tie him to a stake, slather him with salt water and let a horde of cows lick him to death.

The idea of keeping him alive so he could handle some referrals for her crossed her mind from time to time, because almost no one was as efficient or impartial as Lucas when it came to his work, but she hadn’t yet decided. His loyalty lay with the numbers and that, at the very least, she could trust, though she didn’t

like admitting that either. Dealing with him from now on would have a level of disquieting tension she'd never had to work with before.

Unfortunately, she was in need of him.

She'd spent the past week putting off the referral she'd meant to give him on their last date. She had a new client who'd inherited a number of businesses from an elderly uncle, none of which appeared to be solvent. The client had a few questions about his uncle's business manager, who had taken over when his uncle became too ill. She'd need Lucas's skills to untangle the books so she could advise the client whether to sue the business manager or just fire him. Normally, that would be a fascinating discussion topic between the two of them. The way things stood between them now, she could only fantasize that the businesses still used paper ledgers so she could throw them all at his head.

But her feelings didn't change the fact that she needed him.

Staring at the paperwork now, she felt an evil grin slide over her lips. Perhaps the staking could be done another way. And it *would* give her the opportunity to finally break up with him.

She arrived at his door ten minutes into her lunch hour, prepped down to each question she was going to ask and how many times she'd allow herself to glare at him. It wasn't until he opened it with his slash of an eyebrow raised that she realized she'd been rapping on it like a machine gun.

"Oh...hi." She blinked dumbly as she gathered her bearings. Not the best of starts, but she could roll with it. "I need to talk to you," she added firmly, stretching for her earlier irritation.

It wasn't as easy to find with him looking almost apprehensive and slightly lost about why she was there. Probably waiting for her to rain holy fire on his head like she'd meant to. Glumly, she finally admitted that wasn't going to happen.

She wasn't mad at Lucas anymore. Looking at him, she couldn't even gather up a good sense of rage that he'd traded dates on her or that he'd been trying to break up with her in such a lame way. In fact, her feeling for him was so bland and...well, nonexistent, really, that she couldn't believe she'd ever mistaken him and Kyle in the first place.

Kyle shimmered with vitality. He couldn't hide a smile if you paid him. Lucas could frown for days and not even notice. Kyle's eyes were brighter, his skin was golden. Was he taller?

Lucas's eyes narrowed as her thoughts rambled on. He shook his head at her, making a sound of supreme male exasperation. "And here I thought you had the sense God gave a fruit fly."

"I...What?" Wait a minute. He wasn't the one supposed to be mad here. *She* was the wronged one. She opened her mouth to point that out but he shrugged and let go of his front door like it didn't matter if it was closed or not.

"You'd better come in." He sighed, appearing somewhat put upon while he turned away and left her to enter the apartment or go back the way she came.

"I have work for you," she called after him, feeling strangely petty for coming here now, despite the legitimate claim.

He kept going, through his open living room and around a corner. "Sure you do. Come on, Jessica, you're letting the cool air out."

She stared at the open door, just knowing she was going to regret this. She hadn't even gone inside and she was already losing the argument. Bland or not, the Lonnigans could derail her plans with unerring precision. It didn't bode well for the rest of her mapped-out conversation and even worse for her revenge. But she was here for a reason and she'd better get to it. She stepped into the cool wood-paneled living room and closed the door behind her.

"Tea?" Lucas asked, filling a kettle at his sink, while she tentatively followed him into what turned out to be his kitchen. Ninety degrees outside and he was making hot drinks. Given how well air-conditioned he was, though, she supposed it wasn't a bad idea. She was going to be freezing in a matter of minutes. She shrugged and he took that for agreement. "Have a seat."

For an open-plan kitchen/dining room, it wasn't particularly spacious, giving it a cozy feel she didn't expect. The kitchenette table near the window even had a small, leafy plant, which surprised her. Lucas's clinical approach to existing didn't seem conducive to green things surviving in his home. Then again, hadn't she surrounded herself with plants in an effort to curb those pesky nurturing needs she couldn't quite bury?

At least Lucas had had the presence of mind to fill his home with genuine warmth. The rust-colored walls and furniture, wood floors and pine paneling, touches of brown, leather and gold gave him a personality she'd never imagined he possessed. And he fit in it. Her home was comfortable, filled with the tiny luxuries she'd always wanted—fine fabrics, rich flavors, deep softness—but she was never quite sure if it reflected her as a person. If people walked in and knew she belonged there. Or knew that she *didn't*.

Great, now even Lucas was making her feel insecure.

She dropped into the seat at the table, setting her satchel down next to her feet while Lucas put the kettle on the stove.

"I thought when Kyle went all goofy over you that it was a one-sided thing," he said, breaking the silence. "Actually, I thought it was finally justice that he was gone on someone who didn't want him back. This is a surprise."

"What is? What are you talking about?"

"You. You're looking at me and all you can see are the ways I'm not Kyle." He waved an impatient hand at her attempts to interrupt. He crossed his arms, turning his attention to the sink. "It's not like you're the first. Women take to him. Haven't met one yet who knew him and didn't think she was in love with him. Then they look at me and all they can see is what isn't the same. Like I'm less than him, somehow. Worse, I can't even blame the guy for it."

Shame filled her and she purposely untangled the knot she'd made of her fingers. "Lucas, I didn't mean—"

"You don't have anything to apologize for. I'm the one who did something wrong to you, deliberately putting you in his path. I was asking for trouble." He turned away to take the whistling tea off the stove. Within a minute there was a large, fragrant mug in front of her. The scent of a field of little yellow flowers came to mind while she stirred in the sugar packet he handed her.

He lowered himself into the seat across from her, his ocean-colored eyes strangely comforting. "You know what I liked most about you, Jessica? Right from the onset?"

She sipped the tea, hoping it tasted the way it smelled. Comforting. Relaxing. It was; the flavor slid over her tongue in a flash of heat and sweetness. "Hmmm?"

"You were just like me. You didn't want anything that was going to require any effort from either of us. You probably saw that there was absolutely nothing between us and that's why you asked me out. I don't mean any disrespect when I say that's why I agreed. I rambled on about equations and you rambled on about cases. We spent months talking *at* each other instead of *to* each other—and that made us both deliriously happy. But it got boring, which is another surprise. It should have worked perfectly."

And yet...it hadn't.

Jessica chewed her lip, the liquid peace in the mug souring. She put it back on the table while she wondered backward. Was that really how it was? Had she purposely looked for a man who wouldn't threaten her perfectly arranged life?

Kyle certainly wouldn't have been an option. He was too vivid, too alive. He would have sent her running at a passing glance. She'd still run, once the gig was up.

If you were smart, you'd be running now, an annoying part of her mind insisted.

"I still like you, Jessica." Lucas interrupted her internal issues. "I know it was probably a lousy thing to do, sending Kyle in my place."

She raised her own eyebrows at him, mocking his imperious glare as best she could. "Probably?"

Lucas only shrugged, unaffected. "It made sense at the time. You've never been a woman who changes her mind easily, and logic said you were going to break up with me over dinner."

"That reminds me," she interjected, pretty sure she wasn't going to like whatever else logic was going to be saying. "I'm breaking up with you. Officially. Just to be sure."

A girl had to get her points in with Lucas while she could. Especially before he said something horrible and a vein burst in her forehead.

He narrowed one eye and kept talking as if she hadn't spoken. "I didn't think I needed to be there for it. I thought, *here's* a woman Kyle doesn't have a prayer of charming. Believe me, he needed a dose of reality. He'd come to me with some sob story about something *missing* from his life. Something about wanting the American dream. I was sure he'd fallen on his head and that you'd snap him out of it."

“The American dream?” It seemed the safest question. Nothing else he’d mentioned made any sense at all.

“It’s completely ridiculous. He actually thought having a baby might be the way to fill some ‘empty space’.” His expression told her exactly where Lucas thought Kyle’s empty space might be. “He was blathering about wanting a houseful of kids, searching for some boring, simple-minded female to pop them out of. I’m still convinced he was trying to play a joke on me. Who wants *Leave It To Beaver* these days? Look, he even made a list to convince me.”

While he got to his feet and went to a drawer near his fridge, Jessica fought to think past the screaming siren in her head. *Leave It To Beaver*? As in perfect little family, wife in apron and heels while the children parted their hair perfectly and got good grades in school? If she remembered the old sitcom, there was enough starch in that apron to stop bullets. Surely Kyle didn’t want...or expect...from *her*? Oh, God!

“I don’t know why he thought I’d buy it, no matter how convincing he seemed. Kyle’s the last person I’d imagined would settle down, least of all with someone real. I haven’t seen him without a vapid, narcissistic vine-model on his arm for years. Here it is.” Lucas pulled a long pad of paper from the drawer and came back with it, still shaking his head. Belatedly, while handing it to her, he twitched his head to the side. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she croaked, taking the pad with a snap. *Vapid? Models?* And why was the idea of him with clingy gorgeous women instantly irritating when she didn’t want him on a permanent basis anyway?

The top sheet of the pad was a mess, with lines and arrows putting the list in a sort of numerical order, but it matched the handwriting on the notes that had come with the plants. It was Kyle’s.

“Smart, not a spender,” she read aloud, feeling her eyes widen. “Our age, avoid the desperate types unless cute. Unless *cute*?”

Lucas wisely didn’t comment when she pinioned him with an accusing glare. She went back to the list.

“Educated, no lecturers, Wants lots of kids. Soon. He underlined that one. What’s that supposed to mean?” Of course she knew what it meant. But fear had her rambling on. “Emotionally available, don’t want to play hard to get. Sense of humor a must. Honest, not nitpicky. Loyal. No temper, avoid schizos. Pretty, hotness not required.” Pretty was *last*? She tipped the list downward and all but growled at him, air finally getting into her—along with that misplaced rage. “Why didn’t the two of you just go buy him a dog?”

“Well, last I checked, dogs only have puppies. I think he wanted something that resembled *him* a little more.”

“Trust me, a boy would look exactly like him. Both of you, actually.”

Lucas shook his head and sipped his tea with an annoying lack of offense. “I told him women didn’t like these kinds of things.”

“What’s not to like? The fact that you think I’m smart and cheap or where you two think I’m your age and not only desperate but *cute*?” Her eyes narrowed on him as an extra insult finally caught her attention. “How old are the two of you anyway?”

For a second, Lucas finally looked nervous. “Twenty-five?”

“Nice try,” she grumbled, tossing the list on the table between them. “The two of you are pathetic. Him for thinking a list like *this* would help find someone and *you* for thinking I fit anything on here.”

“I sent him your way because I was sure you didn’t fit much on that list at all.”

“If you say I’m educated, Lucas Lonnigan, I’ll stuff you in your own teapot, take you to that elementary school down the road and give you to the first kid I meet likely to pick his nose and count with his fingers.” That would be more denigrating than the salt lick idea.

“I was going to say pretty, actually.”

“Oh.” Well, that was nice. Sort of.

“Educated was a given,” he added, ruining it. If she could, she’d break up with him twice. “*Emotionally available* ruled you right out, so I thought Kyle was going to go down in flames and everything would be fine. Little did I know.”

He probably practiced sounding that dry. She was about to eye the distance to the teapot before another thought got in the way.

“Wait a minute. *You* think *I’m* closed off?” Wasn’t that just the crouton calling the cracker crunchy?

“By choice,” he agreed with such a dose of casual disregard that it took her aback. Hadn’t *anyone* taught him any manners? How on earth had those two come out of the same womb? “It made you efficient and I appreciated the lack of sentiment to everything you did. That’s over now, though. Look at you. You look like you’ve been hit by a truck or something.”

Her jaw dropped. “*Excuse* me?”

“Your focus is gone. You haven’t even gotten around to telling me about the case. And you look sad, Jessica. I don’t mean that negatively—”

“You could have fooled me,” she snapped, wishing she had something to throw at him. The plant was a good choice. With any luck, it had been freshly watered.

“There’s that sentiment I was talking about. I’ve always been this blunt, you just didn’t care before.”

“You never did a character critique of me before. You wouldn’t come out of one very well, either, you know.”

He nodded as if that were old news. “It’s no secret that I’m not likable. But you liked me. And now you don’t. A sure sign that you’ve come to your senses and reawakened to the real world.”

Was it worse that he said terrible things about himself when she wanted to or that he said terrible things and didn't mind them in the slightest? She couldn't decide, but she did feel decidedly robbed of her indignation.

"You need a better self-image," she mumbled.

That finally seemed to amuse him. "Believe me, if I didn't enjoy myself so much, I'd probably have more friends."

"There's a sick kind of logic to that."

"But logic all the same. What about you? What kind of logic are you using while you avoid my brother?"

"I'm not avoiding him," she said, trying to keep up with the abrupt change in topic. "I just have no plans to marry him." She even smiled, despite the urge to convulse.

"Good luck to you. Kyle has a way of getting what he wants. If that happens to be you..." He purposely let the thought trail off.

"Then too bad for him." The words hurt a little for some reason, but she ignored it. "He'll figure it out and move on eventually. And I'll be happy for him when he does." She pasted a big fake smile on her lips and dared him to argue with her.

Which he did. Compunctionless bastard. "I doubt it."

"Doubt what?"

"Any part of it. Kyle never gives up and I'd bet that if he *did* move on, you'd be a sobbing, ice-cream-eating mess."

"Well, you'd be wrong." Probably not about the ice cream, but she wasn't about to admit that. "I have no matrimonial interest in your brother and even if I did, I will never be some man's convenient wife. Furthermore, at the first possible opportunity, I plan to tell him that. Then he can go find his *real* loyal, cheap, child-spitting dream girl. Soon this whole mess will be behind us and things will be back to normal. Speaking of—here." She pushed her folder toward him. "That's the case. You'll love it. It's a big ugly mess."

"Really?" He plucked it from her hands like it was the holy grail, opening the crisp manila to the treasure inside, his brother's love life completely forgotten.

"Should keep you busy for a few days, at least."

He grunted, reading the description she'd given him. He was already gone. She rolled her eyes, sipped the tea again and waited.

"When can you get me the files?"

"As soon as you sign the contract. The client already has." She took a pen from her pocket and handed it to him.

He scribbled his signature, giving her a dark look. “You were sure of yourself. I could have been booked.”

“You owe me.” She smiled at him sweetly. “And now you’ve paid me back.”

He stopped writing, then looked down, his expression turning thunderous as he read over the terms. “This is insane. Why don’t I just pay *him* for the job?”

“Because that wouldn’t be as much fun for *me*. I have to get back to work. I’ll get those books to you in short order.” She plucked the folder from his hands, tucking it under her arm and picking up her satchel at the same time.

He had fast reflexes but she was out the front door before he even started after her. She kept going, down to the street and out to her car. She had the door open when he caught up, leaning across the hood with an expression this close to pleading.

“Jessica, come on. We’re talking about a lot of money here.”

“I have always advised you to read contracts before you sign them, Lucas. Even from me.” She tossed her bag onto the back seat.

“I can’t do all of that work for twenty-five dollars!”

“Yes, you can. I have total faith in your skills. Bye!” She waved and dropped into the seat, prepared to drive away and let him stew. But he suddenly stopped trying to change her mind. Instead, he straightened away from the car, his gaze traveling beyond the vehicle, his expression hardening instantly.

Compelled, though not entirely sure why, Jessica looked over her shoulder and her insides clenched. Walking away from a street vendor with a couple of pretzels, into what looked like a private park for the housing development, was none other than the man who haunted her mind day and night.

With a tall, willowy brunette on his arm.

Chapter Eight

Belinda laughed at him. It wasn't the reaction Kyle was going for, but since he'd not only stood her up for dinner last Saturday but stuck her with the likes of his brother, he tried to take it with good grace.

"This is so typical," Belinda crowed, biting into the pretzel he'd bought her. She shook the lengths of her ironed-flat black hair out of her face enough to keep it out of her food. Few things were allowed to come between Belinda and her meals. Rail thin and strong as an ox, she apparently burned off all her calories hefting pieces of metal around her nearby loft.

"What is?" He tore into his own hot twist. Buttery, salty flavor filled his senses, giving him his only comfort of the day. She'd been right about fresh pretzels hitting the spot.

He'd taken a rare day off work for a little bit of introspection on his situation with Jessica. He knew he'd made positive progress, but he had the sense he'd painted himself into a corner with this convenient-lover thing. Thinking about it didn't help. Instead he discovered he could reflect on the whole of his existence in about forty-five minutes. He'd promptly panicked and called Belinda to help him figure out how to make a U-turn.

"You can have just about any woman you meet, and you—being *you*—want the only woman you can't have. It's completely typical." The jagged slices of her hair caught the breeze, moving as solid pieces while she chewed.

Her getup today would have been inspiring, if it wasn't just a little bit scary. She wore an old black tank top that didn't reach her pierced bellybutton and had enough holes from bleach stains to make him wonder how it stayed together. Not to mention wonder how she planned to stay milk pale with the summer sun on all her exposed skin.

He'd asked what the fist-sized band-aid on her belly was about but she'd shrugged him off a little too nonchalantly, claiming she'd cut herself with a shard of metal. She'd never even given herself a splinter in all the years he'd known her, so he knew there was a story there. She just wasn't telling it.

Her skirt was just plain mean to the male species, as evidenced by all the guys who damn near de-tongued themselves with their own feet as she passed. A Catholic-girl red plaid over some tiny black string underwear she seemed happy to share with the public. The only thing that kept the wind from kicking the skirt up were the suspenders that went down instead of up, winding between her legs to come back up the front and peel the torn waistband down another inch or so. She capped it off with inch-squared fishnets and knee-high boots that would weigh down a lesser Marine.

Lucas would have a coronary if he saw her, which Kyle sincerely hoped was not the point of her demanding a walk in their joint neighborhood.

“You’re sure Lucas never walks in the park?” It wasn’t as if Lucas was ever rational when it came to Belinda. If he were to see them together, especially with her in her pseudo-stripper outfit, Lucas would throttle first, ask questions never.

“I don’t spend time thinking about what he does.” She probably didn’t think about the number of cows it took to make up her wardrobe either, but that didn’t mean he wanted to end up like one of them—slaughtered and skinned for someone else’s pleasure; namely his brother’s.

Maybe he should just get the walk over quickly and hope Lucas was neck deep in unbalanced accounts. “So what do you think? How do I get out of the sex-toy zone and into the live-with-me zone?”

Belinda choked on her pretzel. “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation.”

“Belinda.”

“Have you considered asking her?”

“Not an option. She patently doesn’t want a relationship.” He took another bite, pulling at her arm to lead the way into the community arbor where hopefully they could not be seen from Lucas’s apartment.

Belinda moved only as fast as her leaden shoes would allow—snail’s pace. “Hypnosis?”

“You were supposed to be helpful.”

“You were supposed to have a triple digit IQ. We’ve all learned to live with disappointment.” She finally saw the black cloud forming somewhere over his eyebrows. “What do you want me to tell you, Kyle? You’re trying to talk a woman into something she doesn’t want to do.”

“Something she *thinks* she doesn’t want to do. There’s a difference.”

She snorted. “Only in your mind.”

“I’m right about this.” He knew he was. The way her eyes softened when he made love to her, giving him everything, body and soul. The way she seemed to fight herself as well as him. “You’d have to be there to know what I’m talking about.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. One overzealous Lonnigan is about all a girl should have to take.”

“I’m not overzealous. I screwed up everything when I lied to her. At least you *know* Lucas. You knew what you were getting into as soon as he walked into the bar.”

Her heavily lined eyes narrowed, the dark brown turning nearly black. “What’s that supposed to mean? What did he tell you?”

“Not a peep.” Which was true. Aggravating, but true. “He’s barely letting me in his apartment and when I’m there he doesn’t say much.”

“Lucas *never* says much. It’s the thing I like best about him.”

“You should tell him that.” He considered his words for a second, then figured he was already in hot water, why not boil? “You should tell him everything you like about him.”

The boots scraped to a stop. More important, she stopped eating. “I thought this was about you and *your* failed love life, not mine.”

“Yours is only failing because you’re being stubborn.”

“You think I should take the advice of a man who didn’t even remember to tell the woman he was sleeping with his own name?”

“In this case, yeah.” He stopped walking. “At least I’m admitting I was wrong and what I’m feeling. You won’t even do that.”

“You don’t understand.” She sighed, then tossed the half-eaten pretzel into a nearby trashcan. Damn, he could have eaten that. “Things between me and Lucas are... complicated.”

Kyle snorted. “Love usually is.”

“And what do *you* know about love, you two-timing louse?”

He spun around at the sound of the nearly shrill voice behind him, unable to believe his ears. But she was there, crisp cream blouse and charcoal-gray skirt uniform in place, her hair held back at the sides with sedate clips, the rest flowing down her back like a mahogany mane. He smiled wide. “Jess!”

Her dark eyes were bright with anger, even her lush mouth was tight with it. She was on-fire pissed-off for some reason, but he’d never seen anyone so beautiful in his life.

Not that she was interested in hearing that. She cuffed his shoulder hard enough to make him take a step back. “*Jessica*, you schmuck! I was almost ready to give you the benefit of the doubt. Thinking—feeling... It doesn’t matter. I can’t believe I was so stupid. If Lucas hadn’t told me about all those models you date—”

“Models?” Kyle frowned. His eyes darted to Belinda, who for the first time in her life actually looked surprised. She couldn’t possibly think he and—

“You think *I’m* a model?” Belinda asked, incredulous.

“Not talking to *you*,” Jessica said through her teeth, still boring into him with an incensed stare. “Ever since that night, you’ve been trying to convince me you weren’t a jerk. I *knew* I couldn’t trust you. I knew sooner or later you’d show yourself for the sneaking, lying bastard I thought you were but I let my hormones get the better of me.”

“But we’re not—”

Belinda suddenly rammed her whole body against his side, latching both arms around him and crunching her hair onto his shoulder. “Oh, yes, we are, sweetums.”

“Sweet— *What?*” Finally looking away from Jessica—who was like to burst into flames—Kyle glared down at Belinda. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Just trust me,” she whispered out the side of her mouth.

“No!” He tried to shake her off, but she had the hold of a steel trap. He looked back at Jessica, about to explain when he saw his brother looming behind her like an archangel.

Cold, clinical Lucas Lonnigan had completely disappeared. In his place was a hulk of black fury, his eyes so dark and narrow that Kyle only had enough time to acknowledge one thing: this was going to hurt.

Then Lucas punched him.

“Kyle!” Jessica’s voice cried, while he felt like he was soaring through the air.

Thankfully, he landed on a swell of grass. Not so thankfully, the grass was on top of hard, hard ground. Air whooshed out of him and refused to come back. His eyes teared up, his back cracked and he wondered almost absently if his jaw was still connected to his head.

Jessica dropped to her knees next to him, her soft hands fluttering over his face, her thin brows drawn together in what looked like concern. He liked that look. It was almost as good as her smile. He could hear her telling him to relax and breathe, then she looked over her shoulder where some slightly muted voices were yelling at each other. It was almost nice here in this fog. He wondered how long he could go without breathing, then decided he could make it as long as she stayed right where she was.

Until she took the butt of her hand and popped him savagely in the stomach. Suddenly he was sucking in too much air completely against his will. And all of it hurt.

“What was that for?” he croaked, curling away from her.

“Got you breathing again, didn’t it?” She hadn’t been kidding about not having a Florence Nightingale gene. She got up again, dusting her knees off while he wondered if he’d have visual verification of his balls ever again.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Belinda was yelling, probably at Lucas. He hoped at Lucas. The last thing Kyle needed was someone else hitting him. “You had no right to do that, you jerk! Kyle didn’t do anything to you.”

Oh good, it *was* at Lucas.

“Sure looked like it to me,” Lucas was grumbling.

Kyle sat up slowly, working his jaw right and left. Still on but definitely dented. Who’d have thought Lucas had it in him? He looked up to find Belinda and his brother squaring off, she with her hands on her hips, militant boots braced as if declaring war. Lucas looked severely under-armed, holding his ear and leaning his head to the side. They prattled on while Kyle blinked.

“I was *trying* to help him with his girlfriend over there until you came over here like some wild rampaging caveman and ruined it.”

“I am *not* his girlfriend,” Jessica interjected coldly, drawing their heated attention from each other. “I don’t know what kind of freak show is going on here, but I’ve had enough. I’m going.”

“Jessica, wait!” Kyle tried to scramble back to standing, but he didn’t do a very good job with it and she was already to the gates of the park.

"I'm not dating him!" Belinda called after her. Jessica stopped at the sound of her voice, freezing Kyle in his attempts to catch up with her too. "He wouldn't want me, even if I were. The only woman he wants to be with is you."

Kyle's gaze met Jessica's across the dozen or so feet. She was flushed. He could see her counting the number of people already in the park watching them. Her gaze danced his way again, filling him with hope that she might reconsider. But the longer she looked at him, the sadder her eyes got and he knew she wasn't coming back.

"I'm not what he's looking for," she replied, then impassively walked out of the park and back out of his life. If his insides didn't already feel crushed, he had a feeling they'd be tied up in knots. He couldn't even run after her.

"I'm sorry, Kyle," Belinda said softly a minute or two later, actually sounding like it, her hand resting on his shoulder. "I really thought it would help."

Of course she did. Every impulsive, knee-jerk, dumb-assed thing Belinda did was because she thought it was the right thing or the best way or had the most heartfelt intentions.

He rubbed his jaw, keeping his eyes on Lucas in case the moron got territorial again. Though his brother's eyes were still suspicious, his ear was apparently giving him his own problems. "Next time you want to help, hon, for once in your life, you might want to *think* before you act."

Her hand fell away. Kyle looked over at her, surprised at the open hurt on her face. God, there were even tears in her eyes. He hadn't said anything that bad. And Belinda never cried. Period.

"Belinda—"

"Don't worry about it, Kyle. In fact, I don't want *either* of you to worry about me anymore. Ever again." She backed away. Lucas reached for her but she pushed his hand away harshly. "Especially *you*," she added, then turned away and ran as best she could out of the park, leaving the two of them together.

With a decent-sized audience staring at them disapprovingly.

"Oh, like none of you have ever had the shit kicked out of you by your girlfriends." Kyle waved them off irritably, carefully stepping to Lucas's side. They both stared at the empty arbor gates. "So what do we do now?"

Lucas pulled his hand from his ear—as if he were checking for blood, which meant that Belinda had boxed him but good this time—and grimaced. "Smart men would promise to stay out of each other's business."

Kyle considered that and started shuffling toward the exit. "I don't think either one of us is going to be called smart for a while but it sounds like a good plan. You have any steaks?"

"Not for you. You can have the ice pack. *I'm* getting the steak."

"Greedy." Steak actually sounded pretty good. Better to wait until he could chew and not die, though. "What did Jessica mean about you telling her I date models? And what did she mean about not being what

I'm *looking* for?" If Lucas had shown her that list they'd made to help him organize his thoughts, he was toast.

Lucas's expression of non-expression was miraculously less human than usual. "Not a clue."

Shit. She'd seen it. Kyle was too tired to argue. "Guess I don't have a clue about why Belinda won't give you the time of day, then, either."

Lucas growled. "Fine, you can have the steak." Ah, the begging pleas of a man in love.

If only he were less bruised—and not on the same precarious ledge—to enjoy it. "Later. Right now I just want to fall down somewhere and pray for my unborn children."

"Amen." Lucas followed him out and the rest of the walk to his apartment was blessedly silent. Kyle just hoped the rest of their lives weren't.

Chapter Nine

Jessica opened the door around six thirty, well aware of who would be on the other side. He was exactly as she expected. Bruised from temple to jaw with an ugly black-and-purple mark that would have made her flinch if she were willing to feel compassion. He wore the same white dress shirt and dark slacks too, but the sleeves were rolled up and he had a rumpled look all over him that she just knew was driving him crazy. She hadn't known him long, but he was as exacting with his appearance as she was. Which meant this was a calculated decision to come to her for sympathy.

"I didn't think you'd let me in," he said when she gestured for him to enter.

"A couple of hours ago, you'd be right." She closed the door, hoped he got a little unnerved by the sound of her throwing all four of her locks behind him. "But then I started thinking, why should it matter to me what you have planned for your future? It's not as if I'm going to be part of it."

"Jess—"

"I'm just part of your present. A very *brief* part," she added, not facing him as she continued toward the kitchen. "Thirsty?"

"Jess—"

"No? Well, aside from that, I'd like to make an early night of it. I have briefs to write and I need to catch up on some sleep—"

"Jessica!"

She spun, her voice drying up at the disappointment in his eyes. What right did *he* have to be disappointed? She was the one with the ruined plans for a perfectly meaningless affair. He was the one who lied every time he got near her.

"We need to talk. About us." He dragged his hand through his hair with a wince. "About whatever Lucas told you."

"He didn't have to tell me anything. Unlike your usual lovers, *I'm* fully capable of reading."

"About that list, you have to understand, it was just a way of getting my thoughts straight. It wasn't about you."

"Of course it wasn't." She strolled over to her fridge to pull out a bottle of water, not liking the angry energy surging through her. "I'm too *nitpicky* and *spendy* for it to be about me." Not to mention too *emotionally unavailable*. The bottle crackled in her hold. "Like I said before, I'm not the woman you're looking for."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," he groused from the other room. "You could be everything I ever wanted, if you'd give us half a chance to find out."

Oh, could she? If she tried really, *really* hard? The bastard. She knew what it was like when you turned yourself inside out for people. All it got you was left behind. The urge to throw the full bottle at his overblown head was nearly overwhelming. "There's no way I could possibly be the woman on that list."

"How do you know?"

"Because if I were, I'd have to shoot myself!" She stomped back into the living room where Kyle was standing, arms crossed and an expression of patience on his face. For some reason, that annoyed her all the more and logic flew out the window. "Have you ever said a single word of truth to me? Even one? Because I have to tell you, it's far preferable to be with a schizophrenic than a pathological liar!"

"There's nothing wrong with knowing what I want," he replied stubbornly. Which wasn't an answer to her question.

"There is if you're sleeping with *me* while you look for it."

"I'm *looking* at what I want," he snapped, snapping his hand her direction.

If he'd reached out and made contact with the side of her face, he couldn't have shocked her more. No one just *wanted* her. Least of all on such short acquaintance. Who made claims like that? "You don't know the first thing about me." It was all she could think to say.

His face softened. "I know that you want me the same way."

"For sex," she replied, finally coming to the correct conclusion. A disturbing disappointment filled her instead of relief.

His good eye squinted. "Do you look for ways to make everything I say sound evil?"

Probably. It was the reason one of her foster mothers had pointed her toward law. Jessica forced her arms to stay rigidly at her side instead of hugging them around herself. "You can't possibly claim you want anything else."

"What if I wanted everything else?" he asked, his gentle tone loud in the silence between them.

Her laugh sounded terrified even to her own ears. "You'd be off your medication."

"Because I took one look at you and recognized your value as a person?"

She fisted her hands as he stepped close. As a little girl, she'd listened to the flattering lies of a set of prospective parents. Believing Kyle just wasn't in her anymore. "Because you think you made some life-altering connection with a woman over a single dinner."

"We did. If we hadn't, you wouldn't have brought me home in the first place."

He was close now. Close enough to breathe his scent, sense his warmth and remember the perfect way their bodies fit together. The urge to lean into him, let him comfort her, had her body arching without her permission. As if her body and her mind were at odds.

“Do you know what brings me back to you, Jess? When you push me away? When you tell me that what’s happening between us means nothing to you? Do you know what keeps me up at night, thinking about you?”

She didn’t want to know. But she knew he was going to tell her. When his fingertips brushed over her cheekbone, faint as a rose petal, her eyes fluttered closed all by themselves and she pressed her cheek into his palm.

“It’s that when I look at you, when you talk to me, *that’s* when I feel easy in my skin. I plan every second of my life. Every step I take. Everything I have ever done, because I’m scared shitless of making a mistake. I don’t even know why. No one is going to think any less of me. Honestly, my family doesn’t think a hell of a lot of me now. Even my mother calls me the charming one. They think nothing ever bothers me. They *love* me, they just don’t think that I have any depth. I’m just happy-go-lucky Kyle, the man without problems and you know what? I’ve gotten so *I* believe it half the time. I mean, let’s face it, apart from my job, I’ve made an entire life out of having no discernable substance at all.

“But when I’m with *you*...” He stopped to take breath, his forehead grazing against hers in a caress. “All of a sudden, I’m real. I’m stupid. I make mistakes left and right. And it doesn’t matter. I stop thinking about anything but you. How to make you smile. How to get you to talk to me. How to make you look at me that way that tells me no matter what you say, you care.”

She shook her head. “No, Kyle.”

“Yes, Jess.”

She opened her eyes. “You don’t understand. I *can’t* care. I quit caring about other people a long time ago.”

“Why?” He hadn’t given up. She knew that. Whatever her illusions were about a no-strings affair, they were gone now. And he had to lose them as well.

“Because eventually, everyone will quit caring about you. If they ever really cared in the first place.” She felt herself go cold beneath his hand. “I don’t ask anyone to care about me. I specifically told you not to. I don’t need it and I don’t want it. If you can’t deal with that, you need to leave.”

“You don’t want me to.”

Something in her was shivering. Responding. It needed to be quelled. “I’m not going to give you what you want. I can’t.”

“Try,” he murmured, his other hand sliding around her waist, heat seeping from it into her back. Those tingles only he could create began dancing down her spine while her belly warmed like chocolate liqueur. She softened into him, her breasts pressing into his wonderfully solid chest and their hips meeting with perfect alignment. He fit her, every jut and angle matching her curves and valleys. It didn’t make sense, but it felt like heaven. He lowered his mouth until it grazed hers. “For me, Jess...”

Senses mesmerized, Jessica let him lure her in. His lips were soft against hers, kind and inviting. It could have been a first kiss. A promise. A vow—

“No!” She jerked away, nearly unbalancing him. Again she saw disappointment turn down the corners of his mouth. “Don’t look at me that way. You don’t know, all right? You have no idea what it’s like to care and not have it returned. You, you’re loved by everyone you meet. Effortlessly. Even the people you say don’t think much of you are *thinking* about you. You have no idea what it’s like to be alone. So don’t you judge me, Kyle. You don’t have the right.”

“I’m not.” But he was. She could tell. He was thinking her weak. Believing she didn’t know how to take risks. He was just like Dory, risks came easy to them. It was safety they didn’t understand.

“Tell me what it was like. Help me understand.”

She shook her head. Like she hadn’t gone through that line of questioning with the state-mandated shrink year after year. “Yeah, right after you tell me why you’re claustrophobic. Better yet, why not even your brother knows about it.”

That shut him up for a few seconds. Precious seconds while she grappled for direction. If she sent him away, he’d know he’d affected her—unacceptable. If she let him stay, he’d slowly but surely burrow himself into the fabric of her life. He’d make her care about him. And eventually, he’d leave. He’d realize his infatuation was only physical. Once she stopped being a mystery, he’d get bored. Not to mention he wanted a family for some godforsaken reason and her maternal days were gone for good thanks to the dozens of kids who’d forgotten her once they had real mothers to care about.

“It was the year Lucas left for MIT.”

Jessica felt her eyes widen. Oh God, he was calling her bluff.

“It was strange being away from him. We went from doing just about everything together to being a country apart, and I had to figure out what it meant to be independent for the first time in my life. To be alone. Contrary to what you think, I *do* know what it’s like to be alone. I just never choose to be. Not when there’s a whole world of people and places and things I can be a part of.”

She bit her lip at the gentle reproof.

He took a deep breath. “That year I was a minor part in a ten-car pileup off the 805 interchange. My car got pinned to the median and buried under two others. Three people died in that accident. Two others have permanent injuries. I walked out with a broken arm and a dislocated shoulder. That’s it. A few scratches in the scheme of things. If walking out with an oversensitivity to cramped spaces is the most I have to deal with, I’m not about to complain.”

She hated how much she wanted to touch him right then. To wrap her arms around him and tell him he had as much right to his ghosts as anyone else. But it was an impulse she couldn’t indulge. Kyle would take hold of her right back.

“And you know what? In the five hours it took to dig me out, the whole time I waited, I knew how lucky I was. I still know. It’s why I follow my instincts about everything. It’s how I know that what I feel for you is real and worth building. So, yes, I’ve lied to you. Not to hurt you. Not to pressure you. Just to *know* you. I’m not proud of it, but all we have is the day we’re living, Jess. If you constantly live for tomorrow, you’re never gonna live at all.”

That much she knew wasn’t true. “Tomorrow always comes, Kyle. Usually when you can least afford it.”

And finally, it happened. What she needed him to do and hated most to see. The light in his brilliant blue eyes faded and he accepted the inevitable. She was a lost cause. “So this is it? You just...send me and what could be out the door.”

Jessica swallowed around the jagged lump in her throat. “I have to.”

He wouldn’t be Kyle if he didn’t try one more time. “No, you don’t.”

She made herself smile, though it hurt for reasons she couldn’t explain. Walking to the door before she made an even bigger fool of herself, she ignored the part of herself that wanted too much and listened to the part that knew better. She undid the locks, twisted the knob and opened it before lifting her chin and facing him one last time.

“Yes. I do.”

“Leave it to our girl to kick your ass in the lame platitudes department.”

Kyle slumped into the vinyl bench seat of Baldy’s and tried to summon a grin. Even a sarcastic one.

“That about when she threw your ass out?” Dory asked, lifting a Sam Addams longneck to her lips.

“Give or take a few seconds.”

“Told you not to tell her.”

“My *brother* told her.” A crime for which Kyle was still considering modes of revenge.

“What’s that got to do with the price of eggs? The idea was to seduce her, kid. I didn’t think you’d have much trouble with the concept.”

He wasn’t answering that. “When I called you, I thought you’d be a little more helpful, Dory.”

“Why?” The older woman ran a restless set of fingers through her fluttery bangs, the weariness on her face shining through. When she’d whistled for him at the door of the bar, he almost hadn’t recognized her. The slightly blue, tightly permed hair he now knew was a wig was gone. Instead, her real hair was fine, steel-colored and cut in a jagged diagonal shag. She wore a sleeveless black cotton tee with snug dark jeans on her wiry body. He realized the reason for their instant rapport at once; Dory was Belinda in forty years. “I already got you every opportunity you’ve ever had. Plus, I was saving Jessica for my son, Daniel, but

when you floated her boat I made an exception and believe me, buddy, I don't ever short my kid. I *really* don't see how much more helpful I could get."

"Help me fix this."

Dory shook her head at him. "Honey, you gotta face that it's over. You had a chance when she couldn't see you coming. Telling her you've got feelings for her?" She threw up her hands. "You didn't just screw the pooch, kid. You went out back and shot Ol' Yeller."

Kyle dropped his head back onto the top of the booth seat. Yeah, that's about what he'd figured too. "I might accept it if I could just figure out why she's so afraid." It hadn't escaped his notice that he'd bared his weak spot, but she hadn't uttered a word about hers. He finally understood what it meant to have something sticking in your craw.

The silence from the usually vocal end of the table finally registered. He looked up to find Dory staring at him from behind her tipped beer. "What?"

"Do you really love her? Not that hearts-and-flowers bullshit, but the real thing, the stick-with-her-through-anything kind. The kind that's more important than what you *thought* you wanted. The kind that puts her first."

Kyle swallowed. Those were shrewd questions he wasn't sure he wanted to answer. "I want to say the second kind—"

"Either you do or you don't, kid."

"I don't know," he replied as honestly as he could. "When we're talking, when it's just me and her, it could be..." In his mind, he thought back to their date, to her face in the dark, her unwilling compassion in the elevator. Even the tinge of confusion on her face as she'd shown him the door tonight. "But every time we get close, she pushes me away. She won't tell me why. I know she feels something. I can see how scared she is, she just won't let me in."

"What if she did? What if she suddenly cracked her skull on being totally in love with you? Have you figured out what you're going to do with her? Or is this a thrill-of-the-chase kind of thing?"

He frowned and nudged his beer away. "She wouldn't have to crack her skull..."

"Stop pouting and answer the question. What is it exactly you want from Jessica?"

A lot of things. Sex immediately came to mind, because there were a thousand and one things he still wanted to do with her. But there was more, infinitely more. He wanted her to be with him. He wanted to spend time with her, talk with her. He wanted her to stop hiding from him. He wanted—

"Never mind, I can smell the grease burning between your ears." Dory tsked loud enough to drag a smile out of him after all. "You have a lot to learn about love, Kyle. I can see you want her. I don't think you know why just yet. Sure as shit don't know the how."

"I want a family. That kind of thing takes time. I need to find the right woman. Get started."

"You think Jessica's the right woman?"

Yes. And no. “I think she could be. That I want her to be.”

“Did you ask her?”

“*You* told me not to,” he reminded her.

“I told you not to tell her you already have the rest of her life planned out for her. Jessica’s the kind of woman who’s going to want a say. Hell, boy, every woman would want a say. You can’t go around plugging women into random marital fantasies. They get pissed.”

Jess sure as hell was.

“Maybe your problem is you’ve been putting the cart before the horse. I mean, if you want more from your life, shouldn’t *you* be the one changing it?”

Which might have been what Lucas had tried to tell him at the beginning of this disaster. “I’ll have to be now, won’t I?”

Dory grinned at him. “Thattaboy. Besides, you never know when things might come back around. Look at me. I’ve had a crush on Greggry Groom for forty years. I might have a chance at him, finally.”

The idea of waiting forty years for Jessica to come around was downright depressing. But Kyle found himself too shocked at Dory’s affection for possibly the most uptight, rightwing lawyer this side of the Rockies to dwell on it.

She laughed. “I met him back when he was just starting out. We both worked in the same firm. I got fired when I got caught flashing him.” She laughed while Kyle choked. “Eh, we both eventually got married to other people and, don’t get me wrong, I loved my David. But I’ll always have a soft spot for Greggry. You think he’s a pious stick now, you should have seen him back when he had to work at it. I can’t help it. I’m a sucker for the uptight. It’s just too tempting to yank their chains.”

“I’m starting to feel bad for Mr. Groom.”

Dory winked. “You just work on figuring out why you think you want a wife and kids so bad. If you figure out how to be happy on your own, you might figure out how to get Jessica to be happy with you until the wife and kids show up on their own.”

Kyle lifted his beer and Dory obligingly clinked it with hers, trying to sound jovial when he was anything but. “Here’s to strategic retreats.”

“No, honey. This is to opportunities coming around again.”

Chapter Ten

“And that should be that,” Jessica said to herself as she filed Lucas’s corrected contract four days after the debacle in her apartment. She’d let him stew a few days before she finally sent him the correct one to sign. It came back with typical speed, but she noticed he’d initialed each and every paragraph to let her know he’d read it. Well, good. A lesson learned.

Too bad she hadn’t learned hers.

She’d like to blame Kyle, but it wasn’t his fault. In the end, he’d left when she asked him to. He had nothing to do with the empty feeling inside her that had hollowed her out since the door snicked closed behind him. She was the one having trouble letting him go. Which made no logical sense. After all her experience at watching people she’d been stupid enough to care about walk away, she’d have to be an idiot to still be thinking about him or anything he’d said. But she *was* thinking about him and that had to stop.

What she really needed to do was rid her brain of Lonnigans altogether. Lucas was handily back to work and in a few months they’d be just as clinical around each other as a nurse and her latex gloves. Kyle had already proven infinitely harder to shake but it could be done. It *would* be done.

First, she’d have to stop having dreams about letting him in her bed again. She’d have to stop looking for his handwriting in her mail. She’d definitely have to throw away all the plants he’d sent. Her office had turned into a rainforest refugee camp in a matter of days. Most importantly, she’d have to stop remembering his face in the park, so damned happy to see her, even though she was ready to throw him under the fastest moving vehicle she could find.

“I did the right thing,” she said astutely to absolutely no one. The depressing thing was she was pretty sure that even *she* wasn’t listening to herself anymore.

“Jessica?” Dory’s voice came over the intercom softly, which had Jessica turning her head curiously. Dory didn’t do anything softly.

She reached out for the button. “Yes?”

“Could you come out here...a moment? I—I think I need some help.”

Jessica didn’t bother responding, but snapped up from her desk and crossed the yards to her door. Dory sagged in her seat, her usual ruddy color a strange gray. Her lips were vaguely bluish, her eyes dazed when they slowly met her gaze. She flashed on Dory’s ever-present bottle, the one she claimed was full of candy...

“Where are your pills, Dory?” She rushed to the desk, seeing that Dory already had the bottle in her hand. Her grip was viselike, but Jessica pulled it free. Pills—real, little white pills—scattered across the desk, some flaking, looking tiny and melty on the blotter.

“I took them already.” Dory sounded strained and breathless. “They aren’t working.”

Jessica grabbed the phone and immediately dialed 911. She took Dory’s hand, following the instructions of the woman on the other end. Dory had aspirin in her purse, and she took two of those. Jessica’s hand shook so much that she probably spilled half the cup of water between the dispenser and Dory’s desk.

“Don’t look so scared honey, this is just what happens when your life is as surprising as mine.”

“Yeah?” Jessica heard herself laugh, but it was a nervous twitter.

“You think this isn’t a surprise? I had plans with this sexy little mechanic for my lunch hour,” Dory said dryly, then she sighed painfully. “God, I’m gonna get wheeled through this building like Godiva getting dragged by her goddamned horse.” She groaned. “Greggy’s never gonna forgive me for this. Oh, bring your cell phone, will ya? I need you to call Daniel.”

Jessica raced back into her office, grabbed her purse from under the desk and ran back outside. Dory was all set with her woven wicker bag on her lap and her ankles crossed. For all their hurry, they still had interminable minutes to wait.

Finally, the doors whooshed open. The next thing she knew, the paramedics came, flanked by firefighters for some reason. Jessica waved them over and they had Dory up on the gurney, strapped in and under oxygen in no time.

Jessica ran to keep up as they asked questions about medications, times, pain, babbled numbers to each other during the elevator ride and loaded Dory into the red-and-white ambulance with a jolt. Jessica climbed in alongside, holding Dory’s hand and taking her purse when asked. It was all painfully slow and blurringly fast. The only constant was Dory’s cold hand in her own and the frigid fear building in her belly.

They took her immediately into the ER’s curtained areas, gesturing Jessica to the waiting seats. Which was when things *really* got slow. People came and went, some serious emergencies, some minor. Kids were in extreme abundance, coughing, wrapped in blankets of all colors despite the summer heat, some crying, some sleeping. Some people looked as scared as she felt, some looked like they’d been there a thousand times. Twenty minutes felt like hours.

In the midst of it all, Jessica felt sorely out of her depth and alone. Completely alone.

When she was young, being alone used to bother her. Like the other kids in her foster homes, she’d wanted a family of her own. The mother, the father, the siblings in a gingerbread house where everyone smiled and no one ever died. By the time the Hansons came and went, with their promises of an adoption that ultimately fell through, she’d decided that her family would be what she made it because it was clear she wasn’t getting out of the system. Time and again, she’d taken the role of mother hen. Guiding the

scared kids. Nursing the sick ones. Loving the lost ones. Her “siblings” came and went, as did she. Even if they’d wanted to stay close to her, most of them would have lost her in the shuffle—if any of them even bothered to try. In the end, after losing so many of them to one thing or another, being alone just seemed the better choice. Family wasn’t meant for her, a fact she accepted. Embraced.

Right now, being alone seemed the most foolish choice in her life. And fate was laughing at her for being so stupid.

But Dory wasn’t alone.

Remembering she’d promised to call her son, Jessica opened the wicker purse, looking inside for an address book or something. Unfortunately, Dory wasn’t as anal retentive as Jessica and the purse was a disaster. No address book, just a jumble of candies, makeup, notes, wrappers, perfume, car keys and business cards. With nothing else to do while she waited, Jessica unwadded the notes. A grocery list...unpleasant drawings of “Greggy” Groom with donkey ears and buck teeth...and two phone numbers on separate papers. One said *Daniel: ’til Friday*. The other wasn’t in Dory’s flowing script. It was in a flat, masculine print Jessica recognized with a jolt of her heartbeat: *Kyle*.

She swallowed, tucking the other notes into the purse and putting the two numbers in her coat pocket. Since she couldn’t use her cell phone in the hospital, she let the uninterested clerk at the desk know that she’d be just outside the doors if there was any word. Then, she crossed back outside into the warm day and started dialing.

Daniel Pierson, Jessica knew, had followed his father’s footsteps, a meandering biker. There was no guarantee the number would work or that it was even from this week, but she took a chance. The number was a friend’s house upstate and he had to be awakened. Upon hearing where Dory was, he promised he’d be there in a matter of hours and hung up before Jessica could even thank him. She closed her phone, leaning her head against the stucco wall behind the bench she sat on.

Even the warmth of the sun did little to stave off the dread. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. She wasn’t supposed to be scared. She shouldn’t have this overwhelming need to cry or hold anyone’s hand. Even when she’d allowed herself to care, she’d been the one others leaned on. Not the other way around. Where was her distance? Her poise? When had Dory become more than an employee?

She lifted shaking fingers to wipe away the splash of hot tears on her cheeks and tried to hold in a sob. It didn’t work. Worse, she knew what she wanted to do. The other piece of paper was burning against the hand in her pocket. She’d never had to call him before. He’d always just come along. He’d always done the reaching out.

She’d done the sending away.

She couldn’t call him. It would be too revealing in too many ways. He’d know he had a foothold in her life. He’d see it for the weakness it was. No, she might want him, might wish for his arms to give her that sense of comfort she never let herself think about, but it was wrong. Wrong for her, wrong for him. She

couldn't toy with the man. Couldn't give him hope for his insane plans to turn her into Mommy of the Year. No. She'd have to get through this alone.

For hours. Worrying until Dory's son arrived. And if the worst possibility occurred, she'd have to tell Daniel that his mother didn't make it.

Her own heart constricted painfully and she struggled to bring in another breath over the choking sob.

God help her, she couldn't do that. Not alone.

She picked up her phone again, closed her eyes and hoped she was making the right decision.

He shouldn't speed. The last thing he needed was to end up at the hospital via an ambulance. His heart hammered all over his chest, making his ears pound and his lungs tight. She'd called him.

Cool your jets, Lonnigan, it doesn't mean much.

But just that moment, it meant a hell of a lot.

Kyle leaned into the last turn into the hospital parking lot, wishing things were different all the way around. He'd hoped that when she called, it'd be of her own volition, that she'd decided to give him a chance. But when she said what had happened to Dory with that break in her voice, their little push-and-pull game didn't seem very important. He just wanted to be there for them both. It was a long way to go for a feeling that wasn't returned, but here he was.

And there she sat.

Jessica wasn't a small woman, but she looked like one, sitting in a row of empty chairs, her knees clamped together, her feet hooking around the thin metal legs. She was looking away, down at someone else's kids huddled in blankets while they waited.

"Jess?"

Her head snapped up, turning to him with a faint smile of relief. He crossed to her, meeting her gaze and after a few seconds of nervous blinking on her part, she cleared two purses from the seat next to her by pulling them both onto her lap.

He took the obvious clue and sat next to her.

And sat.

The silence between them seemed only emphasized by the noise of people constantly moving around them.

"It seemed like a good idea...at the time," she mumbled, still not looking at him.

"What did?"

"Calling you. I know I probably pulled you away from your work, I'm sorry about that, I—"

"You were worried and you didn't want to be alone," he finished for her, studying her profile and willing her to look at him. She nodded, a staccato motion of her head that barely moved her hair.

When she turned to face him, the movement was so sudden, so sharp, he instinctively lurched back. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, okay? I didn’t know who else to call.”

He could only stare at her.

“I’m not good at this.” She gestured between them, her hand nearly blurring. “I’m not good with people. Law, law I can do. I understand the law. It’s written in black and white. It makes sense. But you...you don’t make sense to me. And when I’m with you, I don’t make sense to me.”

The more she spoke, the faster the words came. “Maybe I would have been this way anyway, maybe it was growing up in foster care. I mean, it was no picnic, but it’s not like it was *Oliver Twist* or anything, so I can’t say for sure, but I just don’t connect with people. It’s safer that way for everyone. No one gets hurt. No one has any expectations. I’m comfortable that way. I don’t want it to change. And you want change. You want a whole lot of things I can’t do. Things I couldn’t do in a million years. But I called you anyway. Because...because...I don’t know why. I just...I want you to be clear that calling you doesn’t change things between us. I can’t be in a relationship, Kyle. I can’t.” She bit her lips together, probably to stem the flow of words, but nothing was keeping her cheeks from turning bright red.

Except maybe a little compassion. “You haven’t had an update?”

She stared at him, clearly expecting something more. After a few seconds, she seemed to realize he was going to let it all slide. Did she understand that was a temporary decision? Probably not. And she wasn’t asking, either. She turned her eyes back to the desk, but he was glad to see a little relief in the stiff line of her shoulders. “No.”

The silence fell again. Awkwardness started to seep in too. She looked so contained, with her feet, knees and hands clamped together in ascending pairs. Her mouth was just as clamped, the corners pulling down. She looked like the hospital could fall on her and she wouldn’t even flinch.

But so fragile that if he touched her, she’d break.

As if it never occurred to her that she had broken her own cardinal rule and started caring for her secretary.

“How long have you and Dory been close?”

“I’ve only known her a year.” She took a moment to marshal her pained expression. “When I met her I thought she was matronly.” Her mouth loosened a little and she sighed as she gave him a look he could only call commiserating. “She kept up the act for about three days. She cracked when Gregory Groom came in and complimented her on her hair.”

Given Dory’s revelations just that weekend, Kyle could only imagine how that had gone. “What happened?”

“She called him sweet cheeks and winked at him.” He finally saw a little color in her face again, her moist eyes brightening. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think he actually liked it. She didn’t get fired, anyway. But she figured the gig was up and made me her pet project.”

“That explains a lot.”

Her expression turned sharp.

“Well, it explains *me*, anyway.” If Dory were trying to get Jessica to loosen up, dragging her into a relationship against her will was probably on the list.

“I don’t think anything explains you.” A nervous chuckle escaped as she managed to cramp herself even smaller into the chair. Did she think he was going to attack her here in the hospital?

“I’m not all that complicated. I’m an investment banker, which is a fancy way of saying I do a lot of research and analyze stocks and bonds for my clients. I’m more of a personal banker in a small but competitive bank. It’s a good living and I’m good at it.”

“So both you and your brother are good with numbers,” she murmured.

“I wouldn’t tell him this if I were you—” because Lucas was definitely capable of shooting any messenger, “—but we’re still alike in a lot of ways. He likes to think he’s the more efficient version.”

“He does make very efficient tea,” she allowed.

Kyle smiled, glad to see some of the tension seeping out of her.

“So where do all the models come in?”

“Excuse me?”

“The vapid models Lucas talked about. According to him, you’ve practically been drowning in them.”

Yet another reason to disown his sibling. “Drowning is a strong word.”

“Which means you’d rather not say.”

He laughed. “Exactly.”

“Too bad, cough it up. How’d you find yourself surrounded by the young and the senseless?”

“Only because you’re beside yourself with worry.” Which was thankfully starting to take a backseat as the minutes passed. “A number of my clients are in the sports industries. I travel up and down the coast to meet with them and they connect me to other clients. The models are with the clients. I just occasionally get in the way. Since they like me, I started getting a reputation for being with them.”

“That’s possibly the lamest excuse for womanizing I’ve ever heard.”

“You caught me my by surprise. Ask me again tomorrow, I’ll have a better one.”

She shook her head, her mirth not lasting as long as he’d have liked. He saw when her smile turned brittle. “Thanks for coming, Kyle. It...I know I wasn’t very nice to you the last time we saw each other. It means a lot that you came. And I know it’ll mean a lot to Dory too.”

He clenched his fists in his pockets, wanting to put an arm around her and give her the comfort she so clearly needed. She wasn’t ready, though. Dory had been right about that. If he wanted Jessica to take him seriously, he had to start respecting her boundaries. “Thanks for calling.”

Keeping Jessica distracted became interesting work. He still couldn’t get her to say much about herself, but he got a few bits out here and there, all of it related to Dory. Things Dory had made her see

about herself, their surprise trip to a strip club which resulted in Jessica's first—and, he hoped to God, last—lap dance, Dory's constant rhetoric about her son needing to settle down with a woman who *wasn't* a whore. It was around the fourth time he asked reception about Dory only to be told they had no new information for him that something finally happened.

A bear of a man strode into the ER in a pair of leather chaps over jeans, a studded leather vest over a faded black T-shirt, looking sun-ruddy and windblown. Dark brown hair came past his shoulders and his thick beard nearly matched the length in the front.

"I'm looking for Doreen Pierson. I'm her son," he rumbled in a graveling, dry voice.

The unflappable receptionist stared up, her mouth agape.

"Please," the biker added pointedly.

"Oh, yes...she's in the ICU."

"You just told me there was no information." Kyle frowned at her.

"He's family."

"So am I!"

That earned him a raised bushy eyebrow from the biker.

"Well, all right, I'm not, but *she* is." He pointed back to Jessica, who was already standing.

The biker turned. "You're Jessica Saunders?"

She stared up at the man with huge eyes, but she didn't gulp. "Daniel?"

He chuckled his head once. Not the talkative type. "Where's the ICU?"

"Fourth floor," the receptionist replied to his back.

Daniel started walking away, then looked over his shoulder. "You two coming?"

Kyle heard the click of heels before he could reach out for her arm. She stayed by his side as they followed the behemoth to the elevators.

Chapter Eleven

Stable. Jessica had always liked that word before. It sounded safe, secure; a dream word. Looking down on Dory's sleeping form, tiny in the giant railed bed, *stable* had seemed utterly lacking. Now, pushing her key into her front door, Kyle at her side, stable was the last word she could use to describe their situation.

He'd been wonderful at the hospital. He'd gotten her to talk—seemed to be his special gift—but he'd been kind enough to only make her talk about inane things. When Daniel took them up to Dory's room, she was asleep but thankfully not touched with blue as she had been. The doctor said it was definitely a moderate heart attack, but they were unsure about any heart damage as yet. The next forty-eight hours were the danger hours. If she continued without another attack during that time, they would tentatively upgrade her condition. Daniel took that news with a grim, unblinking stare, then sat down at his mother's bedside and took her hand. If he moved again in the next hour, Jessica didn't see it.

They stayed until Dory awoke and smiled at them. She pooh-poohed the doctor's diagnosis, claiming to feel just fine, but made no move to get out of the bed. Jessica promised to come back the next day, leaving mother and son to themselves, probably a little too eager to escape the warmth of their connection to cover it well. Kyle had given her a confused glance but had kissed Dory's cheek and come along with her.

Now how was she going to deal with him?

"Kyle—"

"Uh-oh." He smiled sheepishly and looked down at his feet before leaning on the wall outside her apartment.

Jessica frowned. "Uh-oh what? I didn't say anything."

"You were going to."

"That was rather the point in saying your name."

"You have that distant, 'it's been a nice evening' look on your face."

"I seriously doubt that." She made sure to smooth her features, turning her key to unlock the door.

"She'll be okay, Jess."

"I know," she said automatically. His hand on her shoulder startled her into looking at him.

He looked at her firmly, his blue gaze penetrating her with surprising intensity. "She *will* be okay." Not a platitude. More a statement of fact.

Her mouth curved against her better judgment. “You really think saying a thing makes it come true?”
“Doesn’t it?”

She shook her head. “Life doesn’t work that way. Most of the time, the harder you try to make something happen, the further it gets from your control.” Just look at how things had gone between them.

“That doesn’t sound like a woman who put herself through law school and into a renowned firm.”

“Well, there was a bit more to that than saying I would become a lawyer.”

“It starts with believing,” he said quietly. “I believed you’d call me.”

Her smile fell. “Kyle—”

“I know, you called me for Dory. Maybe I wasn’t specific enough with my affirmation. How about, you will ask me in for coffee?”

He didn’t even know how to stop charming her. “Sounds more like hypnotism.”

“Would it work?” He picked up his hands and wiggled his fingers at her as if concocting some sort of fake hocus-pocus from the air. “You will ask me in for coffee,” he said, using an absolutely horrendous Dracula accent. “You will sit back and relax with me while we talk about how good we could be together.”

“Kyle—”

“You will let me rub your feet while we have this conversation.”

Hypnotized into a foot rub? The thought gave her pause. Her feet did hurt...but he didn’t seem like the kind of man who’d be content to rub her soles and leave the rest of her alone. And she wasn’t sure she was strong enough to stop him. Knowing her body, by the time he got to her ankle she’d be wet, aching and demanding. Not a good plan...

“Hmmm, a difficult specimen.” He pretended to muse, half-crossing his arms and tapping his mouth with a pseudo-thoughtful finger. “I know a twenty-four-hour bakery around here that serves a chocolate torte we can eat while you get rubbed.”

Chocolate and a foot rub?

So I’m not the rock of Gibraltar. She turned the knob and opened the door. “Come on in.”

“Nope, have to run to the bakery. You get comfortable, I’ll be back in twenty minutes, tops.”

“Twenty minutes?” That didn’t sound nearby.

“Tops.” He leaned forward to kiss her, the brush of his mouth so fast she never even thought of saying no.

He stopped suddenly, a frown on his face before he cupped her cheeks and settled a gentle, caressing kiss on her lips. One lick, just one, and she opened for him, moaning, her hands curling around his wrists to hold on. Their bodies fit to each other, her tingling breasts flattening to his chest while he leisurely took her mouth, teasing and stroking and generally curling every nerve ending in her entire body. In a split second, she remembered being kissed just like this, naked, Kyle buried deep inside, stirring his hips slowly against

her, driving her absolutely insane with pleasure. She whimpered, wanting to tighten her legs around his waist just as much as she had then.

Right when she was about to grab his shirt and tear it open right there in the hall, he pulled back and inspected her face, rocking her back on her heels.

“That’s better. Back in a few.” He was gone before any second thoughts had a chance to form.

Not that she was sure she was really going to have any. The truth was, she wanted Kyle there, even if she didn’t want to want him. She walked into the apartment with a sigh, turned on the lights and looked around with a critical eye. Better to concentrate on the room than the hormones demanding to know where their favorite candy went. He was coming in because of a foot rub and a torte. Sex was not on the menu. Period.

I’m not sleeping with him and I mean it this time.

And she had to make sure he knew it. The living room looked decent enough, colored in sedate creams and mauve, its couch and stuffed chair oversize and plush. The art on the wall was a little impersonal, but she wasn’t changing that on the off-chance he went into investment mode and started quoting her art values. She fluffed every pillow, carefully adjusted the lights so it was neither too bright nor too dark. Intimate. No, *inviting*. She wanted him to feel invited, not intimate. He didn’t need any extra help getting her naked.

Because you’re not getting naked. You are not sleeping with him.

She eyed the couch again, this time picturing him sprawled across it wearing nothing but that teasing grin, aroused to his full, thick length, just waiting for her to decide if she wanted to take him in her mouth or simply slide him in and ride him until he was begging for release.

Her smile turned self-mocking. Yeah, right, she didn’t even believe herself anymore. And while her imagination might cast her as a sexual goddess who called all the shots, in reality, the odds were way better that he’d have her bent over the cushy couch arm in seconds, her skirt up to her ribs while she hung on for dear life and he pumped into her from behind.

Her breath shuddered out of her and her sex clenched tight at the visceral imagining.

No, definitely not helping him. It always started with sex. Give him an orgasm and he’d take the next fifty years of her life, turning her into something she wasn’t. Not even for chocolate torte could she let it happen. To make sure, she brightened the room just that little bit more. Her retinas stung, but that was the price she could pay for freedom.

A knock sounded at the door. She checked her watch. Fifteen minutes had already passed. One more glance around the room made her shrug. Time was up.

She entered the hall, ran a hand over herself to smooth her once-crisp white shirt and gray skirt. Expelling a deep breath, she reached over and opened the door with as good a smile as she could muster.

But instead of Kyle waiting there, she found a different surprise.

Twenty minutes, on the dot. Not bad. Sure, he'd had to blaze a trail back across town to the bakery he liked best, and there might have been a few casualties on the return route, but he had the torte and in just a few seconds, he'd have Jessica to himself. With Dory safe at the hospital, maybe he'd have that opportunity to see if Jessica was willing to give him a chance after all.

He mentally rallied his arguments. They had a special chemistry that would be a crime to ignore. He made her laugh and you couldn't throw away a good laugh, could you? He'd be willing to give her foot rubs as often as she wanted. The sex was incredible, though he figured that would be a last-ditch reminder.

So last ditch, he should forget he even thought of it...the way her mouth made that soft little *O* shape right before she came, or how when he was inside her buttery-soft pussy, there wasn't a sensation on earth that was better.

No, he needed to wipe it from his mind. No reliving the taste of her pussy, sweet and tart, or the little grumble-groan she made when he licked through her folds, teasing her clit by the barest of strokes. Nope. Don't think about it...at all. He closed his eyes, since his erection was threatening to blacken his vision anyway. *Time and a place, buddy. Time and a place...*

He needed more, stronger arguments—she was a lawyer, she'd be able to talk him in circles if he didn't have enough. He thought harder. He enjoyed her as a person and he was pretty sure she felt the same about him. They both had time-consuming jobs, so they'd never fault each other for needing to reschedule here and there. At least, until they got married and started having kids. Then she'd need to slow down quite a bit. He filed that as probably unwise to bring up until at least the fourth date. That idea made him grin like an idiot. He hadn't had a fourth date since high school.

He could do this. *They* could do this. It would be great. She'd realize how perfect they were together. They'd spend some time getting to know one another better, get married and have two—no, four—kids, and life would be complete. That thing missing from both their lives would be filled. He just had to get through this one conversation and they could have the future he'd been dreaming about for months.

He knocked on the door and waited for it to open. Waited a while, actually. He knocked again, then stepped back and frowned when it opened. "Daniel?"

The big man smiled. At least, it looked like a smile. Both sides of his beard moved up in a shrug. "Hey, Kyle. Forget your key?"

He stepped inside while Daniel turned around and strolled into the living room. Kyle absently set the locks with one hand, holding the torte in the other by its knotted twine.

"Is that cake?" Daniel asked.

"Uh...yeah, kinda." Kyle followed him, stifling the urge to check his watch. How long had he been gone, again?

“Great, I’m starving. I didn’t eat before I came out and it’s been a hectic time at the hospital. A lot of paperwork.” Before he’d even realized the man had moved, Daniel had lifted the pink box out of his grasp and went past him into the kitchen. Like he had every right.

“Kyle, is that you?” Jessica called from what sounded like the room at the very end of the apartment, the one he’d once thought was her bedroom.

“Yeah,” he called back, not sure what he should do next. What should have been pretty easy to call had suddenly spawned into a twilight zone of bad situations. He followed her voice and looked into the only dark room he’d seen so far. Burgundy walls and dark wood paneling. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves hugged a large desk in front of a window that faced the street. Leaning in further, he saw Jessica bent over and stretching to put the corner of a fitted sheet over a hide-a-bed mattress.

She bounced, creating an instant ache in him. She sighed with satisfaction when the sheet went into place, then looked over her shoulder at him when he groaned. Her eyes were wide—he noticed once he got his own eyes off her firm, raised ass—possibly surprised that he found something as mundane as making a bed to be suggestive. Shocked the hell out of him, too. Then again, she could be emptying the trash in that position and he’d instantly be capable of hitting the first-ever hands-free home run.

She scrambled to her feet, brushing her hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ears, her cheeks flushing to an adorable shade of pink. “I’ve never had to use this aspect of the couch before, didn’t realize the mattress was so irregular. I guess calling them full-sized sheets isn’t a guarantee that they’ll fit, but they’re all I have.”

He nodded. She nodded. Great.

“Kyle, dude, this cake is the best!”

Jessica had the grace to look pained. “He showed up a few minutes ago. He dropped everything to come here for his mom. He doesn’t have anywhere to stay tonight.”

Kyle blinked. Maybe if he smacked himself in the head a few times, that would make some sense. “Why can’t he stay at Dory’s?”

“She lives in senior citizen condo community. They have strict rules about visitors and they especially don’t allow motorcycles. Since she doesn’t have a car, it’s not like he can use hers to get around. Besides, look at him. The way she talks about her neighbors, he’d give half of them heart attacks just sneaking past the gates.”

“So...he’s staying *here*? With *you*?”

“I thought it was the least I could do.”

“Jess, you don’t know the first thing about this guy.”

“I know Dory. I’ll be fine,” she said, her brows coming together, her back going up.

Not a good set of directions. Hoping to keep himself out of trouble, he considered other options. “What about a hotel?”

"I can't just throw him in a hotel." The whispered response sounded more like a hiss.

"Why not? My parents stay in one when they come visit."

"Because I'm not heartless." She seemed to realize what she was effectively saying because she pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to start over. "I don't know if he can afford it, honestly. And he's worried about Dory. She wanted him to get some rest. He doesn't have a cell phone and if anything goes wrong, they'll call here and we'll both know."

Call him a caveman, but heartfelt words escaped his oddly gritting teeth before he even realized he was saying them. "I. Don't. Think. So."

Irritation put a line between her brows. "I don't remember asking your permission."

Uh-oh. He didn't have to be a genius to know a swift redirect was in order. "What if he stays with me?"

"The hospital doesn't have your number."

"You will. I'll leave you all of them."

"I already told him he could stay."

"So un-tell him. I'm sure he'll understand that this isn't—"

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Kyle. There's no reason to throw him out just because he's making *you* nervous."

"Of course he's making me nervous. He's the size of a Sasquatch!"

"What does his size have to do with anything?"

"You said yourself he'd kill a dozen senior citizens on sight. He could tear you in half without breaking a sweat." Was his voice rising? Hers seemed to be.

"He's bigger than you too. Are you Superman or something? What makes you magically able to survive when I can't? Are *you* militarily trained? Did *you* take classes in self-defense? Do *you* have a gun under your bed?"

"No." Did all of that mean she was and she did?

She crossed her arms and glared at him, her mouth skewed to the side, her head tilted in patent aggravation. "Maybe it's time we said goodnight."

He wanted to argue. He wanted to smooth the crease of her frown. He wanted a piece of that cake, the foot rub and maybe a chance to kiss her goodnight.

"Jess—"

"Goodnight, Kyle."

But a man occasionally had to admit when he wasn't going to win a round. "I'll call you tomorrow, to check on Dory," he added when she looked like she was going to tell him not to bother.

She nodded and went back to making the bed for Daniel. Obviously dismissed, he sighed, turned around and headed back down the hall.

“Dude, thanks for the cake. Excellent stuff.” Daniel grinned, definitely this time. “I just want to thank you guys again for letting me stay. I’ll find something better tomorrow, promise.”

You *guys*? “Thank Jessica. I’ll be seeing you at the hospital tomorrow.”

“You’re going?”

“Yup, headed home.”

“You don’t live here?” Daniel asked, seeming to be taken aback. “I thought...Mom said you two were a thing. I figured you were married or something.” He turned his head in the general direction of where Jessica was making the bed up for him. “Oh, man, I’m sorry. I never would have asked if Mom hadn’t mentioned it. I’ll work something else out.”

“No, it’s okay, Jessica wants you to rest here. Tomorrow’s good enough,” Kyle made himself say, though it felt like he’d cracked a tooth before unhinging his jaw enough to speak. Daniel really did look exhausted. He’d probably sleep like the dead. Kyle hoped. Jessica would kill him if she thought he’d interfered and sent Daniel away.

“Nah, I’m good. I don’t want to cause trouble.”

“You’re not any trouble,” Jessica said from behind Kyle, her voice a low purr. A dangerous purr, if the hairs on the back of his neck were any indication.

“It’s okay, Jessica, really. I didn’t know you lived here alone. It wouldn’t be right if I stayed. Thanks though, I really appreciate it.” He was already moving into the living room, picking up his jacket and his duffle bag.

Kyle felt the spikes in Jessica’s gaze on the side of his face and he had a feeling he was going to be taking a big blame for this. Huge.

“If you’re intent on going, why don’t you come with me? I’ve got a spare couch,” he offered, risking a glance at her. The spikes turned glacial. Oh yeah. Total blame. He looked back to Daniel.

“Really? You don’t mind?”

“Nah, not at all. Go ahead and get your stuff, I’ll just leave Jessica all my numbers to be sure we can be reached from the hospital.”

She eventually gave him a pad of paper and a pen. He wrote his home number as well as the cell she already knew, well aware she was ready to poke holes in him with dull objects. “I didn’t tell him to leave, Jess.”

“Sure, you didn’t.”

This was going well. He handed her the paper. She folded it in precise halves, seven times. By the time she was done, it looked like a bullet. Not a good sign.

“Okay, Daniel, let’s get going. I’ll call you,” he added to Jessica as they passed her threshold. He leaned to kiss her cheek, but she leaned away. He all but hopped backward to keep his nose attached to his face when she slammed the door.

“That didn’t look good for you, man,” Daniel remarked while they stared at the silent door.

“Yeah,” Kyle muttered with a deep sigh. “Tell me about it.”

Chapter Twelve

Kyle couldn't quite make himself go to sleep. He needed it, but none would come.

He tried imagining Jessica eating his torte and smiling. No dice. He tried remembering her bent over the hide-a-bed in that slim skirt. Nuh-uh. He tried without the skirt and developed a whole other problem. Groaning, he figured a snack and some hot milk might help—an old trick that still that worked from time to time—and rolled out of bed.

Being mindful of his guest sleeping on the couch, he crept out of his room. At the end of the hallway, as he approached the partition that divided the living room from the kitchen, he realized something was out of place. No snoring. Daniel had been threatening the structure of the building two hours earlier. Kyle stopped and craned his hearing for anything. For all he knew, Daniel had rolled onto his side and was now sleeping like a baby. Not likely, but hey, you never knew.

He leaned out a bit, surprised to see the small reading lamp on. It didn't give a lot of light, but it was good for sitting in the corner chair and making notes by the phone. The brief peek before he slipped back into the hall showed Daniel folded into the chair, a complicated jumble of leather, denim, arms and legs, his dark head bowed into his hand. He was on the phone.

"I need another day or two," Daniel's deep voice rumbled quietly. "I know it's bad timing, Cody, but I'm not leaving her."

Kyle grimaced. He should head back to his room. Daniel was probably talking to a friend or something, letting him know he was going to be gone for a while. There was more mumbling on the other side of the wall, but Kyle didn't bother listening to it.

Just because Daniel was a little scary looking was no reason to think the worst of him. He'd been polite and good-natured. He'd immediately backed out of Jessica's when he realized she would be alone with him. Hadn't he come racing down the state line because his mother was in the hospital? How many hardened criminals did that?

Shaking his head, Kyle turned back to his room. He could just lie in bed until sleep came. It would eventually. He'd even taken a whole step when Daniel's voice picked up, the pitch becoming a deep growl of anger.

"You tell Santos he can wait until I'm damn well ready to make the deal. I'll be there Sunday. I'm here for the next thirty-six hours and that's just the way it is. He might find other buyers but he won't find

any before then who can take that kind of shipment without needing extra time. He can wait a day. You tell him that. Tell him I'll make it worth his while to wait."

Shipment? Buyers? That didn't sound like a friend. Kyle moved back to the edge of the partition.

"Fine. Sunday, five o'clock." The phone clanked when he put the receiver back in place. Kyle listened to Daniel's heavy sigh, a few swear words and then nothing. Not the sound of the light turning off or Daniel moving. Not even him breathing. It was almost as if...as if he was listening for someone.

Kyle rolled his eyes. Great, Daniel knew he was there. Of course the possibly drug-dealing biker who was a foot taller and a good fifty pounds heavier could tell when he was being spied on. In about ten seconds he'd probably creep around the wall to see for himself. Standing there and getting caught was not a palatable concept, so Kyle took a risk and scrambled to his door as silently as he could. Rattling the doorknob, he made it look like he was pulling the door shut just as Daniel stepped into the hall.

In the shadows, Kyle was dismayed to discover that Daniel looked even bigger. His feet were braced wide, hands already into fists, as if he were trying to look menacing. He took up the entire portal, like a giant shadow with a lot of hair.

"Everything okay, Kyle?" he asked, his deep voice resonating in the tense silence.

"Sure, just can't sleep. Thought I'd get something to eat." It wasn't that he was scared. More that he wasn't stupid. At least, that's what he told himself.

Daniel seemed to be deciding if he was faking or not.

"I thought you were asleep." That was a good, casual excuse.

"I sleep light."

What do you say to that? "You hungry?"

Daniel sighed, loosening up and shrinking a whole percent all the way around. "What you got?"

Kyle couldn't help the deep relief that pushed his held breath out. The last thing he wanted was either to get his ass kicked or be introduced to his maker because he'd been dumb enough to eavesdrop. "I don't know. I'm not much of a cook. Probably something worth eating, though."

He led the way to the kitchen, aware of the giant behind him. *Stick to your purpose, man, find out more before you make up your mind.* He hit the lights on the way into the kitchen, causing them both to blink at the sudden harshness, but it took most of the menace out of the night. He opened the fridge and peered inside. Same as usual—beer and sandwich fixings. Eggs. Restaurant leftovers.

"Omelets and beer or sandwiches and beer?"

"Got chips?"

He pointed to the cabinet next to the stove. Daniel crossed to the long pantry panel, opened it and pulled out a package of pretzels.

"Sandwiches," they both agreed. Against his better judgment, Kyle grinned, relieved again when Daniel matched him. When he wasn't prepared to rip your throat out, Daniel Pierson was a pretty likable guy.

Kyle reached into the fridge and started pulling out fixings. The sound of the bag popping and then the subsequent crunching let him know what Daniel was up to.

"You really didn't eat much today, did you?"

Daniel grunted a negative. "I got Jessica's call and hopped right on the bike. I was over in Blythe. Near Nevada," he clarified. "She just caught me. If I hadn't been asleep, I'd have been riding out in the opposite direction."

"How do you get into biking?" *Was that a job?*

"Just happens, really. You start off riding crotch rockets cuz they're fun. Some guys get started on dirt bikes, but that wasn't really my thing. Don't like dirt much."

Kyle had to fight to keep his eyebrows from rising while he constructed the sandwiches.

Daniel chuckled at his struggle. "When you're my size, you can't stay on regular bikes too long. I got into Harleys when I was a kid. I mean, you don't have to ride to appreciate the beauty of 'em. But when you ride...man, there's no better feeling than a hog."

"I'll have to take your word for it." He might hate cars, but they were a hell of a lot safer than bikes.

The other man lifted his chin in question. "You don't like bikes?"

"Only if you count the ten speed I had as a kid."

"You're missing out, man."

"I think I'll live." He handed Daniel the sandwich. When he saw the man take huge bite, he rethought biting into the other one and handed it over as well.

"You not eating?"

Kyle smiled. "I'll start with pretzels."

Daniel shrugged and took it. "So what's the deal with you and Jessica?"

Well, maybe he *could* make another sandwich. Kyle pulled another set of bread slices out of the bag and dipped into the mayo jar again. "You've got me."

"You're not seeing each other?"

No, I'm just trying to get her to marry me. "We're trying."

Cheeks full, Daniel stared at him in question.

"It's complicated."

"Women usually are."

"Not for me." Kyle sighed. "At least, they never were before. Jess is...special."

"She's nice. Mom talks about her a lot."

"You and Dory are close, then?"

Daniel took a big bite and nodded. "It was just me and her most of the time. She was kind of wild when I was a kid," he conceded.

"No," Kyle replied with false shock, his laughter escaping. "She seems so down to earth and conservative."

Daniel's dark eyes danced. "She showed you the tattoos already then?"

"Tattoos?" He tried to picture where Dory could be tattooed. Then he winced and thought better of it. "No, haven't seen any. She just talks about sex a little more than my local politician would like."

Daniel laughed, a rough rumbling sound that could have been a cough. "She does have a kinda dirty mind. But I like that best about her. She always says what she thinks. We figured that's why she never got re-married. No one but me really put up with always knowing what she thinks. Except Jessica."

"Sounds like one of those situations where you took turns taking care of each other."

Daniel nodded. "She didn't handle losing my dad real well. Once she was back on her feet, though, we got along a lot better. She's the one who got me into bikes. Probably thought it'd make me feel closer to my father. A lot of our friends were bikers. I remember this one guy had an Indian—"

"He just kept one around?" Kyle asked, trying to picture that in a way that wouldn't get him labeled a racist.

"Original bike manufacturers, man. They went out of business back in the fifties. They're back now, but it took 'em fifty years to pull it off. Anyway, finding a '53 Chief is a lot like finding a perfect Babe Ruth autographed baseball in your backyard."

Kyle whistled.

Daniel nodded appreciably. "Exactly. I was like, sixteen, looking at this thing and I fell in love. Just fell in love. It was beautiful. I was gone from that day on. You couldn't get me off bikes after that. Mom taught me to ride and I was on my way."

"On your way where?"

Daniel tilted his head. "Wherever I wanted."

"Don't you ever want...you know, more?"

"More what?"

Kyle clamped down on his frustration. He couldn't be the only guy in the world who felt like this. "I don't know. A house. A family?"

Daniel shrugged. "Never really thought about it. Women don't exactly fall all over themselves to jump in front of my bike, if you know what I mean."

"My brother says the same thing."

"Your brother rides?" Daniel looked so hopeful, Kyle felt bad about laughing. But the image of Lucas on a motorcycle was too ridiculous to consider.

"He says women are hard to find."

“But not for you.” Daniel finished off his sandwich with a chomp.

Kyle lifted his hands. “I don’t know why. I like them, they like me. I guess they don’t intimidate me. You just talk to them like they were anyone else and they seem to respond to it.”

“You think I’m intimidated by women?” Which sounded more like, “You think I can *be* intimidated?”

“That might not be the best word. I don’t worry about how they’ll respond. If they walk away, so what? There’s always another one to talk to.”

“What about Jessica?”

Kyle took a sip of his beer, his confidence dropping like a rock. “Like I said. She’s different.”

“She intimidates you?”

“No. Yes.” *Way to make sense there, buddy.* Now he knew why Belinda didn’t like talking about Lucas. “It’s...complicated.”

Daniel polished his beer off and made a gesture asking where to toss it. Kyle pointed under the sink. He finished off his own and gathered the plates to put in the sink. As he rounded the island, he stumbled to a stop when he saw Daniel bend down to put the bottle in the trash. The unmistakable shape of a gun holster was visible past the line of Daniel’s torso.

Averting his eyes, Kyle made himself put the plates in the sink and pretend the camaraderie they’d just had was still there. Instead, all he could think about was the phone call he’d overheard and the fact that there was a man in his house with a gun. A *stranger* with a gun.

“I’ll take care of these in the morning,” he mumbled, anxious to get back to his room and go to sleep before he started thinking. Or worse, *not* thinking and doing something stupid. Like getting shot.

Jessica arrived at the ICU bright and early the next morning, having slept surprisingly well despite a face-first dive into the torte that tasted a lot like guilt. Carrying a vase of daffodils, she had her smile pasted on, ready to be cheerful for her friend. Instead, she stopped short when she found Daniel already there, speaking in low tones to his mother, whose face was pale and drawn. She couldn’t make out what they were talking about, but both of them looking grim and worried couldn’t be good.

“What’s wrong?” she asked automatically, worrying more when they both seemed surprised to find her in the room. As if they hadn’t even seen her come in.

“Oh, nothing honey. Daniel’s always a grump this early in the morning,” Dory replied, pasting on a smile of her own, if Jessica wasn’t mistaken. Without her makeup and wig, Dory looked more weathered and definitely more stressed.

Hoping to alleviate that a little, Jessica accepted the explanation with a nod to Daniel, who gave her a weak smile of his own.

“They don’t have strong enough coffee here to wake up a guy my size,” he explained, rubbing at his right eye with his half-gloved hand. “Kyle wakes up pretty early for work, so I just left when he did.”

“Yeah?” Jessica didn’t know that. Then again, living here in California, it made sense that Kyle had to beat the market opening on the east coast. She’d always gotten flack for being a morning person. Interesting that Kyle seemed to be too.

But not *that* interesting, she reminded herself. Finding things that made him fit her better was not a good plan. She was supposed to look for reasons *not* to like Kyle Lonnigan.

“So you two got through the night all right, then? No problems?”

Daniel shook his head. “None at all. He makes a killer midnight snack. Even has a comfy couch.”

Drat.

“He said I could stay until Mom’s doctors say she’s out of the woods. You have yourself a nice guy there, Jessie.”

“Jessica,” she corrected automatically, though she remembered to put a smile back on when she said it. Only Kyle ever called her by a diminutive. There didn’t even seem to be any point in telling him not to anymore. Odd that she didn’t find it annoying, something she obviously had to work on.

Daniel apologized, which she waved off. After a few more minutes, she’d have to get to the office. No one there had been given an explanation about what had happened to Dory, and Jessica was not looking forward to providing one. Thanks to her wounded comrade, she had a bad habit of thinking of Gregory Groom, Esquire as Greggy Groom, asswad. One of these days, she was going to call him that to his face and there would go ten years of career building.

She said her goodbyes, promised to come back soon with any important office gossip and headed in to start her day. Myriad messages were waiting for her, as were a few more cases and notes from the partners concerning them. The most important note was indeed from Gregory Groom, requiring her presence as soon as she returned. Sighing hard, she went up to her executioner.

Surprisingly, Gregory was sympathetic. He admonished her for not calling to let them know what was going on, but excused her to return to her work and requested she keep him updated on Dory’s condition—maybe he wasn’t the asswad Dory claimed.

Jessica ensconced herself in her office and completely lost track of time. She didn’t come back to reality until she smelled the heavenly scent of mu shu chicken and heard a soft knock on the door.

“Here you are,” Kyle said, holding a large paper bag from which she desperately hoped the smell was emitting. “When you weren’t home yet, I figured you were making up for lost time.”

“Eternally.” She put her pen down and leaned back in her chair. No wonder he’d come looking for her, the clock read nearly eight o’clock. “Is that for me?”

“Me or the Chinese food?”

The devil in her wanted to ask for both. “I haven’t eaten all day and you’re tormenting me by staying all the way over there.”

So the devil occasionally got the best of her.

Kyle’s smile was slow, sinful and a little more tempting than the food. He strolled in, crossing the space in a few steps of his long limbs. She liked watching him move, she realized. He was light on his feet. Masculine grace didn’t get nearly as much credit as it should.

The other surprise was that she had such appreciation for his clothes. Surrounded by men in suits for the last several years, she’d grown somewhat blasé about them. One man looked generally like another in them; dark, blue or gray, pinstripe or double breasted, it was all the same to her. Some looked dignified. Some looked like they were trying too hard.

Somehow, amidst all those clouds of suits, Kyle looked unique.

He favored jewel-toned shirts. Not that he was wrong, they looked good on him. Today’s was a deep rose red under black suit jacket and slacks. The tie had come off and the first couple of buttons were undone, making him look relaxed and casual. He unloaded the paper containers onto the surface of her desk, his dark lashes turned downward as he went about it.

She liked him, she decided. Liked the way he looked, with his inky hair falling over his forehead. Liked that he was so persistent and thoughtful. Liked that he was funny and intelligent. Liked, even, that he worried about her. No one had ever worried about her. Then again, he probably considered dinner to be a peace offering. One he shouldn’t have had to make.

“You didn’t have to bring food to come in this time,” she finally said while reaching for a white box with the name “Wong’s” on the side, breaking her musing silence as he broke a pair of wooden chopsticks.

He raised both eyebrows, his vivid eyes twinkling at her. “I like how you don’t mention that until you’ve already got your hands on the container.”

She sputtered with laughter, accepting the offered chopsticks. “I’m sorry, did you want this back?”

“No, thanks. If the lady wants my meat, who am I to stop her?”

“You live on innuendos, don’t you?”

“They keep things interesting.”

She would have answered, but she was fitting her lips around the thick chunk of sesame beef, eyes closing in pleasure.

“Oh, God,” he said, his eyes riveted to her mouth. “If you moan again, I can’t be responsible for my behavior.”

It was all she could do to keep a straight face while she chewed. “You have problems,” she mumbled after a bit, though she knew she was grinning. She was also looking for a bigger piece of beef.

“You have no idea,” he grumbled, shrugging out of his jacket.

She could see the lines of his body better in just the shirt and black slacks. The width of his shoulders, the straight line of his waist and hips. She pulled in a slow breath, wishing it weren't so shallow, remembering the feel of those hips between her thighs. The ripple of muscle in his stomach against hers as they moved together, hot and smooth, just like his mouth around her nipple—

“Jess?”

He was sitting now, watching her curiously. She could feel what he was seeing. Her flushed cheeks, her faint breathing. Thank God he had no way of knowing about the tingling in her breasts or the slick wetness at the juncture of her thighs.

How did he do this to her? There were plenty of good-looking, amiable men on the earth, several of them in her office building. Yet not a single one of them made her forget what she was thinking, saying or vowing to do. None of them made her want so voraciously, need so desperately. Kyle had her forgetting her name, her goals and her limits.

She put down the beef, suddenly losing her desire for it. “Yes?” She studiously looked in the other containers for something less suggestive. Fried rice looked the most innocuous.

She waited for Kyle to say something—anything—but he didn't. Instead, he went back to eating. For several minutes, that was all they did, but before long her stomach was full and her mind was slightly guilty again. She might like Kyle, but she didn't want to keep seeing him and all this time together was starting to look more and more like dating. Eating with him was just encouraging him and that wasn't fair. She could offer an inch, Kyle undoubtedly wanted a mile. The sooner she explained that, the better off they'd both be.

“Kyle—”

“What do you think about Daniel?” he asked suddenly, frowning into his container, not seeming to notice she'd been brooding unfavorably in his direction.

Jessica stopped short. “Daniel? He's okay, I guess.” Not the answer he wanted apparently, because his frown deepened. “Why?”

“I'm not sure about him.”

“Not sure in what way?”

He finally looked up at her, the frown still intact, a different intensity to his features than she'd ever seen before. Not the joking man now. “I think he's a drug dealer.”

“What?” She couldn't help it, she laughed. “I know he's a little scary at first, but that's no reason—”

“He carries a gun, Jess. On his person.”

Okay, not the best thing to hear about a guy, but certainly not the worst. “Does he have a permit?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I immediately thought of asking that of a guy I suspect might be selling drugs.”

“Well, don't get mad at me. They *are* legal. Owning a gun doesn't automatically make a guy a criminal.”

He shrugged. That was a nice feature in a man, admitting that he lost a point in a discussion. “There’s more.”

“Okay.” She put her food down and so did he. A fine frisson of nervousness whispered through her, preparing her to tense like a coil. She fought the urge to jiggle her knee. “Like what?”

“I overheard him on the phone last night. He was making arrangements to meet someone for a shipment purchase.”

“Overheard? You mean, like eavesdropping?” Well, there was another tick against him. He was nosy. She knew he had more flaws somewhere.

“It’s not eavesdropping in your own house.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “Did he know you were there?”

“Well, no—”

“Then it’s eavesdropping.”

“That doesn’t make it any less valid,” he argued, his brows close together with what looked like a touch of temper. “And that’s not the point anyway.”

“The point would be?” It should be that this situation between them was never going to work out.

“What are we going to do about him?”

“Do?” Okay, even she knew she was getting annoying by replying to each question with a question, but really, what did he want from her? The whole topic of Daniel as a drug dealer was insane. Dory would never...well, all right, she might have once upon a time, but she’d never stand for her son doing something so dangerous. Or stupid.

Then again, Jessica unwillingly remembered the conversation she’d interrupted earlier. Dory looking upset and displeased, Daniel holding her hand and speaking softly but firmly. Was he telling his mother what he’d been up to?

She shook her head. The last thing she needed was to start getting as suspicious as Kyle based on things she hadn’t even heard. “I don’t see where we need to do anything. Except maybe not listen to other people’s conversations.” A good reminder for both of them.

Kyle’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not proud of it, okay, but it was the middle of the night, I was hungry and I came out to get a snack. I didn’t mean to stay there and listen, it was impossible not to hear him. He was angry and threatening the person on the other end of the phone.”

Oh. Not liking the idea of conceding the point—great, now Kyle had better manners in an argument than she did—she decided to skip it entirely. “So, he has a gun and he makes threatening phone calls in the middle of the night, but that somehow inspired you to invite him to stay with you for the next few days?”

“I didn’t want to throw him out and be wrong. Besides, I feel better knowing where he is than washing my hands of him and letting someone else get hurt when there might be something I could have done.”

“So you’re Superman again? Unable to get hurt by bullets and giant muscled men?” Jessica launched out of her seat to pace the length of space behind the desk. What was he doing? *First he’s suspicious and now he’s a hero?* Trying to make her worry about him? Hell of a way into a woman’s heart and certainly not the way into this one’s, she assured herself. “What do you plan on doing if you’re right and he’s dangerous?”

“Are you angry at me for doubting him or for asking him to stay?” Did he purposely stay calm when she wasn’t, just to exasperate her?

“I’m not angry at you—all right, fine, I am, but I haven’t decided for which reason yet. And you’re not the one asking questions here. That’s *my* job. What are you trying to prove? That I care about you? That you’re brave?”

“I’m not trying to prove anything. I’m trying to ask your opinion.”

“My opinion is that we get him a hotel room near the hospital and stay out of it.”

“That’s a little reckless, don’t you think?” He was looking at her strangely, rising to gather the containers back into the bag. Not extra-head strange. More the I’m-thinking-something-about-you strange. “What’s going on, Jess?”

Didn’t that just hang it? He was all but putting on a cape and boots, but there was something wrong with *her*. Just because her steps had gotten a little quick and her hands were flexing open and closed while she thought. He should appreciate her effort, it was all that was keeping her from wrapping her fingers around his neck.

And come to think of it— “Why do you keep calling me that? I’ve asked you repeatedly to call me Jessica and you insist on doing what you want. It’s always about what *you* want. Well, *I* want my name, damn it.”

A heartbeat later he was next to her, moving so fast she gasped before catching herself mid-stride. It wasn’t like she was afraid of him. At least, not physically. But him coming closer to her was definitely a frightening thing. Especially with that look still on his face.

“This isn’t about Daniel, is it, Jessica?” he asked quietly.

She bit her lips, then made herself release them and hold her ground. “Of course it is. Who else would it be about? Unless you’ve been listening to *other* phone calls?”

He let that one slip past him and advanced on her another step. *Steady, girl. Steady...*

“This is about us.”

“What is?” She wasn’t breathless. There just wasn’t a lot of air in the room. He took another step closer, leaving just over a foot between them, heightening the awareness between them so sharply that a shiver ran through her. But she couldn’t look away from his intent gaze.

“You. You’re all but running in place and making about as much sense as a babbling brook.”

“If this is your idea of seduction, Lonnigan, it needs work.”

“You’re right. How’s this?” Then he closed the gap, cupped his hand around the back of her head and brought her mouth to his.

Chapter Thirteen

In a word, it was delicious.

Kyle's hand held the back of her head, his fingers in her hair and his thumb caressing her jaw while his other hand curled around her waist. There wasn't enough room for a breath. She could feel him from knee to lips, lips that were devouring her as if he hadn't been near sustenance for weeks. She'd opened her mouth to him without even thinking, and her own hands were clutching his shoulders as if he was going to get away.

This was a *bad* idea.

But she didn't dwell on that because his hand worked its way up to her breast and her brain completely shut down. No pesky thoughts, no inhibited responses. Just his mouth, his hand, his heat and his taste. She felt the edge of the desk at the back of her thighs, then felt it on her back. Along with the hours of work she'd arranged so neatly.

She pushed at his shoulders desperately. "Wait, my files!"

His laugh was soft, a sexy puff of sound that parted them and made her belly clench in response. Part of her wanted to throw the files and couldn't give a rat's ass where they landed. But it wasn't as big as the part of her that didn't want to do all of it again.

"They're that important?" he asked, voice warm and rough in the ear he was nibbling. His hand was inching under her skirt and her legs were already parting for him. If he kept going any higher, he'd feel exactly how wet for him she already was and neither one of them would care about her files.

"Do I feel like I'd stop you for anything less than absolute importance?"

He pulled away, still supporting her body just above the folders. His gaze traced her face, a caress all by itself before he looked around the room, probably searching for a good flat surface that was bigger than a plant stand. He wouldn't have any major windfalls; she considered herself lucky to have the desk.

"What about that little couch?"

Where the plant book was hiding? "No."

His thumb continued to caress the side of her neck and his fingertips on her thigh held her against his hip, still massaging her against the heat of his erection. Even if her head miraculously cleared while he searched for somewhere to have his way with her, she already knew what she wanted. What she needed from him. She might not really know why, but she didn't want to think about that yet. Not yet.

"The carpet's soft." She pulled his attention back to her with a touch of her fingertip to his jaw.

His eyes had darkened, the pupils large and his gaze hungry. He was thinking something, she knew he was. But she didn't want either of them thinking. She wanted him. The same way she had that first night—completely consuming, without reason or conflict. Pure desire, from head to toe.

“Say it,” he murmured.

“Say what?”

His hand roved down her neck to her breast to her hip to her backside, as if he couldn't decide where to leave it. Or what he wanted more. “You've said it every step of the way, Jess. It wouldn't be right if you didn't say it this time.”

He lowered his head to her throat, his tongue finding a spot beneath her ear and warming it with a caress that had her eyes closing. Folders crunched beneath her back, but she didn't care when he started nibbling along the cords of her neck. Maybe the folders weren't so important...

Then she was lifted—whisked, really—off the desk. Her body started sinking and his was coming down with hers. She laughed when he shoved her rolling chair out of the way hard enough to make it tip over. In no time, she was on her back, him nestled at her side, one leg lying over both of hers while he looked down at her and toyed with the closure on her skirt.

“I've always had fantasies about making love behind a desk,” he whispered as he kissed her ear.

“I never thought it was all that sexy behind a desk.” She brought her hands to the buttons of his shirt, careful to slip each tiny one through the hole with as little fuss as possible. With each one came another inch of sun-kissed skin that she wanted to touch, to taste, to reacquaint herself with. But she kept her hands on their steady task, determined to open each one as proof of her own complicity.

“Sure it is. No one can see you, they never know who you might be hiding under here.” His hands hadn't been idle either, parting the white linen blouse and plucking the front closure on her bra. The white lace opened as happily for him as the blouse had.

“No one would ever know what I was touching,” he continued, circling her nipple with a barely touching forefinger. She closed her eyes, forgetting all about buttons and drowning in the tiny waves of pleasure he sent rippling through her.

“Or what I was tasting.” Then his mouth replaced his finger and he shifted so that he was completely above her.

She moaned. At the sound, she felt his mouth tighten at her breast. One of his hands took his weight off of her while he used the other to draw up the hem of her skirt. Her breath shuddered as her legs were suddenly freed to part around him, the fabric bunching at her waist. His hips dropped into the cradle of her thighs, the hard jut of his cock straining against her.

“Say it, Jess,” he coaxed while she pushed his shirt over his shoulders. More smooth skin, more heat.

“I wouldn't mean it this time,” she said, finally knowing what he meant and smiling at his silliness.

"I know, that's what makes it a turn on. You've never meant it." He had to help her with the sleeves, but after a second the shirt was gone.

Then he was moving, pulling away and resting back on his haunches. His belt made a whipping sound as he pulled it from his belt loops, then a thump when he sent it off on its own to the carpet behind them. He reached under the folds of her skirt to her hips where her satin panties gave way to the urging pull of his fingertips. They came down her legs and his eyes glowed when she pulled one limb free of the loose fabric, parting them around him again. She watched him stare and study, loving that he was so entranced looking at her. At *her*.

"Kyle?" She felt the power of her femininity and the call of his masculinity like a heady rush to the brain.

"Hmmm?"

"I'm not going to sleep with you."

His eyes met hers and his smile was sin itself.

Then he dipped his head and she threw hers back in laughter that became a moan when his tongue found the wet core of her, lapping deep within her. Desire knifed through her at that first touch and heightened with stroke after fiery stroke. Her fingers speared through his hair, holding him close while her hips lifted and fell, doing their best to ride his tongue to completion. He wasn't slow or gentle, but rather ravenous, desperate to wring pleasure out of her until every caress, kiss and finally the firm suckle on her clit made her cry out his name. The first shake and shiver of completion rippled through her and her groan was matched by his as he took the moment to unzip his pants and slide into her with one filling stroke.

She pushed the folds of his pants further down his hips, lifting her legs until her knees were just behind his shoulders while he positioned his forearms under hers. Buried deep inside her, he remained utterly motionless until she lifted heavy lids to meet his sensual gaze.

He said nothing, though she expected him to. Instead, his eyes were telling her things she couldn't look away from. Things that made the joining of their bodies feel almost secondary to the connection of their gazes. Of their hearts.

Panic poured in.

She didn't want to feel this. Didn't want to be so open, so raw. But then he started to move, his eyes never leaving hers, the thrust of his hips gentle and fulfilling. She brought her hands to his shoulders, pulling him down for a kiss, one he resisted. He stroked within her, filling her until there was no sense of anything but him and the tide of passion that moved her in ways she was too afraid to consider.

He took her hands, twining their fingers and raising them above her head. She held on, her body tightening around him, inside and out, the tension rising and that gaze still holding. Deeper and deeper he pushed, into her body, into her soul, and she came rushing to meet him. Again and again, until her gasping sighs became moans that had him rocking against her, harder and faster. Then and only then did his eyes

finally close, when the passion caused them both to shudder, and she was free, riding out the climax like a storm-tossed boat, straining for breath, ecstatic with pleasure, terrified of what just happened.

It hadn't just been sex.

He'd made love to her.

She'd made love to him.

And this time, she knew, he wasn't going to let her ignore it.

Kyle pulled in a deep breath, his body still shuddering. They were still in a tangle—clothes, limbs and hearts. But he could already feel her pulling away from him. He'd seen in her eyes the growing fear of what was between them. The power of it scared him a little too. How much worse for her, who wasn't even looking for it?

Their bodies cooled and what had started off as passionate now felt awkward with silence as she kept her face averted from him. Aching as he did so, Kyle pulled them apart, letting her shift to her side, curling like a child, while he settled behind her. She pulled her blouse closed with one hand and tried to look casual while hugging herself with the other. But she shivered and ruined it.

Sighing, he stretched out to smooth her crumpled skirt back over her hip. She made a dissenting sound, but he didn't stop until it was back in place.

"Do you want me to apologize?" he said, hoping and praying that she wouldn't.

She shook her head.

"I wouldn't have," he told her in a low whisper, as if someone there might hear it. She didn't respond. Careful, sensing how fragile she must feel, he pulled her close so that they were spooned. "Why does this scare you so much, Jess?"

"Doesn't it scare you?" she asked after several moments pause.

"Yes, but I want it. I want *you*."

"You don't know me."

"Then why do I feel like I do? I may not know every facet of you, you're right, that takes time. But I can..." Were there words to explain how she'd gotten into his blood? How she'd changed everything about him in an instant? Filled that space without even trying? "I feel you. Feel *us*. Inside. Like...like music or art. You just know what it is, feel it to your bones. Don't you feel it? Like we accidentally found something everyone else was looking for? Something we both wished for but couldn't get our hands on."

She shook her head, but it was too vigorous to be believed.

He petted her hair. "Talk to me, Jess."

"I don't want to talk. I don't know how."

"You're a lawyer, honey, it's your job to talk."

"That's different, that's not about me. It's about someone else."

“So talk about me, then.”

She shifted, looking over her shoulder at him finally. “What about you?”

“You can tell me what it is about me that makes you so afraid.”

She tried to smile, the same way she tried not to show her fear or her tears. Her hand came up to touch the side of his face. She swallowed, almost convulsively, before opening her mouth to speak. “I’m not ready for you, Kyle. I don’t know anything about couples or commitment or love or anything even remotely like it. You make me feel things I can’t even name. And almost every time I get near you I end up having sex with you. You want something I can never be. You’re dangerous.”

“Because I want a future with you?”

“Because I get the feeling you want a *specific* future.”

He nodded. She was right about that, at least. He wanted what his parents had. “I want a wife. And kids. I want a house with a yard and a dog and a lawn to mow on Saturdays. I want to wake up from a bad dream and know you’re there. Or wake up from a good one and show you what we did that made it so great. I just want what everyone wants, eventually.”

She shook her head. “Not everyone wants to be a sitcom family. I grew up wanting to be a lawyer. Wanting to change the world for the better. Wanting to dedicate my life to making a difference.”

One of his eyes narrowed. “From the financial department? Why not family law or criminal law?”

She shook her head, almost in repudiation. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Nothing worked out the way I thought because it was a naïve dream. I spent too many years waiting for happy endings to happen, listening to lawyers and social workers and foster parents lie to me to be able to do it to someone else. I can’t make anyone believe in something like what you’re talking about. I don’t know anything about the life you’re describing. I’ve never even seen it, except on TV, and everyone knows that stuff’s never true. Love has *never* been a part of my life.”

He cupped his hand over hers. “Of course it is. Everyone has felt love.” It was a relief she was using the word. An acknowledgement of sorts. He hoped.

Her hand slipped from beneath his, her frown deepening. “No one has ever loved me and I’ve never loved anyone. You have to understand. That’s not going to change.”

“What about your family? That brother you talked about?” She’d cared about that boy. He’d heard it in her voice when she’d talked about him.

“My mother left me in a church when I was almost a year old. No names, no connections. I was almost adopted. They changed their minds when it looked like they might get me. My ‘brother’ was just one of the million different fosters I helped take care of because I was the oldest in nearly every house I stayed in.”

Since her admission at the hospital, however brief, he’d assumed she’d been orphaned. Abandoned, though. That had never crossed his mind. “Who named you?”

"She did. It was written on my shirt. I think Saunders was the name of the street the church was on."

"So you've never had anyone?"

She shrugged, as if it didn't matter. But it did. Lucas was occasionally—all right, mostly—a pain in the ass, but he was always there when Kyle needed him. Even a few times when he didn't. The thought that she'd never had that, not anywhere in her memory, seemed wrong.

"You have me, Jess. You can always have me." He hugged her close but her body remained stiff and unbending. He decided not to push her any more. Better to make her smile again. Logic and emotion she seemed able to dismiss at will. She couldn't seem to resist humor. "Our sleeping together isn't exactly a bad thing, you know. I kinda like it."

She said nothing.

"If it really bothers you that we do this almost every time we see each other, I'd be more than willing to sleep together *every* time we see each other."

She didn't reply, making him lean over her to try and see her face. Yup, smiling, but she tried to cover it. He pulled on her hand, but she kept it glued over her mouth. So he decided to play, tickling her neck with a single finger, poking at her ear, then making her yelp when he went for the gold and flipped open her still gaping blouse.

"Stop that!" She swatted at his hand.

"But it's so pretty in here." And it was. Creamy, sweet skin, gentle swells of breast, small rose-colored peaks that he'd swear were flavored like honeysuckle. He smiled as she covered herself back up while impatiently pushing his hands away.

"You'd be so much easier to get rid of if I didn't like you," she complained with a laugh, finally rolling onto her back to look up at him.

"You admit you like me. That's a good place to start."

Probably the wrong thing to say because she sobered again.

"Uh-oh, that's the look you get when you tell me something unpleasant."

"Truth is often unpleasant."

"Who's truth would this be?"

"Mine. And it's yours too, if you're honest with yourself." He comforted himself that she had to take a breath before starting to talk again. It meant she didn't want to say whatever she was about to say. "Things like this, like us, they don't happen, Kyle. They especially don't happen to *me*."

"Things like what?"

"Like, like having sex on the floor of my office with a man I barely know."

"We've known each other for weeks," he reminded her as casually as possible. If he let her know she was starting to scare him, she'd move even faster. Jessica was definitely a rip-it-off-fast kind of woman.

"We've known *of* each other. Big difference."

"Not really. People fall in love at the drop of a hat all the time. We just complicated it because you thought I was someone else when the hat fell. That's all fixed now."

She was cute when she was perplexed. Her mouth pursed and her eyes flashed as she tried to make sense of him. "There's so much wrong with that statement I can't even decide where to start."

He attempted a doe-eyed blink. "You still think I'm Lucas?"

She smirked at him.

"Well, that's one thing that's not wrong. You know who I am and I know who you are and you don't hate me for it, right? Which means that part is fixed. Or did I misinterpret what just happened here?"

Her expression turned grudging. "No, I'm not mad at you anymore. For *that*," she added, as if warning him he was trucking up close to something else that would get him in trouble.

"So what really has you so upset is that I said we fell in love. I don't see what's wrong about that, though. I'm falling in love with you more every time I see you."

Her eyes widened and her lips moved, but she didn't seem able to find what word she wanted to use. Or maybe just one she was willing to. He waited, staring down at her and coaxing her by nodding.

Until she hit his shoulder and turned again on her side. "Never mind."

"No, you were about to say something." Hopefully something about how she felt the same way.

"No, I wasn't."

"Jess—"

"*Jessica*. My name is *Jessica*," she grumbled with a slight snap, back to the name business. He was starting to get the feeling it was her fallback argument, when she knew she didn't have a leg to stand on in the previous one. "Why is that hard for you?" she continued. "Everyone else on the planet respects that I don't like nicknames. Why don't you?"

"Because I'm not everyone else on the planet. I'm special and so are you."

"This isn't about if I'm special or not. It's about courtesy."

He wanted to laugh. She was barely dressed, her body still warm and wet from his, hair wild across her carpet, but damn if she didn't sound haughty enough to have her own throne. "I'm courteous. I like calling you Jess. Knowing I'm the only one who does. That's what special means."

She sat up, eyes narrow, her hands frantically going to work on her blouse. The buttons came together with ruthless determination. "I don't want special."

Just like that, all the playfulness was gone. He flinched, but he doubted she saw it. She was too busy trying to make herself look like nothing had happened. Back to the unflappable, unyielding Jessica Saunders. And doing a damn good job of it too.

But the words were still there. Still coming out of her mouth and he had to hope that they had meaning.

"You're admitting something incredible is happening here?"

“No. All that’s happening is chemistry. I failed chemistry. With any luck, I’ll fail at this too.” She scrambled to her feet, miraculously without touching him or looking at him even once. She all but ran to a door on the side of the room that he’d never even noticed before. A small bathroom, it looked like. Hard to tell because she closed the door so fast. He heard the sound of running water and sighed.

“Bet she got an A in her track class, though,” he mumbled, reaching for his shirt, shaking out the wrinkles twice before sliding his arm into the sleeve. Reluctantly, he rose to his feet, stuffed his shirttails into his pants and zipped them up. His muscles complained but the physical satisfaction took the edge off the discomfort. Now if he could just do something about the emotional ache.

On the one hand, he didn’t blame her for being terrified. She scared him all the way down to his toes. Every moment around her was charged with something way bigger than he ever thought to hope for. Loving Jessica meant loving himself a little less than he was used to. If he were honest, he’d spent the last fifteen years dedicated to loving himself. Loving what he did, where he went, where he could go and what he could do while he was there.

Then he met her and all he could think about were ways to take that guarded expression away. Ways to make her smile. Ways to make her moan. Loving how she spoke, how she touched, how she knew what he was thinking with just a look. Suddenly, there was someone far more important in his life than himself and even with his desire for something more fulfilling, that was an unnerving notion.

Until he looked in her eyes and saw longing. Until he touched her body and felt need. Need for him. Need for what they made between them so easily. Then it wasn’t frightening at all.

On the other hand, he almost wished he could be like her. Life would be a lot easier for him if he could pretend it wasn’t happening.

Jessica Saunders was a complicated woman. Not the blank, happy, child-bearing, house-cleaning, gives-great-massages woman he’d envisioned as his dream come true. When this whole thing started, he’d wanted a family. He’d wanted fulfillment. He’d particularly wanted effort-free.

He hadn’t thought about falling in love, which is exactly what he’d done. He’d seen her across that restaurant and in less time than it took to blink, it was already over. She spoke, she laughed, she seduced and he never had a prayer of wanting anyone else. Someone who might be interested in wanting him back. Someone who might want anything resembling the life he craved.

Jessica wanted a career, not kids. She wanted to change the world, not diapers. And nothing he could say would change her mind.

But he couldn’t make himself let go.

“You’re still here.” Jessica’s flat voice snapped him free of his brood. She looked almost put together again, standing just outside the door, her face moist from where she’d no doubt tried to scrub off his kisses. While her clothes were smoothed and her hair back in place, she still had the air of a woman who’d been thoroughly made love to.

His chest tightened, an odd sense of pride filling him at knowing he'd been part of that. "You thought I was leaving?"

"I can't see what you'd gain by staying."

"You're determined to make this get ugly, aren't you?" He started buttoning his shirt, feeling her eyes on the skin of his chest like firebrands.

"Not ugly. Over." She walked briskly past him to her desk, where she started collecting the stacks of files and paper. He watched her for a full minute, looking for some sign of emotion in her but there wasn't any. She took her work and set it in a drawer, not so much as a tremble to give her feelings away. No remorse, no apology. Not even a wham, bam, thank you, man.

His hands tightened into fists, a wash of anger swelling in him. This was the woman who'd taken him inside her and stolen everything he thought he knew with a husky laugh? Hard to believe. In fact, he didn't believe it at all. Which only served to piss him off further.

He grabbed his jacket. "So that's it then? Thanks for the rug burn, see you later?"

She froze for a second—just one—before she finished locking her cabinet and stood up silently, evidently determined to act like he wasn't there. Even so, she was beautiful. Her spine was iron straight, fine shoulders rolled back, her mane of hair falling slightly tangled.

How the hell did that work? She was trying to shove him out of her life, trying to kick him in the balls really, and he still thought she was beautiful. If this wasn't love, maybe it was malaria.

She finally turned to him again, her dark eyes completely devoid of anything. If it was a mask, it was the best one he'd ever seen.

"I know what I'm doing, Kyle. It's what I *have* to do. I don't have room in my life for your house or your dog or your yard. I have dreams of my own. A career. Security when I get old. Respect for myself and my achievements. I can't throw that all away because we're infatuated with each other. Infatuation fades. Love goes away, especially if you don't want it. Believe me, I know. And because of that, I've made it this far in my life without it. I can go the rest of my life without too."

He shook his head at her, wanting to mock her desperation, unable to do it. He didn't have to break her to prove her wrong. All he had to do was leave.

"It's not going to go away, Jess. Even if you never see me again, you'll still remember me. Always wonder about me and where I ended up. Always wonder what might have happened if you'd taken a chance. Sending me away doesn't mean you don't get hurt. It just means you have no one to blame but yourself."

He grabbed his jacket and started out of the room.

"Kyle," she called, making him spin around. The longing was back in her eyes; hurt and loneliness so deep it was almost enough to curb his anger. Almost. She took a breath, looking down at her twisting hands, her facade crumbling with each passing second. "I know it doesn't mean much, but I'm sorry."

“No, you’re not,” he said, not caring that bitterness edged his voice or that her eyes widened at hearing it. “But you will be.” He paused briefly before opening the door. “Don’t forget your underwear in the corner. I’d hate you to lose your job because of this. Especially since it’s all you have.”

Then he left.

Chapter Fourteen

Sunday afternoons used to be his favorite time. The one day each week he spent purely to rejuvenate, usually with a run on the beach until the sun went down. But instead of the beach, he was sitting in the hospital again, back in an uncomfortable chair drinking terrible coffee and watching Dory sleep. When he'd arrived, she said Daniel had to go for a meeting with some of his friends that he couldn't put off.

It had taken most of his control not to make a remark about that.

Daniel had been waiting for him when he got home after the disaster with Jessica. Luckily, the big man hadn't asked what the grim look was about. And Kyle knew it was grim. Everything about him was grim, out of sorts. And new. He'd never been known for any kind of temper. Nothing ever mattered enough to deter him. Now he was crackling with repressed energy, unable to use any of it.

He didn't like how anger felt, that was for damn sure. He'd had an inner ear infection when he was thirteen and swore that he was leaning at a forty-five degree angle the whole time. This was the same, but worse. At least then it had been funny.

Even with all that, it didn't get past him that Daniel was tense about something. No doubt his meeting about his shipment. There were more phone calls in the night, Kyle knew from the rumbled voice he didn't bother to eavesdrop on. What would be the point? If he got caught, Daniel would just kill him or do something equally painful.

He couldn't call the police, he had no evidence of anything but a midnight phone call.

About anything, really. Not even himself.

So he'd come here and tried to feel normal with Dory. Part of him wanted to ask her advice, that selfish part which until recently hadn't measured the slightest twinge on his conscience's Richter scale. The rest of him just wanted to be with someone who didn't dislike him, resent him or suspect him of anything. How sad that only Dory fit the bill.

An hour into his vigil, a crotchety voice graveled out, "If you call me unhelpful this time, kid, I'll get my son to knock the shit out of you."

Kyle reached for his small bouquet on the counter. "These are a little pathetic compared to the rosebush over there, but I thought you'd appreciate simple."

Dory's craggy face scrunched as she groaned. "I'd *appreciate* a beer."

"Sorry, they'd never let me past security with that."

She smiled at the monstrous arrangement of roses on the shelf by the window. “Those are from Gregg.”

“Groom?” Kyle managed to blank his face of surprise, but Dory’s smile was knowing.

“Nothing like the threat of death to pull a man’s head out of his ass.” She frowned at him. “What happened to you, you look like twice-crapped shit.”

“Thanks, I was hoping you’d appreciate the changes.”

“Jessica still giving you a hard time?”

Harder every time, he thought automatically.

As if she heard him, Dory cackled.

“For a cardiac patient, you’re in a good mood.”

“I just like watching the dirty-minded think, is all.” She fussed with her bouquet. “Makes me wonder if that’s what I look like most of the time.”

The smile wasn’t too hard to dredge up. “What makes you think I have a dirty mind?”

“Oh, honey, I know the look of a devil. I dated enough of you in my day.” Her eyes went soft before she sighed, as if the memories didn’t last long enough.

“Your day...that was last week, wasn’t it?”

“Don’t I wish. No, sorry to say, my dates with devils ended about fifteen years ago. Now I’m into tame, trainable men.”

“Well, then, as soon as you get out of here, you’re my girl.”

She laughed and though she checked the door several times to see if Daniel was returning, she did a good impression of herself for the next hour and a half. Then she dozed to sleep.

He grabbed a coffee and stayed with her. It was kind of nice there, on that uncomfortable chair, where all he had to do was watch her breathe and think about nothing else. Not sexy brunettes with streaks of red in their hair. Not terrified women with longing in their eyes. He especially didn’t have to think about passionate kisses and making love behind a desk because they couldn’t wait a second longer.

“...er, there’s some muscle damage, but nothing that will impair her permanently.” The low drone of Dory’s doctor speaking outside the room caught Kyle’s ear.

The lower rumble of Daniel’s reply had him putting down the cup and getting to his feet. Careful not to wake her, Kyle stood up and slipped out of the room. The two of them were talking, looking down at the doctor’s clipboard, heads nearly together and both frowning at what they saw.

“So you’re saying that she’s—”

“She’s going to have to take it very easy from now on. She’ll recover, but her lifestyle is going to have to change considerably.”

Daniel raised his head, nodding at Kyle in acknowledgement. “Will she need nursing?”

“Probably not, but I’m anticipating at least another angioplasty and some rigorous changes to her medication. I don’t want to be more specific than that. For now, she’s maintaining a stable condition. We’ll be keeping her, of course, for observation and treatment, but I think we can safely say she’s out of immediate danger.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Daniel offered his hand, for the first time smiling so genuinely that Kyle had a little trouble reconciling him with the menace to society he’d been painting in his head all night and day. The doctor patted his biceps with the back of the clipboard and moved on.

“So she’s clear?” Kyle asked once they were alone.

“For the time being, yeah.” Daniel’s eyes had an unexpected sheen that he wiped away with the edge of his denim sleeve. As he did so, he noticed the time on his leather strap of a wristwatch. “Damn, I have to go.”

“What?” Kyle asked, shocked. “Go where? You haven’t even seen Dory yet.”

“There’s somewhere I have to be. Mom knows about it, she’s not expecting me back until tomorrow. She didn’t hear me out here, did she?” He looked beyond Kyle to the room’s open door.

“She’s sleeping,” Kyle confirmed blankly. That was it? He was really going to just run off and leave her waiting?

“Good. Good.” Daniel’s mind seemed to be on auto as he patted down his pockets, looking for something and turning absently. “I don’t have anything to leave her a note—”

“A note?” Was he nuts?

“Just tell her I’ll be back tomorrow. It’ll all be over by then and I’ll be able to take care of her like she needs.”

Kyle’s indecision about what to do fell away and his anger focused. It was probably a stupid move, but someone had to do it. He stalked forward and grabbed hold of Daniel’s jacketed arm. Pulling the bigger man behind him, he led him into the hall where the elevators were so they were at least out of earshot of the rooms. A few people came and went, but not many.

Kyle finally let him go and tried to calm down. Daniel was looking at him like his nose had fallen off. “Look, if you need money, I understand. I’ll lend it to you and we’ll work something out to take care of Dory.”

“Money?” The shock on Daniel’s face was almost real. Right there next to the affront. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you ditching your mother for a drug deal. What did you think I meant? What about Dory? You don’t think she’s going to be proud of you for this, do you?”

Daniel’s friendly puppy smile came back and he straightened away from the wall. “Whoa, Kyle, man, I think you got the wrong idea. I don’t know what you think you know—”

“I heard you on the phone, Daniel. I know about your shipment. Five o’clock? Ring any bells?”

Daniel paled slightly, but his mouth came together in a grim line. "I knew you did, damn it, I knew." He swore a few more times, then checked his watch again. "I don't have time for this, but I swear, it's not what you think."

"Sure it's not." Just like Jessica believed he didn't know what he knew about her.

"Give me a few hours. I can explain then, I really can. For now, forget you heard anything. I'll explain it all tomorrow, I swear, but right now I have to go. If I'm not outside in the next five minutes, some guys you don't want to meet are going to come in after me. Believe me, they're not good at waiting."

"You brought your connection here? Are you insane?"

"I didn't bring them. They came for me. Where do you think I've been all morning? Trying to buy more time. I'm telling you, Kyle. There isn't any. I have to go."

"No, you stay right there and explain right now." Everyone wanted to explain later or not explain at all and Kyle had about all he could take of it. He pushed Daniel into the wall with a loud thump, making the bigger man's eyes widen in surprise. "Explain the calls. Explain the threats. Explain the *gun*."

To make his point, Kyle pushed open the coat to expose the holster again, while Daniel let him, opening his arm wide enough for Kyle to finally get a good look at it. Tan leather, tucked close to his side by a strap over his shoulder and forming a fat lump encasing a cold piece of steel with a black-textured handle. Kyle didn't know gun makes but this was big and looked dangerous. Still, it didn't gleam half as brightly as the shining badge hanging from it.

He looked up at Daniel's dry expression. "You're a cop?"

"DEA. Been undercover for two years and it all ends today. The only reason I have the badge is to explain my gun if hospital security gets wind of it or it'd be in my boot where it belongs. Now you need to get your ass back in that hospital room, where you belong." The elevator dinged and Daniel's relaxed pose changed in an instant, his arms clamping closed and his back straightening.

But it wasn't fast enough.

"What the shit?" a voice asked in a growl.

Kyle spun around. There were four guys of various sizes forming a half-circle around them, all wearing denim and black T-shirts or leather. All apparently from Daniel's gang of riders. All looking at the two of them as if they'd just robbed a bank.

Or spilled the truth.

"You're a narc, Danny? After all this shit, you're a fuckin' *narc*!" The talker looked roughly Kyle's own age. If you took off the mud and the sun-baked lines on his face. He wasn't yelling, not in volume, anyway. More like a whispered rant that could get loud any second. He shoved at Daniel's shoulder, sending him back into the wall again. "I brought you in. I trusted you, asshole."

"You never trusted me," Daniel actually bothered to correct, sounding just as angry. "You used me to finance your big ticket. You'd have known what I was if you'd stayed in touch over the years, Cody. But that's you, isn't it? Only ever out for yourself."

"I should put your head through that wall, you bastard. Did you make up the bullshit about your mother too? Who's this guy? Your contact?" The biker turned to Kyle, already reaching for his throat.

Kyle swayed back, only to bump into one of the other men.

"He's just some guy here in the hospital, Cody. Thought I was after his wallet," Daniel said, sounding bored. "No one you need to worry about."

"Like I'm going to believe anything *you* say." But Cody didn't throttle Kyle where he stood, which was a moment's relief, at least. Then the fact that he was still surrounded by a bunch of drug dealers who'd just found out they'd been infiltrated sank into Kyle's head and relief spirited away. Quickly.

Daniel didn't look like he had any such problem. He just stared Cody in the eye like he didn't care one way or another. About anything. Kyle would have liked to know how he did that, because right this second he was caring about everything. A lot.

"Take him or leave him, I don't care. We just can't stay here much longer," one of the guys said, looking around at the people moving just outside the hall. For now, no one really cared much about the clump of men talking near the elevators in low voices. In ICU, no one bothered anyone else unless they were making a scene. No one was even acknowledging them. But that could change at any time and Cody seemed to know it. He gave Daniel one more glare then turned his back on him and hit the button for another elevator. Two of the men flanked Daniel and shoved him forward.

Maybe it was still the shock of the situation, but Kyle put a hand on him to hold him back. Daniel flinched, as if reminded that he had someone next to him who wasn't in the mood to kill him. Or maybe someone he felt responsible for. That flinch only served to remind Kyle who was really responsible for this scene: nobody but himself. He'd jumped to a conclusion. Now look at them.

"Bring him with us. He knows enough."

"He don't know shit, Cody, leave him." Daniel braced his feet at the doors, making himself a hard parcel to move.

Cody didn't even acknowledge him with a look. "We bring him with us or cut his throat and stuff him in a closet. Your pick, Pierson."

Daniel hesitated, then shook his head and let them both get herded into the elevator. Kyle got put next to him, a sense of surrealism wrapping around him like one of his mother's quilts. His heart thumped and every sound took on a muted quality, fear slowing everything down to a snail's pace. He watched almost absently as someone passed the closing doors of the elevators without even looking in. Without caring.

The whole thing took a total of three minutes. Maybe four. That was it. No one had noticed anything. No one would remember them all leaving together. Other than the doctor and Dory, no one even knew they'd been there.

"We're gonna die, aren't we?" he asked, realization seeping slowly through the cottony fog.

"Yup," Daniel replied without emotion.

"Yeah," Kyle sighed, becoming strangely detached from even his mounting terror of being back in a barely moving elevator with a clear knowledge of his own upcoming demise. He could feel that, couldn't help but notice it in the press of angry men all around him. He just didn't feel it like he normally would. Weren't people supposed to run when they confronted the fact that their lives were about to end? Think up some noble way to go? Or even fall to their knees sobbing and begging or something?

Instead, in the quiet—was that really Muzak playing his death knell?—he'd gone numb. His brain raced like the whirring of an overtaxed computer, but nothing seemed to be clearly thought. "Just checking."

One of the men shifted, jabbing an elbow into his side hard enough to shift a rib, probably to tell him to shut up. It sounded like a good idea but all of a sudden he had so much to say.

He wanted to call Lucas; tell him to stop pretending he wasn't in love with Belinda. Stop taking no for answer or at least ask her the damn question. He wanted to tell his parents to take that Hawaiian cruise they kept putting off until next year when the market was better.

But most of all, he wanted to tell Jessica he loved her and that he knew she loved him too. Tell her that he'd wait until she was ready to say it, wait until she was ready for his dog and his house and his yard. Tell her he'd give them all up forever if she gave him a chance to be part of her life. He had so much to say and no one to say it to but Daniel and the four thugs preparing to kill him.

"Sorry about pushing you," he said softly, knowing it was a lame start and even lamer last sentiments.

Daniel remained silent.

"And...you know...blowing your cover." He looked around briefly at the dirty men, rough haircuts and various tattoos on bare shoulders or arms. A deep breath pulled in the scent of dust and sweat, among other things he didn't want to identify. "*Really* sorry about that part."

"S'right," Daniel mumbled. What was he supposed to say? That he'd be holding a grudge?

The apology didn't make Kyle feel any better, but at least it had been accepted. "Thanks."

"Shut up," Cody barked.

Kyle clamped his mouth closed. The elevator doors opened and they walked as one big block through the hall. Cody led the way, not through the main lobby but through a side door to the underground parking. There they made their way to a plain white van. Sliding the door open, revealing a stripped cargo bay with some blankets for seating, they pushed him and Daniel inside. Two of them climbed in next to them and slammed the door shut.

A few rough seconds later they were being searched and both Daniel's gun and Kyle's cell phone were taken, but Kyle didn't care. All he could do was stare at the closed doors of the van and watch the curved walls lean in. After all these years, he was still going to die compressed into an impossible position in a goddamned car. If he could control the tightening in his throat, he'd laugh at the irony.

"Uh Daniel?"

He heard a grunt.

"Would now be a bad time to mention I'm claustrophobic?"

Kyle heard the sadistic chuckles from the others until Daniel asked, "You gonna throw up?"

Oddly enough, that almost made Kyle smile. "No, probably not."

"Then no, now's good."

Cody got behind the wheel and started the loud engine while the men in the back tied their hands and feet in front of them.

"Where are they taking us?" Kyle asked a few uneventful minutes later, his bound hands resting on his knees. It wasn't so bad, really. Better than having them behind his back, especially with just a blanket on the corrugated metal floor for cushion.

"Death Valley," Daniel answered, blasé, leaning his head back against the wall of the van as if he were going to take a nap. "Emmanuel Santos is meeting us there with a boatload of heroin. Literally. We're late, so they don't have time to kill us on the way."

"That's good news, right?"

"Not really. When Santos finds out he's been dealing with DEA for the last year, odds are he'll disembowel us instead of just shooting us."

Kyle swallowed. He looked at the other guys, one of whom nodded.

"Sounds..." Okay, disemboweling was hard to joke about.

"You're taking this pretty good, Kyle. I expected something with less dignity from you by now."

So had Kyle. "Yeah, well, you haven't seen my shorts."

Daniel gave a lazy grin. "You should get some sleep if you can. It'll be a few hours."

"I don't think I can sleep." Not with his heart racing and the cold sweat starting to run down his back. The windows of the van's front doors were down, sending a steady stream of air his way, but while it kept the claustrophobia from sucking him down, it wasn't enough to keep the fear for his life at bay. There weren't even enough smudges of dirt to count and distract himself from the impending doom. Like Jessica had warned, he'd run out of distractions.

"All right. I'm gonna knock out, then. I've hardly slept at all the last few nights."

Kyle looked at him incredulously. "At a time like this?"

"Not gonna be able to do it later." That said, Daniel closed his eyes and within a few minutes was snoring.

Kyle looked around, but no one seemed particularly bothered. The other guys were settling in, trying to get comfortable too. With nothing else to look at for an hour and the drone of the wheels on the road, the summer heat warming the air until it wasn't worth it to fight it, Kyle let his own lids droop and decided to dream of Jessica for what little time was left to him.

It wasn't as if it were difficult, since she was the only thing he dreamed about these days anyway. But instead of the usual dreams where she huskily said she loved him and couldn't live without him right before taking his cock deep into her mouth, he dreamt memories. Jessica, smiling against her will that first night he'd met her, the lightest rose flush across her cheeks because he'd teased her about wanting hot beef. The graceful curves of her shoulder and arm, leading to the rise of her hip beneath her sheet, visible only in the moonlight, a sight that haunted him long after he'd left her. In the elevator, her eyebrow raised while she taunted him about their impending fiery doom, never knowing how impish she looked there on the floor or that he'd been able to see all the way down her blouse from his vantage point of hanging on for dear life. But the best, the very best, was the memory of her from the night before, curling into him there on the floor, her hair wild around her face, her blouse open so he could see her perfect, creamy skin from her face all the way down to her belly button. But as much as he'd loved the sight, had wanted to trace the curves of her breasts peeking out from behind the open folds, the only thing he'd been looking at was her face. So soft, so open for the first time since he'd known her...so confused by the feelings she had for him.

You make me feel things I can't even name...

Because she'd never known it before. Could barely recognize love—not his, not even Dory's. For a few precious seconds, though, she'd let him in. Let him see on her face what it meant for someone to care about the man he was instead of the man he thought he should be.

Until he'd crushed it.

Kyle jolted awake to hot, oxygenless air and a stopped van. His startled gaze met Daniel's steady one.

"We're here."

And that's when the fear broke past the cotton of numbness.

Chapter Fifteen

The sweat that had been burning his body turned frigid despite the fact that it was so hot everything looked like a mirage. His stomach turned into a giant coiled knot that made him wince at the pain of it. The bindings at his wrists carved into his flesh as his hands tried to twist out on their own. But there was no escape.

Daniel's friends opened the sliding door of the van and hopped out. The sun outside had turned the whole sky orange, which meant it was either so hot his eyeballs were on fire or that it was low enough to be starting to cool. Of course, cool in Death Valley was high noon in hell anywhere else. Either way, he'd never seen anything more beautiful than that open door.

Until he remembered he was still going to die.

Shit. A few more words popped up in his head, but he bit his tongue to keep from saying them. Otherwise he'd be swearing 'til they killed him.

"You could have had a part of this, Danny," Cody said from the front seat, startling Kyle into looking away from the gold light. He'd been so happy to see it he'd completely forgotten about the man still in the van with them. If Cody hadn't spoken, Kyle might have talked himself into hopping out and seeing if he could make a dash for it. All those years of running could have paid off, even in the desert. Couldn't they?

He pulled his feet closer and started toying carefully with the knots in the rope. Whatever else these guys were, they were good at tying knots.

"I'd rather be a part of what I already am, Cody," Daniel said evenly.

Kyle kept his eyes on his ropes. He didn't want to be here. Not just because of the obvious. There was something between these two men that he didn't have a right to be listening to.

"What you're part of is going to get you killed." Cody sounded almost sorry about that. "Your friend there too. Maybe even me. What happened to you, Danny? The guy I knew would never let his job be more important than his friends or his family."

"Could ask the same for you. Deals with Santos don't exactly extend your life expectancy. He kills all his associates, eventually."

"Yeah, well, if that day comes he won't find me."

"Sure, he won't, Cody."

Kyle waited for the other man to say something else, to get mad and yell again, but instead he just opened his door and left the van with a solid slam of the door.

“No one’s going to stay here and watch us?” he asked after a few minutes when no one came back.

“No reason to. We step out of this van we’ll be surrounded by twenty other crews with vans just like it, ready to kill us. If somehow we made it past them, we’d have to get past Santos’s men and there’s bound to be a hell of a lot more of them.”

Kyle looked down at his loose knot. Great. Free but if he took one step outside, he’d die. So much for claustrophobia. Looking for something else to do, he went to work on Daniel’s hands. The other man looked amused but he didn’t stop him. “So what happens now?”

“Well, if it all goes to plan, Cody out there is going to make a deal with Santos using the money I brought with me for the deal. Last year, Santos’s operation was pinned down in Southern Mexico. He beat the agents out, though, taking pretty much everything he could scrape with him. We figure he’s been floating around the Pacific on a ship, transferring cargo containers for months. But that couldn’t last and with his accounts frozen, he needed to move the smack.

“Lucky for us, his usual distribution lines were closed—Latin Kings won’t touch him because he’s too hot. We found out his in was a group of bikers in Central California. He’d been using them to move small shipments and supply his distributors from LA to Sacramento. Since I was already under with a crew for a smuggling ring, I was chosen to infiltrate.”

“Through Cody,” Kyle surmised, finishing the knot.

Daniel nodded, rubbing his wrists and uncoiling the rope. “Remember that ’53 Indian I was telling you about? The owner was Cody’s dad. Cody was practically a brother to me.”

“Not anymore, though.”

Daniel looked away, sighing deeply. “You can’t protect people determined to do themselves in. I’d have given this whole deal to anyone else if he’d have come out of it, but he won’t. He’s in over his head with Santos. He thinks this is going to take him to the big time. Truth is, Santos just needs a glorified bag man.”

“So you were going to come here, buy it, then arrest everyone?”

“Um-hmm.” Was it really that simple to him?

“But then Dory had her coronary...”

Daniel’s dark eyes opened and for the first time he didn’t look untouched. “I couldn’t let her be alone for that.”

“You risked the biggest bust of your career for your mom?” It was a nice idea, but he didn’t know many guys in his field who would do something like that. Most of them would probably just ask which rest home to send the check to. He wondered if he could give up all his plans for anyone else.

Jessica sprang to mind.

“I’d throw my whole damn career away for her,” Daniel said with no remorse or second thoughts. “She’s my family. She’s everything.”

Kyle looked at his tied hands, thinking of his dream along with Daniel's words. How was that for an epiphany? He'd met Jessica Saunders looking for family. Looking for everything. Not only had she tied his hands because she wasn't ready for "everything", but he hadn't even offered to wait for her to be.

His eyes stung, thinking about the things he'd said to her. Those weren't the last words he wanted to have said, hurling his hurt and accusation over his shoulder just because she bruised his feelings. Because she was scared.

"Thinking about Jessica?" Daniel pulled up his boots to start on his own ties.

"How'd you know?"

"I'd be thinking about her, if she was mine."

"She's not mine." Painful to admit, but since he'd be dead in another twenty minutes or so, it wasn't the time to be proud.

"Screwed it up, huh?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Dan. Got a real graceful way with words, there."

Daniel chuckled. "Sorry, man, but it'd be hard for you to get that one right anyway."

Kyle frowned at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't get all offended or nothing. It's just she's got that scared rabbit look. One second she's all googly-eyed at you, the next it's like you've got the plague."

He couldn't quite argue with that, not even to defend her honor. "Yeah, well...she has reasons." They hadn't seemed like *good* reasons, when she was trying to explain, but that was between them.

"You know why I got into undercover work? Cause it was way easier than dealing with women." Daniel laughed again, his voice whisper-low while he unwrapped the lines on his boots. "Then I got to thinking that it was a lot the same. I mean, when you're undercover, you're after something. Something your mark isn't real likely to let just anyone get, right? Right," he answered, not even looking up to see if Kyle was following him.

Wouldn't have been worth it, Kyle wasn't sure he was.

"So, you gotta earn their trust. You can't just show up and think they're gonna give it up just like that."

Kyle decided to keep his comments on that to himself, but Daniel snorted, taking Kyle's hands and pulling at the bonds. "I don't think she had any qualms about sleeping with you, man."

"Yeah, you weren't there. Believe me, she had qualms."

"I'd bet money she was more worried about that puppy look you get on your face when you see her."

"Puppy?" Bad enough everyone was calling him little, now he was a puppy?

"Yeah, like you're in the pound and she's your last chance at adoption. You're not real subtle, man." Daniel tossed the rope to the corner of the van. "You gotta earn some trust first. Marks always have tests to see if you can do something for them first without trying to screw them. So, you prove your worth."

Well, he could chalk *that* up to failure. Just about anything between him and Jessica that didn't involve phone calls and orgasms had gone down in flames.

"Marks got needs too. The more you prove, the more they trust. The more they let you in."

"Like Cody?" Kyle asked and Daniel's expression hardened.

"Yeah, like Cody." The knots began slipping. "He let me in. And eventually, he let me in on this deal. Let me talk him into getting Santos here personally.

"The plan was to wait on the bust 'til today because Cody trusted me so much we had the opportunity to get it all; shut down the entire pipeline in one bust. Maybe it was greedy, but it was worth the risk at the time. Now, instead, each van gets a thousand kilos, Santos gets fifty million and everyone in the country gets treated to a dose of *mierde puro* at rock bottom prices. Happy freakin' fourth of July."

The ropes came off and Kyle rubbed his chafed wrists. Daniel checked his watch and swore. "We don't have a lot of time left."

Kyle stopped rubbing and looked up. Daniel was looking out the open door. "You thinking we'll make a break for it?"

"No, I think this is when they come and get us."

That clenching in his gut started up again, harder. Kyle watched along with Daniel until Cody came back to the open door with a gun out. Daniel's gun. "Santos is waiting."

Daniel turned to Kyle. "You ready?"

"No."

Daniel grinned and chucked Kyle's feet with the back of his hand. "Come on, I have a little something in mind I call the 'Bond Plan'."

"You mean there's a chance we'll get out of this alive?"

"Not really, but what do you have to lose?" He started out of the van.

With nowhere else left to go, Kyle took a breath and followed. It wasn't what he expected. They were in what looked like a desert valley. Open flat land and mountains all around. Dozens of vans were all lined up, of various colors and makes, each one with their doors open. To one side were five large semis, each one fully loaded with new cars. Kyle realized men were unloading the cars, while a few others were disassembling them. It didn't make much sense until he saw a man lift a little silver brick from inside the tire he'd just slashed.

"Mr. Pierson," a thickly accented voice said smoothly, dragging Kyle back to the scene of his imminent demise. Standing at a table in a clean dark suit was a man he didn't really imagine a drug lord to look like. Lean, brown skinned, wearing glasses and looking a bit more like an accountant than an evil murderer capable of ripping his guts out. *He* wouldn't have any trouble hiding in plain sight with fifty million dollars.

“Santos,” Daniel replied, standing next to Kyle and not looking the slightest bit concerned about his death.

“I trust your mother is on the mend.”

Daniel nodded curtly.

“Excellent. It’s always best to have healthy subjects. Killing the ill takes all the sport out of it.”

Kyle’s misgivings faded and his phobia suddenly seemed insignificant. Dying here wouldn’t stop with them. They’d kill Dory. And who knew who’d be with her when it happened. Probably Jessica. He took a step forward, but Daniel put a hand to his chest and shook his head.

Santos looked him over then seemed to dismiss him as insignificant. “I actually think this is a perfect end to my transaction. Killing an undercover federal officer. Fitting way to disappear into the night, don’t you think?”

“I kinda doubt that disappearing-into-the-night stuff, Santos,” Daniel said calmly. “I don’t think you’ll get ten feet, but then again, you look fast. You might make twelve.”

The man’s eyes flickered before he decided to be amused. Kyle, on the other hand, just wanted to know what the hell was going on.

“And who do you think is going to stop me? Your little friend here?”

Daniel grinned, looking as scary as Kyle first thought he was. “Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of the DEA and an assload of local cops. But Kyle here might take a shot at it.”

Santos looked around. Nothing happened. His show of teeth couldn’t quite be called a smile. “Doesn’t look like any of them are here to help you this time, *cabrón*, but you almost looked serious.”

“I’m serious enough. Ever hear of cellular triangulation?”

Santos gaze turned sharp. “There’s no cellular service here. Nothing works in Death Valley. Even if it did, you don’t have anything to transmit a signal—”

Daniel extended his arm and flicked off his thick watch band. He tossed the strip of leather at Santos who caught it. “It’s a tracer. They’ve been monitoring me all the way up here. Even if you shoot me, Santos, you’re sure as shit not getting out of this canyon.”

Santos looked at the watch, disbelief obvious. Kyle was about to consider the “Bond Plan” a dismal failure when from the south came the strange sound of chopping.

Santos picked up his head, threw the watch down and stomped on it while swearing out commands in Spanish. The sound grew closer and people started running. Vans turned and peeled out, doors flying and men clinging on like escaping pinwheels. The cars were abandoned and ultimately, from what Kyle could tell, so was Santos. In the chaos of the helicopter coming over the rise and spotlighting them, sending wind and dust whipping all around them, only the three of them were standing still.

Santos reached into his breast pocket, pulled out a gun and pointed it at Daniel. A booming voice demanded something from a speaker above them, but it didn't make any sense to Kyle. Between the rushing blood in his ears and the chopping blades of the helicopter, one thought repeated.

Daniel's gonna die.

Daniel's gonna die.

Daniel's gonna die.

He couldn't let it happen.

He sprinted forward. He thought he heard Daniel yell his name, but Santos turned his head. Turned the gun.

A flash, a boom, rocked his senses, but Kyle didn't stop. He threw his arms around Santos, coming down on the man like a cape, and knocked them both to the ground. His bones jarred at the impact. Pain spread through his chest, icy and sizzling at once. His fist connected with Santo's jaw once before the man rolled them in the dust to deliver a punch of his own to the same damn side Lucas had already bruised.

For a second, Kyle saw only the blinding white of pain, but he managed to grip the handle of the gun, determined to yank it away. Another vicious punch to his jaw and he lost purchase. Adrenaline sapped out of him, warm at his back. His arms were too heavy, too weak, too— He could only stare up at the silhouette of Santos sitting on his chest as the gun lowered to aim at his forehead.

So this is how it ends... Strange, since he'd been pretty sure all his life that he was a coward, but he was curiously unafraid. In the back of his mind, he remembered Jessica, smiling at him on her office floor, her face soft, her hair flowing through his fingers. *She's gonna be so mad...*

The gun fired, the loudest sound he'd ever heard in his life.

Santos jerked, light hitting his surprised face...and the spreading red stain at his middle. He looked down at Kyle, extending the gun again, already squeezing...

A second shot to his forehead and Santos flopped backward, unquestionably dead.

"Kyle!" Definitely Daniel's voice, thank God, then Daniel's body, hopping over him and crashing down at his side. "You crazy sonofabitch, what the fuck were you thinking?"

Kyle meant to answer him, but Daniel put both hands down on his chest and pushed down. Pain turned the light around them nearly black.

"Oh no you don't, you stay awake, Kyle." Daniel lifted his head and yelled, "Medic!"

The black edges didn't leave his vision.

"Damn, you're bleeding a lot."

Kyle turned his head, fuzzily realizing that there were more people in the circle of light now. People running towards them, sending the dust swirling.

"Kyle, look at me!"

He tried, he really did, but the blackness spread.

Dee Tenorio

And then there was nothing.

Chapter Sixteen

Walking into her office Sunday morning, Jessica tried to take the gloom and heartache off along with her coat. It didn't work.

The night before, she'd painstakingly cleaned her office to obliterate any trace of what had happened, not that there was a lot to do physically except throw out the Chinese food bag and put her chair to rights. Which was about as effective as waving her hands to block out the moon. She could still see where her body had pressed into the soft carpet. See where their clothes—the few they'd bothered to take off—had lain. Still see where Kyle Lonnigan had changed her life...just before she'd run him out so he wouldn't see what he'd done to her.

Except that he knew exactly what he'd done.

She wanted to hate him. To be angry at him for the things he'd said, for the way he'd walked out, but how could she? She'd made him angry on purpose. Belittled what was between them. If it hadn't been the right thing to do, she'd hate herself.

But it *was* the right thing to do.

She was sure of that.

Mostly.

She wasn't what Kyle was looking for, that much couldn't be ignored. He wanted a family, for God's sake. She wouldn't have a clue what to do with one of those. Sure, she'd wanted one growing up, had gone a little crazy taking care of others to pretend she had one, but ultimately, she'd rather boil herself in lighter fluid.

Say she married him. Say they had their two-point-five kids and their furry little dog that never peed on the carpet or humped anyone's leg. Would she really be happy?

Probably not, and that was the honest truth instead of gut-wrenching fear. She'd be waiting for it all to fall apart. Just like it always did. The other shoe always fell and if it didn't fall by itself, she'd find a way to push it off its pedestal so the agonizing wait would end. That was the way of *real* life.

And speaking of real life, the idea of marrying Kyle and having that perfect white-picket-fence life was so ridiculous. She'd known the man for less than a month. You didn't start talking marriage before you were even sure you were dating. They were both being maudlin, making the end of a brief affair sound like the end of life itself.

Well, it wasn't. It just didn't happen that way, she reassured herself, so the guilt wouldn't slice so deep. People did not fall in love at the drop of a hat, like he said. How overworked were the divorce lawyers in this very firm because people were dumb enough to think they could? She'd simply cut this relationship off before it got anywhere. Before anyone got permanently damaged or promises got broken. He'd see that. He'd accept that, eventually.

Why couldn't she?

She sat in her chair, placed her flattened palms over the surface of her desk and willed them to stop shaking.

"People do not fall in love in a few weeks," she said out loud, closing her eyes and hoping the sound of the sentence would make her believe it. She repeated it four times, like a lucky charm.

It didn't quell the denial in her heart.

"Just lust," she tried. Lust that had been thoroughly satisfied. But repeating that didn't help either, because she still wanted Kyle. Still craved him—the feel of him all around her, inside her, his voice and his laughter. God, just the smell of him would be enough to soothe her, but she'd used too many cleaning products and the faint traces of his cologne were gone for good.

She scoffed at herself and the pain in her heart, digging back into her papers to find an order to them. You didn't look at a man and know he was going to change your life in an instant. And if by some chance you did, you didn't let him. Her life was just fine without him. Happy. Content.

Lonely.

She shook off the stinging of her eyes and any further inclinations in the direction of Kyle Lonnigan. He didn't bear thinking about because she couldn't change anything. She had work to do. Work would carry her through. It always had before.

For several hours it did. Until she was too tired to read and the sun had made its way over the top of her building, leaving her in shadows. She sighed, admitting defeat that she'd have to turn on the light, and shifted her chair to reach for the lamp she'd stupidly set too far from her working position. The shift moved her foot and she gasped when she stepped on something hard. Grumbling, she pushed her chair back and found the small gold cufflink under her shoe.

Just like that, depression swamped her. She closed her eyes, bent to pick it up, running her fingertips over it even as she enclosed it in her fist. Plain, smooth gold. Simple, clean and masculine. So very Kyle.

Damn it.

"I do *not* know this man," she said out loud again, not caring how crazy she must sound. Banishing the concept that she knew anything about him took priority.

But she did know him and her senses reminded her. She knew his scent, his taste. She knew his smile, the way it lopsided and made her stomach roll over in excitement. She knew the way he moved his body or his hands when he talked. The way his eyes danced when he said one thing and meant something special

just for her. She knew the way his hand felt, when he held hers just to offer support. She knew the way his eyes looked when they were filled with love.

She gasped, the ache in her chest flashing with breath-stealing pain, her eyes opening wide while she dropped the cufflink with a clatter to the surface of her desk. She stared at it, wanting to be angry at the piece of metal too. But all it did was reflect her face back at her.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, running her mind in circles before she gave up. The only one thing to do with it was get it out of her sight as quickly as possible. She didn't need any reminders of Kyle and she didn't want any excuses to see him again later.

Just before she threw it out her window, she realized it was gold, which meant it was valuable. Throwing it away would be like stealing. Plus, he'd come looking for it.

Well, she wasn't calling him, that was for sure. She didn't know where he lived—another reason why this was *not* a relationship—which meant she'd have to go to the only physical link she had with him: Lucas.

“You look horrible,” Jessica said in shock when Lucas finally opened his front door.

He only blinked at her. Impeccable, permanently-pressed Lucas Lonnigan stood before her a changed man, and not for the better. His hair spiked in every direction, not with style but because it looked like he'd been pulling it that way. His jaw was darkly shadowed with a couple of days' stubble, at least. Judging from the bloodshot eyes, an unbuttoned, barely-hanging-from-his-shoulders shirt and the slightly swollen look to his cheeks, he was fresh from his bed. She fought the urge to check the time on her watch. It couldn't be any later than six, too early for even Lucas to be in bed.

“Did you want something?”

It took effort, but she managed to pull her jaw up and grappled around for her bearings. “No, actually, I have something for you.”

“Now isn't a good time for any new contracts—”

“No, not that.” Her impossible-to-bury maternal instincts kicked in, reminding her stinging of her childhood—and Kyle—but she couldn't help it. The man was in a bad way. “Are you sick?”

He snorted, shifting his weight impatiently to his back leg. “You have no idea.”

She frowned at him.

He frowned back.

“You're not going to tell me what's wrong, are you?” she finally asked, guessing after his glare turned glacial that his patience was running thin.

“You had something for me?”

Fine. He wanted to look like his best friend had died and didn't want to talk about it. No problem. She dug into the side pocket of her purse for the cufflink.

The small piece of metal kept evading her grasp, adding to her irritation. "If you didn't want to be bothered, you shouldn't have opened the door."

"You've been knocking for eight minutes," he said pointedly. "It was either open the door or call someone to come shoot you."

She finally got her fingers around the damn thing, pulled it free and all but threw it at him. "Here. Give it to your brother."

The annoying schmuck managed to catch it, bobbling it against his bare chest for a few seconds. He pinched the cufflink between thumb and forefinger, staring at it before raising enraged eyes to hers. "I haven't slept in two days and you got me out of bed for a damned piece of jewelry?"

For just a second, she considered that this was a bad idea.

Then she remembered the alternative: taking it to Kyle herself. Lucas could rant and rave for all she cared, he was still the better of two evils. So she raised her chin and stared him down.

It was a short battle.

While she was intent on standing her ground, he simply reached out, grabbed her hand and shoved the cufflink into it. "Deal with it yourself, Jessica. I'm not getting involved."

Then he backed up and slammed the door in her face.

"Lucas!" She pounded on the door until her hand hurt, yelling his name in indignation. Not that he would be fazed in the slightest. The only ones affected by this point were his neighbors. "Lucas Lonnigan, so help me, if you don't open this door I'll... I'll..."

She'd what? Stand here and yell at a door? Give up and go home where her conscience would berate her, using this tiny piece of gold as a megaphone to tell her that she'd made the biggest mistake of her life?

The pressure behind her temples throbbed painfully. She quit knocking and laid her forehead on the wood, her hand splayed flat alongside. Tears burned her closed eyes and she sighed, hoping not to sob.

"Please, Lucas... I can't...I can't do this." She doubted her voice was getting through the door. The words weren't easy to say, she wasn't even sure exactly what she meant. Was *this* dealing with Kyle...or managing without him? She squeezed her eyes tighter against the question.

Without a reply from Lucas, there was just her and the silence, which enjoyed its advantage by continuing to whisper regrets. Distantly, a phone rang inside, but only for a second before it was picked up. He'd never listen to her now. At least it was likely he was yelling at someone else.

She finally lifted her head and peeled herself away from the door. It had been stupid to come here. She'd just package the cufflink and mail it. It was what she should have done to begin with.

She tried to put her composure back together, ignoring the shaking of her hands, and turned away. She was already halfway down the stairs when Lucas barked her name.

He stood at the top of the steps, a jacket over his arm while he attempted to button his shirt. To her surprise, he looked worse. What little color he'd had was gone. The one button he'd managed was in the wrong hole. He gave up on the buttons and began shuffling down at full speed. "Come with me."

"What? Where?" Watching him tromp down the steps was like watching a locomotive bearing down and not being able to move. Something was wrong.

Lucas took her arm when he hit the landing, pulling her along with him. He didn't so much as miss a step. He wrenched open the building door and swept them both through it.

"Lucas! What's going on?" She was fine demanding things, but she couldn't quite make herself wrench away. "Who was on the phone?"

He finally let her go once they were next to a dark old-model SUV, then crossed around the front, unlocking the power locks as he did. She opened the passenger-side door with fingers that felt frozen. He'd already turned over the engine by the time she got the door closed behind herself.

"Talk to me, damn it. You're scaring me."

"It's Kyle." Two words and she didn't want to hear any more. Not because she didn't want to talk about him or think about him. Because she was terrified.

"Is he hurt?" she whispered, her throat tight.

"I don't know." He pulled into traffic, the truck hitting bumps as he recklessly off-roaded the potholes.

"So where is he?"

"Death Valley."

She grabbed the sissy bar over the side window when he veered through a lane to get to the freeway entrance. Once her heart dropped back into her chest, she gasped a few times and asked, "What's he doing in Death Valley?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. All I know is that a police officer called to inform me that he was in a hospital up near there. He gave me directions and said it was important that I get up there immediately."

"Which means he's hurt." That's what it had to mean. Wasn't it? They wouldn't want to give very much information over the phone, since it would be a long trip. But would they have said something different if he were— She couldn't finish the thought.

His jaw was so tense his teeth were probably cracking from the pressure and his knuckles were white where he gripped the steering wheel. She turned away, staring forward through the windshield, still holding on to the bar with her right hand, her left clutching the side of her seat. Now that they were on the freeway, he was driving smoothly, but it seemed so slow. How far did they have to go? How long would it take until they knew how bad it was? What if he was gone before they got there?

Trembling started deep inside her, old fears welling from parts of her heart that she'd imagined closed off. She closed her eyes, willing those terrors back into their box, but they wouldn't. Emotions suffused

her. Terror, abandonment, loss, loneliness, regret. She let go of her moorings to cross her arms across her belly and hold it in. It didn't help.

She never meant to care about him. He wasn't supposed to matter. If people didn't matter, you wouldn't miss them when they left, and everyone always left. Behind her closed lids, she could feel the traces of her earliest memory. The dampness of her sweater, the queasiness of hunger, the faint traces of a face she could never pull into focus, saying something she could never quite hear. Then the silence of the church, where she sat on the pew, holding a bear and waiting to be found. It might not even be a real memory, but it haunted all the same. Just like all the other thoughts she stifled as hard as she could.

The faces of all the kids she'd taken to heart, but who had all eventually left the foster home, never once looking back for her. How many of them remembered the girl who tried so hard to be needed, to be loved? She'd never know. She'd given up counting. And the couple who'd almost chosen her. She never thought about them, not even in the darkest hours. They'd seen something in her that had made them change their minds. Something everyone else seemed to know about. It was when her then foster-mother, Helen, had told her they weren't coming back that she gave up caring. She'd boxed up her heart and buried it, never once missing it or all the hurt it held.

Until Kyle.

And now he might be gone. Not because he wanted to leave, but because she made him go. He was right, what he'd said. She might never see him again, but she hadn't set herself free by pushing him away. She'd tied herself to regret, to memory.

"Talk to me," she ordered through her teeth, probably startling Lucas, but she didn't care. The pain was growing. She couldn't deal with it. She needed a reminder that she wasn't alone. Not in the car, not in her fears for Kyle.

"What?"

"I need a distraction. Please, just...talk."

Lucas turned his head briefly, staring at her with narrowed eyes before returning his attention back to traffic. "You're not going to cry, are you?"

"I don't know," she replied, relief nearly choking her. If he talked to her, she wouldn't have to feel all those things battling to get out. She squeezed herself tighter. "Maybe."

Lucas scrubbed his face wearily with his palm, but acquiesced. "So what do you want me to say?"

If only she knew for sure. "I don't know, anything."

"Why couldn't you give Kyle his cufflink back?"

"Not that."

"Not what?" He speared her with a sharp look. "Not talk about Kyle? Are you insane? What else do we have to discuss?"

Her lips trembled no matter how firmly she held them together. "I'm afraid."

“So am I, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to ignore the fact that he’s on my mind.”

Jessica dipped her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t—I don’t know how to handle this.”

“Being afraid for him or being in love with him?”

“I’m not.” The denial was instant but ineffective. Her eyes stung and her insides clenched tighter. His words burned like truth. “I don’t know. I don’t understand what happened between us. None of it makes any sense.”

“Start at the beginning.” He shifted the car, slipping into the carpool lane and setting the cruise control. “Just tell me what’s so confusing.”

“I like my life,” she finally said, the tears she meant to keep inside all but bursting from her in a deep gasp. “I like it, damn it. I like knowing each day is going to be as boring as the one before. I like knowing where my remote control is. I like knowing that bad things aren’t going to happen and even if they did, they wouldn’t hurt me.”

“And Kyle ruined all of that for you,” he said evenly, almost as if he understood.

“Yes!” Wait, that sounded terrible.

“It’s all right, he loves destroying people’s hard-worked plans. You had a great, ordered, serene life. Everything was just the way you wanted it. You could get by and not have to feel everything the way everyone else did. Didn’t have to fall apart every time something went wrong or be nervous when it goes right. It was perfect.”

She smiled at him, wiping her face with the back of her hand. “How did you know?”

“Because I have that life and it sucks. It’s not you anymore. Never should have been, if you ask me. You’re not going over cases in your head or reading notes while we sit here. For the first time since we met, you’re not thinking about work. You’re thinking about your life and responding to it. The woman I knew pretended she didn’t feel anything and would never shed a tear for a man she barely knew. You’re different now. Meeting Kyle changed you and that’s why I slammed the door in your face earlier.” He tsked, giving his head a little nod she didn’t think was directed to her. “The lucky bastard found his one in a million on the first try.”

Lucky? Weren’t they speeding their way up the interstate because Kyle was hurt? She frowned at him, disapproval a little richer in her voice than she wanted. “Now *you’re* not making any sense.”

His sharp gaze fixed on her face again, for as long as was safe while driving. “I would be if you were being honest with yourself. You came all the way over to my place just to return something because you were avoiding him, right? That’s some strong emotion. Didn’t it occur to you that it might be more than just wanting to avoid him?”

She’d purposely not thought that.

“He doesn’t know anything about me,” she muttered, because his silence was taut enough to prove that he expected an answer of some sort. She just didn’t have any answers at all when it came to Kyle.

Lucas sighed. Why did she get the feeling he was reevaluating his opinion of her intelligence? “How good are you with math?”

“I really don’t think this is the time to start waxing poetic about negative integers and prime numbers—”

“Math.” Lucas cut off her diatribe with a briskly formed word. “Most people forget that it’s a beautiful art form. Perfect in its simplicity. People think it’s complicated, but math is the simplest, safest thing in the world. There’s always an absolute answer, even if we haven’t found it yet.”

“Lucas—”

“Take the number one, for example.” He unfolded his index finger from around the steering wheel, then added his other index finger next to it. “You add one to it and you get two.” He wiggled his fingers at her. “A completely separate number that means so much more than one by itself.” He lowered the second finger.

“But you take one away from one—” All fingers were firmly on the wheel again. “And you’ve got zero. Nothing. Just an empty space you can’t fill and you don’t know what belongs there. It’s just where one used to be.”

She stared at his hands, finally daring to look up at his face. His profile was sad, as if he knew what it was like to be a one without another one too. She didn’t want to relate, but her chest ached and that unbearable pressure formed behind her eyes again. He understood. He knew how she felt, even when she didn’t.

Or just didn’t want to.

Tears, ones that couldn’t be held back any longer, escaped. The box deep inside opened wide, making her feel as if something had caved in and broken open at the same time. She covered her mouth with her hand to hold in a cry, but the sound slipped through her fingers. She tried to breathe, but it felt like a sob instead. She didn’t realize she’d used her other hand to hug herself while she leaned forward until Lucas pushed a soft piece of fabric into her hand and spoke gently.

“He’s in love with you. I don’t know how it happened so fast, but I do know that it’s real. He’s just as changed by it as you are. Just as confused, just as lost, but I’m guessing from those tears, you’re in love with him anyway.”

In love with him. In love. She instinctively rejected that, tried to shove it away, but then she remembered where they were headed. Why. And the feeling refused to fade. Would she really have allowed Lucas to drag her into his car and ride off in desperate terror if she didn’t care?

“It’s all right to be in love with him, Jessica. It doesn’t mean your world is ending. It means your world is expanding.”

“Why can’t the two of you understand that I don’t *want* my life to expand?” she snapped angrily. The Lonnigans seemed to think they had the right to just decide the fate of whoever they met, did they? Was it a

God-given gift that everyone else knew about? Had she missed the memo on that too? “I *like* it small and cramped and...and...” She ran out of steam. Choked on it, really. She didn’t like her life. She hated it. But it was safe. Her hands fisted as she lowered them to her lap.

“Lonely?” Lucas asked softly.

She didn’t answer him, instead turning her head to look out the window.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Lonely is best. It’s a hell of a lot better than losing everything over and over. Wanting to be happy so much it hurts, but how much would it hurt when it leaves again? It’s a lot to consider. I can see how lonely has a certain attractiveness.”

“What do you know about it?” She wished she could get out of the car and run into the night.

“You’re not the *only* lonely person in the world.”

She turned her head at the raw note in his voice, but he wasn’t looking at her. It was as if he’d never said a word in the first place. His eyes were fixed on the road, even with the thinning traffic. His jaw was tight again, but the haggard, sad expression was still there, etched on him.

“What’s going on with you Lucas? I’m not the only one who’s changed either. It doesn’t take a genius to know something serious has been happening to you.”

He shook his head, tension in his jaw and neck growing visibly tighter before he shrugged and tsked. “Serious, yes. Happening, no. Something in my life came to an end, that’s all. I’m having a little trouble getting used to it being gone, and the thought of living the rest of my life without her—it... It’s hard to imagine.”

Her anger faded in the wake of his sudden silence.

“You have a family,” she found herself whispering, trying to explain as well as soothe. There was no way for him to know what it felt like not to be wanted at all. Not to be needed. Not to matter to anyone but yourself. “You have people who care about you. You’re not alone. You don’t know what it means.”

“You go to work in one of the busiest firms in the city. You’re never alone either, but you’re one of the loneliest people I’ve ever met. You know better than anyone it’s not about being surrounded. It’s about not letting anyone in.”

“I have reasons.” Good reasons. Smart reasons.

“I’m sure you do. But you’re still lonely. And you’re still unhappy. Because you choose to be.”

She bristled. “What makes you think that letting myself fall in love with your brother is going to magically make me happy? For all you know, we’d ruin each other’s lives.”

“That’s a good point. You could. You two might be the most miserable people on the face of the planet if you get together. I’m not even sure what you see in him. He’s never serious enough, he’s a slob and he’s never met an impulse he didn’t like.” He shrugged.

She waited in the silence for him to say something else.

And waited.

“But?”

“But what?” He gave her a sidelong glance.

She blew out a breath in disgust. “No wonder he says you’re a terrible conversationalist.”

“No, terrible would be telling you about the rabid case of athlete’s foot he had in high school. Or the stuffed rabbit he had on his bed until he was sixteen. This is me being *helpful*.”

She laughed despite herself.

“I can’t tell you how to feel about him. You either love him or you don’t. Hell, half the time *I* don’t like Kyle. But he’s made my life bearable, even when he’s making me miserable. He’s never let me down, he doesn’t make promises he doesn’t try his damndest to keep and, just for the record, I think you’d be stupid to pass up the chance to be happy because you’re afraid. Everyone’s afraid. The only people who are happy are the ones who try to be.”

Lucas sighed, sounding for all the world like a teacher who’d failed. But he didn’t say anything more and Jessica couldn’t bring herself to ask any more questions. Her mind was full as it was.

She crumpled the kerchief in her hand, trying to find reason and sense somewhere inside herself. It had fled, though, leaving her to face the swirl of emotions that threatened to pull her into their current. Fear, for Kyle, for herself. She could be hurtling toward heartbreak when she found him at that hospital, whether he was hurt or not.

Folding the fabric carefully in her lap, she concentrated on making each turn precise and perfect. And willed him to be all right when she got there. Once she knew he was safe, she would decide what to do next.

Chapter Seventeen

Five hours. Five. That's how long it took to get the hospital to agree to release him. They'd wanted to keep him overnight, but Kyle refused. He needed to get home, set things right with Jessica. Except they took their damn time letting him go. It would have been less aggravating if Kyle had anything to tell the cops asking questions every fifteen or twenty minutes. Blowing their agent's cover hadn't exactly endeared him to them. Falling asleep in the van had lacked intelligence and rendered him unable to claim he'd learned any other valuable information. He wasn't even the one who fired the shot that killed the drug lord. Neither was Daniel, small consolation that it was, but it was his gun that ultimately did the deed.

Nope, all Kyle had done was knock down a psychopath and get shot through his damn shoulder. A through and through, Daniel had explained when Kyle came to, still leaning on him in the dirt and putting enough pressure on the wound to flatten a moose. Meaning he hadn't even stopped the stupid bullet. Maybe it was the pain that made him angry—at least the doctor had numbed most of that—but he had a feeling it was the complete pointlessness of it all.

In the end, the one who saved everyone's lives was Cody. According to Daniel, they had him in custody for drug trafficking, but when Daniel moved to help Kyle fight off Santos, Cody should have shot him. Instead, he'd turned the gun on Santos, going so far as to finish the job when one shot wasn't enough. Not that Cody had said a single word to anyone since dropping the weapon and getting on his knees before anyone could shoot him too. Daniel didn't expect that to change anytime soon, so it would be a waste of time for Kyle to thank him. There was also the possibility, Daniel informed him, that Cody had been aiming for Kyle and hit Santos by accident, necessitating a kill shot.

Daniel definitely possessed his mother's sense of humor.

On the one hand, Kyle comforted himself while the hours crawled by, when it came down to it, he'd done what he felt he had to do to save someone else's life. It was a pleasant surprise to discover he had some depth of humanity after all.

On the other hand, he hadn't stopped shaking since.

He shook his good hand out while he sat in the waiting room for Daniel to come back for him, scowling at the lame one cradled against his chest in a sling. Same stupid arm and shoulder as in the car accident. The only good thing about it was that it was his left, so it wouldn't stop him from taking care of himself, and the doctor assured him the pain wouldn't last too long. A week or two at most.

It felt like a week or two already, sitting there doing nothing while Daniel handled details only God knew where. He'd said he'd arranged for Kyle to get home, that any further briefing could be done from there, but for the most part everything that had happened had already been recorded and there wasn't much he'd be asked to add.

The tracer-in-the-wristwatch story—which Daniel told him was a crock of epic shit—aside, Daniel had been wired and just about everything they said from the hospital on had been listened to by the DEA. Nifty little mic sewn into his rat's nest of a beard. The guys in the van had been in too much of a hurry to do more than a cursory check of his torso before starting the long drive.

Kyle did try to apologize again for blowing his cover, but Daniel told him not to sweat it.

"Hey, we're alive, right?" he'd asked, smacking Kyle in the back hard enough to push him forward a step.

Once his vision cleared and the agony faded down to tolerable levels, Kyle had agreed to wait and here he was. Still. Waiting.

Could be that this was the big guy's idea of revenge.

"...in there?" a feminine voice asked from somewhere out in the hallway.

Kyle frowned, his ears tingling at the familiar timbre—warm, low...frightened?

"Jess?" he asked, unsteadily moving out of the room, blinking at what had to be a mirage. There was Jessica all right, standing next to Lucas at the nurse's station, surrounded by the black-uniformed officers milling around.

She turned and he realized with a shock she was no mirage. Her dark eyes filled with tears and her expression crumpled as she pushed past someone to run his way. He'd only gotten three steps forward when she crashed into him, her arms going around his neck tight enough to strangle him.

He struggled briefly between his relief at seeing and touching her and his desire to breathe through the blinding pain. Nature eventually won and he pushed her back slightly. "Jess—"

She didn't budge. If anything, she tightened her hold. "Just shut up, Kyle, okay? Please?" She pressed her forehead against his neck, letting out a ragged sigh. "You're okay, that's all I want to know right now."

"Sort—" Argument ended when two steely bands wrapped around both of them and what little air was still in his lungs was forced out on a wheeze. "Lucas?"

Kyle blinked through stinging eyes, catching a glimpse of his brother's dark head bowed across the shoulder Jessica wasn't occupying. Maybe it was his blackening vision making him imagine things. Lucas didn't hug people. He barely acknowledged them half the time.

"Need. Air," he managed finally.

They were immediately released from his brother's hold. Kyle stared disbelievingly at Lucas—God, he looked like *he'd* been the one who was kidnapped, shot and rolled on the ground a few times—who was coughing discreetly behind his hand to offset the show of emotion. Kyle took in a few extra lungfuls, just in

case the two of them wanted to try to squeeze the life from him again, but kept his good arm firmly around Jessica to make sure she stayed right where she was. Give the woman an inch and she ran ten miles.

“What are you two doing here? And why are you trying to break my neck?”

Lucas hitched a shoulder. “Sorry, I just...we expected to see you in a hospital bed. Or worse.”

Kyle frowned, not wanting to admit he was supposed to be in one. “I don’t understand why you were expecting anything. Who told you I was here?” How would they even know who to contact?

“Some sergeant from the local station. I got the call that there’d been a shooting and you were involved.”

“What?” Jessica interrupted. “You didn’t say anything about a shooting—”

“What was I supposed to think?” Lucas continued, pretending Jessica wasn’t skewering him with mental kebab prongs. “And while we’re asking questions, how the hell did you get all the way up here? And what happened to your face?”

This was the Lucas he knew and loved. But, for a second there, it had been nice to be hugged. Except for the pain. “It’s not serious,” he said, nodding obliquely to the sling that Lucas had ignored. “The bleeding stopped hours ago.”

Jessica’s eyes threatened to swallow her face. “Bleeding?”

“I’m fine, Jess. Cleaned, stitched and shot up with enough painkillers and antibiotics to run my own pharmacy.”

“*Stitched?*”

“Oh good, your ride’s here.”

Kyle looked past Lucas’s shoulder to find Daniel there, a small grin on his face as he leaned on the wall, his badge clipped in open view on his hip.

“What exactly did you tell them?” Kyle demanded.

“Just what they needed to hear, apparently. Hi, Jessica, how are you doing?”

“Hi, we...” She looked up at Kyle, confusion all over her face. He tried to think of a quick response, but she looked back at Daniel for one instead. “What are you doing here?”

“Federal agent. I *was* getting my life saved by your boyfriend there.”

Kyle winced. “That’s not exactly what happened.”

“Maybe not how it started, but that’s how it ended. I’d be a smudge on the ground if you hadn’t jumped in front of that gun. It was pretty brave, man. Two inches lower and you’d have been toast.”

“You *what?*” Jessica spun, looking him up and down as if there was another hole she missed the first time she got a look at him.

Well, actually, there was, so he moved his good side a little closer to her, hoping she’d miss the thick bandage under the generic green smock the nurse gave him.

“Are you out of your mind?” Jessica nearly shrieked. “You could have been killed!”

“Well, he probably would have been killed anyway, but it’s the thought that counts.” Daniel seemed to have realized that she wasn’t into the hero thing, because he straightened up while the blood drained out of her face.

“Daniel, you’re not helping.” Kyle dropped a kiss on her temple, tucking her head back to his good shoulder. Her hold had gotten tight again. He could feel the fabric of his shirt pulling from the back. “I’m fine, Jess. The doctor called it a flesh wound. No arteries, no bone damage. Just some stitches.”

“You swear?” she asked, her voice muffled against his neck.

“I swear. You can check for yourself when we get home.”

He waited for her to push him away, to get angry at him for saying anything in front of Lucas or Daniel, and she did stiffen, but she just blew out a sigh and stayed where she was without argument.

Kyle pulled a relieved breath in and glanced over at Lucas and Daniel. His brother gave him a sad half-smile, then nudged the self-satisfied-looking Daniel into a walk down the hall to give them privacy. He might double well for a cyborg, but every now and then, Lucas was all right.

Kyle leaned the side of his head down to rest against Jessica’s. She felt so good to hold, her softness and strength a balm for his nerves. The tremor in his hands lessened and his air came easier as relief finally settled in. As he breathed in her scent, holding her against him, his eyes stung at the whirlwind of the day replaying through his mind. He might never have felt this again. Not because of Santos, either. Because of himself.

“I have so much to tell you,” he whispered, feeling raw and open no matter how she might respond. “I don’t know where to start.”

“It’s okay,” Jessica murmured, running her hands over his back in a gentle, supportive circle. “We have time now, don’t worry. You’ll tell me.”

Kyle nodded, lifting his chin from her hair, trying to compose himself again.

“You’re all set to go, Kyle.” Daniel walked over from wherever Lucas had drawn him. “They want you to see your regular doctor as soon as you can. Oh, and don’t tell my mom about this yet, okay? I prefer to get her out of the hospital before I scare the shit out of her.”

Kyle cleared his throat to get the pressure there loose enough to speak. “Maybe you could take the whole gun/near-death angle out entirely.”

“Nah, she likes hearing about that part. It’s the idea of having me underfoot every day from now on that might freak her out.” Daniel shook his head, already turning to head back down the hall. “She thinks I cramp her style. Drive safe. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“They have got to be the oddest mother-son pair I’ve ever met in my life,” Jessica muttered when Daniel disappeared from sight.

“But I like them.” With any luck, he wouldn’t see much of them, but he did—strangely enough—like them.

“Me too.” Jessica grinned, wiping at her eyes. “They make me feel a little less weird.”

“So, are you ready?” Lucas asked, back to impatience as usual.

“Looks that way.” He twined his hand with Jessica’s. He was ready for a lot of things. Even waiting. She stared back at him, the nervousness in her expression clear. Then something happened. It faded, not all the way, but it suddenly wasn’t the only thing he could see. And she smiled. It was small, but it shone in her eyes like a promise of good things to come.

Then she slid next to him and tucked her head onto his shoulder, right where she fit, and led the way down the hall.

Kyle’s apartment was not at all what Jessica expected.

“Whoa.” was all she could say after he flipped on the lights.

It was homey. Cream walls, cherry paneling, green carpet. He had a lot of furniture, but all of it looked worn and comfy. There were throws on the backs of the couches and pillows you could fall into. If there were a big enough table, she’d call the room poker-night heaven.

“Whoa, good, I mean,” she rushed to clarify. “I like it. Very bachelor-*chic*.”

“Uh-huh.” Kyle grinned at her, appearing to wait for something more definitive.

She looked around for something, anything, to comment intelligently on. There was sports memorabilia, some in frames on the walls, some in the bookshelves acting as separators for DVD cases. Plaques baseball cards. Mini-football helmets with signatures in small glass cases. Porcelain boat figurines? In baby blue and yellow, with shiny gold trim. That capped it. She was speechless.

“I kept some stuff when our parents sold their house,” Kyle finally explained, not doing much to stifle a chuckle.

Should she tell him that she kind of liked not knowing what was coming next where he was concerned?

Probably not the smartest idea. He’d think that was a license to surprise her at every turn and she doubted she’d be able to keep up with that without kicking him.

“So, these are your mother’s?” She touched one of the little boats with the tip of her finger.

“They aren’t what you’d call chick-magnet material, but Mom put those in our room when we were babies and kept them ever since. Seemed weird to throw them out.” He touched the figure as well, running over the little yellow boat body to meet her, then taking her whole hand into his. “These remind me of her.”

Jessica let him hold on, relief that he was still here to be touched still coursing through her. There was so much about him she didn’t know. Every time she thought she had him pegged—liar, man-handler, seducer, misguided lover—he added some other dimension to himself she never would have imagined. “You’re one confusing man, Kyle Lonnigan.”

"I thought I was pretty straightforward." He tugged her into his arms, his lips finding hers with an urgency she couldn't mistake.

She softened for him, her arms wrapping around his waist, needing to give to him as much as he clearly needed to connect. She'd gotten so used to shutting this part of herself off—the desire to comfort, to share—she'd forgotten how soothing it was to her own senses.

He used his good arm to steer her toward the couch. Which reminded her that he had a bad arm.

"Shouldn't you eat first? Or rest—"

He sat in the corner of the leather seat, pulling her down on his lap with a tired shake of his head. "When I was in that van...when that gun was pointed between my eyes..."

Sheer terror jolted her, stealing her breath and filling her heart with pain at just the knowledge that he'd been in that position.

"All I could think about was having one more second with you. One more minute, one more chance to tell you I was wrong. To tell you that I'm an ass and that if you'll just let me be with you, I don't care what comes next. That I can wait, because you're worth waiting for."

She touched his lips, useless tears filling her eyes. "No, Kyle—"

"But here we are and all I can think about is how badly I need to touch you. Taste you. Prove to myself you're real and that I'm not still lying there in the dirt, bleeding to death."

She could see it wasn't a ploy or a play on her emotions. The shadows in his eyes weren't her imagination. He needed this. Needed her.

He stayed silent while she unbuttoned her blouse with shaking fingers. One by one, until she shrugged the blouse off her shoulders. She rose off his lap to shimmy her skirt high enough that she could straddle him. Taking him back into her arms, she lay her head over his, pressing his ear to her heartbeat, and willed her warmth around him. "Can you feel this? My heart?"

He nodded, a caress despite the scruff on his jaw.

"You're not dead." She tried to say the words firmly, but her voice shook anyway.

He pulled back, staring up at her solemnly.

"You're not leaving me." It sounded more like a command than a reassurance, something that finally made him smile again.

"Wouldn't dream of it." His hand smoothed up her side, clasping her shoulder before running back down. On the second path, he reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear, cupping the side of her face to pull her down for another kiss. This one soft, sweet...loving.

For the first time, knowing that didn't terrify her.

She deepened the kiss, an urgency of her own taking hold. This wasn't about just comfort anymore. He licked at her lips, she nipped at his, sucking the bottom one in to soothe any sting. His arm wrapped around her as the kiss built heat. Between her thighs, she felt his cock harden for her and an ache in her

core throbbed in response. She settled over him, pressing herself against him, gasping when he bucked upward.

He slid her bra strap off her shoulder, his usual grace replaced with near-desperate hunger. Skipping the other one entirely, he simply undid the front clasp and nuzzled the cups apart before drawing her nipple into his mouth. He sucked hard, sending a surge of white-hot desire from the hard tip all the way down to her slickening sex.

“Oh God,” she breathed, arching into his mouth, grinding onto his cock. “Please,” she whimpered, not really sure what she was pleading for. Him. That’s all she knew. *Him*.

“Inside you, Jess.” His voice was a growl against her breast, a demand. His hand tightened on her hip, slowing her movements, pulling her down until it hurt to be so close and still so empty.

“Please,” she said again, throwing her head back.

His hand struggled to open his belt and she realized what he’d meant, that he needed her help. She took over the task, her hands making quick work of his zipper while he tugged aside her panties. In seconds, she was guiding his thick shaft inside, sliding down onto him in slow, stretching increments.

He watched her descent, his heavy-lidded gaze locked with her own. For all that their desperation had led them to this, she couldn’t bring herself to move faster, to destroy the moment. Finally, full of him, she settled completely on his lap and wrapped her arms tight around his head. She pressed a soft, almost chaste kiss to his lips.

“You’re not dead.”

His eyes glistened, filling with emotions she could barely begin to understand, but she wasn’t running from them. Didn’t even want to.

“You’re right here with me. Right where you’re supposed to be.”

He nodded. “I love you, Jess.”

Could you hear a heart shatter? Or was that simply the sound of the last walls she had left, breaking apart because of this man? This incredible, impossible man.

She never got to think of an answer. He dragged her down to his mouth, branding her with a kiss while his hips thrust upward into her, sizzling any brain cells she might have left with pure sensation.

Soon, there was nothing at all except the rush of their bodies sliding together, nearly pounding in the frenzy toward completion. Finally, finally, she found it, her muscles clamping around him and taking him with her, his shout of release a sound she felt against her slick skin.

Wordlessly, they held each other, their bodies cooling, but the emotions around them stayed raw. Exposed.

As if he sensed her disquiet about that, his hand trailed up and down her back until she lay her head on his good shoulder. “It’s going to be okay, Jess, I promise.”

She shook her head. “You can’t promise that. Look what nearly happened today.”

“Look what *did* happen today. We’re here. Together. I can’t think of anything better than this.”

“That’s over-simplifying things a little, don’t you think?”

“I *like* things simple. Just because it’s easy doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

Her mouth twisted wryly. “I haven’t exactly been easy to deal with.”

“No, but I like that about *you*.”

She lifted an eyebrow, even though he couldn’t see it. “The challenge?”

He shook his head, taking the opportunity to nuzzle her. “The fire. Even when you’re completely irrational, you’re passionate about it. I haven’t seen that too often. Most of the women I’ve known only get passionate about jewels or furs.”

“I’m not agreeing about the irrational part.” But she knew she should. There was a lot that she should do. Should admit. Should try. Being fair was only the first on the list. “I’ve never had either of those things, so I don’t know how I might get about them.”

“You’d probably like them, but I don’t think you’ll go ballistic over them. I’d bet you’ll take them or leave them.”

“You can tell that, can you? Just from looking?”

“I have an eye for it,” he replied, casual as you please. But suddenly, she didn’t want casual. She wanted closure. Answers.

“I don’t know what to make of you, Kyle,” she made herself say, pushing past the fears that she was headed into waters too deep. She’d been in too deep the first time he smiled at her. “You’re handsome and popular, you’re well dressed and you seem to do well for yourself financially.”

He waited a few long seconds, the casual charm dissipating. He swallowed, his arm tightening around her slightly, then nodded a few times. At least they were both on the same page. Terrified.

“Sounds like there’s a but in there somewhere,” he finally said, somewhat hoarsely.

There was. “But you want things normal people do.”

“That’s because I *am* normal.”

“I’m not.” It hurt to say that, to finally admit it. Being different was never an identity she craved, but it was the one she’d been stuck with. Hell, it was the one she hid inside from everyone she knew...except him. “You and Lucas had a good family, right? Never wondering what might happen if you weren’t good enough or important enough to keep around. I never had that.

“I knew no one was going to throw me out in the cold, but there were always a lot of kids to take care of. I thought if I made myself indispensable, they would never want to lose me. If I worked hard enough, I’d always have a place to belong.”

“Is that why you’re so dedicated to Goesler & Groom?” His question was soft, but important. For both of them.

“If I had a therapist, that’s probably what they’d say. I’m a pleaser.”

His irrepressible humor intruded into their seriousness. “*I’m pleased with you.*”

She smiled back, turning it into a kiss she pressed just beneath his jaw. “I know you are. I just don’t know why. I’ve done nothing to endear myself to you except sleep with you.”

The hand in the sling—the one she’d completely discounted in their lovemaking—grazed the tip of her breast next to it. “That *was* pretty endearing.”

She sat up and smirked at him, ignoring his groan and her own small throb of pleasure because his cock was still nestled within her, not quite soft enough to slip free. She didn’t want him to. There was something...intimate about being joined this way while talking. You couldn’t be anything but honest. She needed that freedom now.

“I’m not indispensable, Kyle. You can get sex anywhere. I don’t know where I stand if I can’t understand why you want to be with me so badly. If I could, maybe I’d feel safer about...us.”

It was only when he pushed a breath out that she realized he’d been holding it in. “At least you’re admitting there is an *us*.”

“I’m scared. I was—am—completely unprepared to care about you.”

“But that’s exactly what you did.”

She nodded. “I didn’t want to admit it, not to me and definitely not to you. But...”

“But what?”

He was so serious, she couldn’t help but wonder at him. And want to make things easier for him to understand too. “But then I got locked in a car with your brother for a few hours.”

He grinned, that typical Kyle grin. He’d probably find a way to smile in the worst situations. Which would be great, really. How much easier would her life have been if someone had been there to smile with her? If someone had made her want to smile back? “I told you so. You’d never have lasted in a placenta.”

She rolled her eyes. “He actually made a couple of things clear for me. Things I didn’t *want* clear, since we’re being honest.”

“Which were?”

This was it. The moment of absolute no return.

But a look in his eyes made that so much less daunting than she would have thought. *Gamble or gone, girl.*

“I’m in love with you.” Voicing it made it tangible. Even if she couldn’t give good reasons why she did. She didn’t know his favorite things. She didn’t know his bad habits or his goofy quirks. She wasn’t sure she could love those things about him. But she loved his smile. She loved the way he talked to her, the way he cared. The way he made *her* care. Even when she was being irrational. She loved the way she felt when she was near him, that sense that her life was finally beginning, even if she didn’t know exactly where it was headed.

He curved his hand to her face. “I know how hard that was to say.”

She leaned into his palm. Great, now she was tearing up.

"I've never been in love before, either, so it's scary for us both."

She hadn't thought of it that way. The only thing that seemed to truly scare him was when she turned him away. "But how we feel doesn't change some of the specific problems we have."

He grimaced. "Something tells me I'd rather hear the list of Lucas-induced epiphanies."

"I'm no Holly Homemaker." She had to be upfront and direct or he'd never let her get to the point, which explained a lot about why Lucas never let anyone's interjections interfere with what he was saying. He'd been well-trained. "I don't know the first thing about being a mother with knick-knacks and clean carpet."

He laughed. "There are such people as professional carpet cleaners. Besides, I'm not the neatnik in the family, that's Lucas. You can stain whatever you want, I don't mind."

"This is legitimately important to me, dammit." She meant to sound falsely outraged, but the squeak of tears slipped into her voice and she knew she was going about this all wrong. "I'm horrible about looking up from my work. I cook just well enough to save my own life, but that's because I live on salad half the time and takeout the other."

"Jess—"

"No, you have to listen to me. I'm not ready for what you seem to want out of your life. I know you want to find someone and get married and have kids as quickly as humanly possible. You want happily ever after. That didn't go away just because someone pointed a gun at you. I'm having anxiety attacks at the *happily*, I stop breathing at the word *ever* and I'm pretty sure I'll be unconscious by the time I get to *after*."

"Jessica—"

"What if loving you isn't enough? Can you really take me the way I am, because I don't think I can turn myself into your idea of the perfect woman, which is totally bizarre, by the way, but that's beside the point. I'd hate myself if I tried. I know I would, because I did it growing up and I failed. I've always failed. I couldn't do it again. I've worked too hard to be someone I respect, so if you can't accept who that person is, I need you to tell me now. Please." God, it was the scariest demand she'd ever had to make, of herself or anyone else.

Kyle stared at her for a solid, silent minute. Then he took her chin with the tips of his fingers and kissed her until she wanted to weep from the sweetness of it. "I'm going to say this again and I want you to hear me this time. I was wrong."

"What?"

"I was wrong. I'll record it if I have to, so you can play it over and over until you believe it. I was wrong."

Her confusion must have finally translated itself to him because he shifted them both to the side, finally separating them. He grabbed a throw from behind her and wrapped it around her shoulders, holding it closed under her chin.

“Something happened to me a few months ago. Something changed and suddenly it was like my life didn’t add up to anything that mattered. I don’t know if you know what that’s like, but I’ll tell you, it scared me. I’d thought my life mattered a lot until then. I went a little crazy. I started looking for meaning and couldn’t find any. I guess I thought having a family might make my ten-year plan mean something again if it was about providing for someone. Like you said, I wanted to be more than my goal when I got there. I just didn’t know how.” His gaze fixed intently on hers. “And then I met you.”

He kissed her nose, her cheeks, her mouth, a gentle, giving kiss that melted at her worries. But it didn’t take them away.

“People change their minds, even after they think they’ve found what they were looking for.” Like her almost-adoptive parents. “You could meet someone else you think changes your world.”

“No, I can’t. Because until that moment, until I saw *you*, I didn’t have a clue that my only real purpose was to make you happy. To make us both happy, however we can manage it. I didn’t have a purpose at all. And now it’s the only thing that keeps me going, The only reason I’m alive right now. So, yes, Jessica, I know nothing is going to change the way I feel about you. Yes, I can take you exactly the way you are. Because I don’t want you any other way.”

She came this close to blubbering. “You’re not leaving.” Something she didn’t have to say to know deep in her heart. Kyle would never leave, not on purpose. She could see it in his eyes, more than the love, the absolute surety gleamed through. She could trust in that. “What about getting married and all those kids you want?”

The laugh lines at the corners of his eyes deepened. “Maybe later?”

“Um.”

“I’m not talking about next week or anything. Just...maybe later.” He reminded her of a four-year-old she’d once told about Santa Claus. She’d been ten and way past such things, but the little boy was still clinging to hope and she’d wanted him to keep it as long as he could. She’d been happy for him when he was adopted a few months later. For him, Santa really had come.

Maybe he’d finally arrived for her too.

She twined her fingers into his, unknotting them from the blanket. “I don’t know. You’re a pretty fast mover. I get the feeling your version of later is a little sooner than most people’s.”

“Only if you want it to be,” he assured her. “Remember when we first met, I told you there was a right answer to running away with me?”

Jessica nodded. At the time, she’d thought him insane. Now, though...well, he was still out of his mind, but she was at least willing to hear him out.

“The right answer is, always, only if you want to. It’s right to run off on a wild vacation with me, but only if you want to. The same way it’s right to be with me right now—for as long as you’re willing—but not because I’m guilting you or making you think you have to be. Be with me only if you want to be.

“Now, I’m not going to lie and say I don’t want a family. We both know I do. What we don’t know is if it’ll ever be what you want. But if that’s not in the cards for us, I know I’ll be happy if it’s just the two of us and maybe a pet or two. But if we get to that, if we do ever have a family, maybe we could look into adoption. Find ourselves another little girl or boy who’s never had a home of their own either.” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “That way, when we screw up, they won’t know the difference.”

If she didn’t love him already, that last bit would have pushed her over the edge. Just that easily, she gave in to the inevitable. Oh, she wasn’t going to rush—no way, no how—but she could see the future ahead of them and it was a good one. Filled with all the things she’d thought could never be hers. A home, a husband...and yes, God help the poor kids they brought up, a family.

“Someday,” she agreed, feeling not all that different than she had when claiming Santa was real. The little boy been right to believe that something wonderful was out there, searching for him to bring him the ultimate gift. She’d thought herself beyond believing. But she’d been wrong. It just took someone like Kyle to get her to see that. “But we should start with something small.”

“Like a puppy?”

“I was thinking more like a second date.”

“Oh,” he replied with a tired laugh, laying the side of his head against the cushion. His eyes closed, as if he were already falling asleep, not that she could blame him. “Then the puppy?”

She sighed, laying her head next to his. He was drifting off. Sated, content in a way she’d never known, she decided that sleeping on the couch wasn’t the worst way this night could have ended. Not by a long shot. She tugged off the blanket, spreading one end over him and cuddling closer so they could share. “Why do I have the feeling this puppy thing is going to keep showing up in our conversations?”

He shrugged his good shoulder.

“You’re not answering.”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m trying to think of how to fit the word puppy into another suggestion.”

“How about you fit *I love you* in instead?”

“I love you, Jess.” Just like that. So simple. So right.

She kissed him, gently, carefully, blessedly, giving him absolutely everything there was in her heart.

“I love you back.”

“Happily ever after, however long it might take?” he asked,

“Well, there is one other concession you’ll have to make.”

“Yeah, like what? Which restaurants we’re going to have to give up to keep the other person happy? Because Wong’s is a deal-breaker for me, I’ll put that on the table right now.”

“Not Wong’s.” She pretended to think about it, toying with the hair at his nape. “I was thinking about your list.”

“My what?” Only one eye opened, but she could tell he was wide awake at that. “Was that someone at the door?”

“Nope, didn’t hear a thing. Your list. I have a question.”

He stared at her, his mouth falling open just a little bit.

She used a forefinger to lift his jaw for him. “Smart, Educated, Sense of Humor.”

His eyes narrowed. “Yes?”

“Is there a particular reason why *pretty* is at the bottom? Did you pick me because I was any of those other things first?” She blinked innocently at him, as if she wasn’t about to make some sort of point. But she could tell he scented danger.

“Of course not.”

“So, you don’t think I’m pretty?”

“I think you’re gorgeous.”

“Which doesn’t apply to the list.”

He closed his eyes with a groan, no doubt wishing he’d pretended total unconsciousness. “I’m going to beat my brother senseless.”

“You can’t go blaming Lucas just because you don’t want to be in trouble.”

“Jess, honey, being with you means I’m going to be in trouble every day for the rest of my life. I can blame him for a little bit of it from time to time, can’t I?” He leaned close to her, his smile warming all the parts of her heart that were still afraid, filling them with hope. Filling her with delicious, wonderful heat. And love. A whole new world of love.

She pressed her index finger to his lips. “But you wouldn’t have it any other way, right?”

His smile grew broader, sparkling with mischief beneath her touch. The smile she knew she’d be seeing for the rest of her life, good or bad, rain or shine.

Merry Christmas to me...

“Maybe with a puppy...”

About the Author

Dee Tenorio is a sick woman. Really sick. She enjoys tormenting herself by writing romantic comedies (often with sexy, grumpy heroes and smart-mouthed heroines) and sizzling, steamy romances of various genres spanning dramas with the occasional drop of suspense all the way to erotic romance. But why does that make her sick?

Because she truly seems to enjoy it.

And she has every intention of keeping at it!

If you would like to learn more about Dee and her work, please visit her website at www.deetenorio.com or her blog at www.deetenorio.com/Blog.

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Burn for Me

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A Rancho Del Cielo Romance

Twelve years ago, Raul Montenga left home to live life on his own terms. Yet for just as long, his nights have sizzled with erotic dreams of Penelope, the girl he left behind. Enough is enough. It's time to find out if the sparks are real, or all in his head.

Not that he expected a warm welcome, but her cold shoulder and icy rejection sting more than he cares to admit. So he's more than a little surprised to find her tomboy daughter standing nervously on his porch...claiming to be his child.

Dr. Penelope Gibson's worst nightmare isn't that her daughter wants to know her daddy. It's facing—and keeping at arm's length—her biggest youthful mistake. Now he's back and the feelings she'd thought frozen solid are melting fast. Along with her inhibitions, her clothes and her better judgment.

Problem is, Raul's not content to stop at getting acquainted with her daughter. He wants it all—Penelope's love, her body *and* her soul. After twelve years building a life without him, though, she's not sure she trusts him—or herself—enough to try.

Warning This book features a wildly hot Latino firefighter dead-set on a mission to seduce. Contains bad words, fiery tempers and scorching sex. Oven mitts required.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Burn for Me:

He stared down at his daughter—*his* daughter, a thought that in and of itself was growing less incredulous and more exactly what he wanted—and knew in that moment that his life was about to change irrevocably. If he wanted, he could still back away. Keep Chloe at enough of a distance that he could be her friend, give her access to his family but not really change much. He'd work at the firehouse, finding all the meaning in his life in the work there, and keep longing for something more in his heart.

Or, he'd become her father. Be someone to guide her and protect her. Be more to her than he'd ever managed to be to anyone else.

The ease with which he made the decision should have startled him, but it didn't. Like snapping that chain around her neck, the pieces fell together inside him and the lock was set. They still had a long way to go, of course—no kid of his should be expected to live in a room this perfect—but at least he knew he wanted the experience. Wanted to be part of this. *Wanted.*

He tapped the lamp a couple of times to turn it off and reached for the door handle. Penelope stood there, raising her chin when he waited for her to walk out first. She was stubborn, something he should have realized years ago, but some things didn't change no matter how deep in denial a person wanted to go.

Faced with waking up her daughter or standing there staring at him for eternity, Pen finally let go of the door and walked ahead of him into the hall.

Satisfied, Raul pulled the door shut, silencing the chimes by pressing them to the door. The door directly across from Chloe's could only belong to Penelope. She caught him looking, he could tell because she bit her lip. Tempting, very tempting, to stroll over there and discover what secrets the elusive Miss Gibson had in there, but they had talking to do first.

Raul shook his head and pointed to the stairs. Was that relief or disappointment on her face? It wasn't a question he could let himself think about. Much. He forced himself down the stairs, listening for her footsteps in his wake.

It took a while, but Penelope finally came. She walked into the living room where he was putting the poker back on the hearth stand. Vents closed, door closed upstairs. Now, finally, he could lay into her.

Except when he turned, he didn't see the hard-shelled woman who had stood on his parents' deck and told him to back off. This Penelope was worried. Afraid. Of him.

His anger curdled in his belly. "I'm not going to do anything to you, Pen," he growled.

"I know." And then she backed up a step and crossed her arms.

"Now that's just fuckin' unfair." So what if he sounded like a ten-year-old. "You were ready to rip my balls off and serve 'em for dinner earlier. But now that we're alone, you act like I'm going to hit you or something. I thought you were better than that."

"I've had almost five hours to think about what you were going to say. You've always been somewhat...demonstrative when you're upset. I've never seen any value to yelling myself hoarse. So no, I'm not looking forward to this." He could practically see frost coming out of her mouth as she spoke.

"You didn't care about my demonstrations at the house."

"At the house, I was angry."

"But you're not anymore." Of course she wasn't, she'd had her say. And her say had been six kinds of insulting, each and every one of them telling him to keep his distance. Just thinking about it pissed him off all over again. "How convenient for you."

Her mouth twitched and some life snapped in her eyes. "I had every right to be angry. You were giving your family the wrong impression. On purpose."

Damn right he'd done it on purpose. "I was being attentive and you were giving everyone the cold shoulder because things weren't going your way. I hate to break it to you, *querida*, but you don't have all the answers and you're not the only one with something to lose in this situation. Those people are all going to play an important role in her life now. That means they'll be part of *your* life, the same as me. Treating us like shit will kind of get in the way of that."

She rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t treating anyone like anything. I was staying out of the way because the whole point was for them to accept Chloe. *Chloe*. Why weren’t you giving her the grand tour, introducing her to the relatives, instead of finding new and inventive ways to excuse putting your hands all over *me*?”

He focused on the first accusation...for now. “I did. For as long as she stayed still for it. Unlike you, she likes people and dove right in.”

Color flooded her cheeks in a rush. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” he said, taking that step forward she’d put between them and another two besides, “you’re getting more and more like your mother with every damn day and it’s getting on my fucking nerves.”

She froze, her eyes widening while her mouth fell slightly open. He could just see the tops of her teeth, perfectly white and even.

“What the hell happened to you, Pen? Do you even see the way you’re becoming like her? You freeze people out, shut off your emotions and act like you’re too good to be bothered. You’re thirty-two fuckin’ years old, but you’re locked up in clothes and restraints like some goddamned retirement-home lady. You used to talk about the way you’d be when you grew up. That you’d go away and do things, make a difference with your life. Everyone knew you were just waiting to grow up and get out from your mother’s control, but you haven’t. And it’s wrong for you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, yes, I do.” He walked up to her now, invading her space, almost wrapping his hands around her shoulders, he wanted to shake her so much. “You don’t think I paid attention, but I did. I knew you. I knew who you were under the frills and the manners and all that other shit she used to make you do. You used to *laugh*, Pen. I haven’t heard you laugh once since I came back. Not a real laugh. It wasn’t loud, wasn’t crazy, but fuck, at least you did it. When the hell did you lose what made you special?”

That finally seemed to snap her back to reality because she put her hands on his chest and shoved. “You happened, Raul. *You*. I spent fifteen years throwing myself at you because I couldn’t seem to help it and you never cared.”

He let her move him, shock at her emotional explosion muting his earlier frustration. She pushed again, as if she thought she could throw him across the room instead of a single step backward.

“Finally, finally, when I thought you felt something for me, all that happened was a horrible drunken fuck in a closet. A *closet*, Raul. Nameless, faceless and completely forgettable.” She pounded at him, enough that it actually hurt this time. Or was that only because of what she was saying? “You left and you never looked back. You *destroyed* me. Does that make your ego feel better? I thought I lost everything the day you left, and I’ve spent the rest of my life proving myself wrong. Proving to myself—if no one else—that you don’t matter anymore, and you know what, I’ve done a hell of a job.

“So excuse me if I’m not special enough for you anymore. Maybe it was the pregnancy afterward that took a little of the shine off. Or do you think it was surviving medical school with an infant? It could have

been the pointless relationships I tried to have every now and again, each one a little more depressing than the last. Or maybe, just maybe, it was living with my mother's unflagging disappointment my entire life because at every single turn, I've lived up to everyone's lowest expectations.

"And by the way, yes, she's a bitch, okay, but she's *my* bitchy mother and if you want my respect for your family you'd better damn well have some for mine. Either way, *you* do not get to decide if I'm special, Raul. You made your mind up a long time ago that I wasn't—"

The kiss muffled her words. She shoved at him again, but he didn't let her go. She had to stop talking. Because everything she was saying was ripping his chest open. He licked at her lips, taking her fists into his hands and holding them still. She kept trying to hit him, but eventually she stopped fighting. Instead he felt her lips soften, part and then the darting touch of her tongue against his. She stroked, a warm, wet invitation that he'd have to have been dead for three days to turn down.

Letting go of her hands, he cupped her face, gentling his touch but unable to tamp down the hunger. His body hardened for her, pushing against her. Her palms slid down his chest, burning a trail to his waist, where she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and pulled his hips closer. Flush, their bodies strained into each other from chest to knee.

The kiss slowed, became an exploration. He tasted her lips, drawing the full curve of the bottom one into his mouth before delving back inside to stroke her tongue with his. His senses filled with her, the taste of her, the scent and the feel of her. She met him kiss for kiss, rising up on her toes to get that little bit closer.

When the kiss finally broke, he still held her face cupped in his hands, but the angry fire in her eyes had cooled, the cobalt color shimmering with unshed tears. With unabashed want. Her lips pink and swollen, open and moist enough for him to want to pull her right back in.

She stared at him, looking almost tormented. "Why can't I hate you?"

Wouldn't everything be easier if she could? He touched her lip with his thumb, caressing it carefully. "Probably the same reason I don't think I can let you go tonight."

He thought she'd get angry again, but all she did was sniff and blink back her tears. Her poise threatened to return, and with it he knew would go any chance of touching her. Kissing her again. Making love to her, which he'd just told her he meant to do.

A good man would have released his hold and left. A good man would tell her she deserved better than the way he'd treated her all her life. But if there was one thing Raul knew about himself, it was that no one in their right mind would ever call him good.

"Don't make me let you go, Pen. I won't be able to."

Penelope didn't pretend to misunderstand. Or lie and say she didn't want him just as much. "What about Chloe? I don't want—"

"I'll be gone before she wakes up."

She glanced down at the couch, a flicker of distaste making her flinch.

“Your bed.” She was going to stop expecting the worst from him one of these days. He’d see to it. Starting tonight. Swooping down, he scooped her up to his chest and headed back to the stairs.

One wrong move, and she could be dancing on her grave...

Pas de Deux

© 2010 Fiona Jayde

Two years after an injury put her dancing career on hold, Lynnrina Kovaleva is determined to reclaim her place on the stage. On the eve of her comeback production, she takes the edge off her nerves with a one-night stand in the strong arms of celebrity bodyguard Mateo Rivera.

Ex-cop Mateo is celebrating one hell of an anniversary: eight months since he was declared unfit for duty. When a delicate beauty boldly propositions him in a bar, he chooses to lose himself in her body rather than lose his mind to alcohol. This choice comes back to haunt him when he's hired to protect a prima ballerina who's been receiving threats.

Despite her shock at seeing him again, Lynn must not allow their intense attraction—or any creepy fan letters—to undermine her performance. Mateo can't reconcile this coldly focused dancer with the passionate woman who seduced him. Yet he sees fire under the ice, pain hidden by the smooth mask of perfection.

The vivid memory of their entwined bodies wars with the job at hand, but he must keep Lynn safe—regardless of the cost. The most difficult challenge, however, will be keeping his hands to himself.

Warning: Contains jetés, pliés, a chilling touch of danger, and the boiling heat of an unwanted attraction that combusts into passionate sex.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Pas de Deux:

Her legs ready to give out, Lynn only wanted to reach her dressing room and sit for a small precious second. Sit and not move a single inch. She went straight for her stash, barely chewing the first chocolate before tearing open another one and actually biting off a piece. It hurt to chew. Her whole body was aching. A month until opening night, and she wasn't sure she had the stamina to carry it. Six different duets, each of them grueling. Her aching feet throbbed at the mere thought.

She took another piece, letting the taste melt on her tongue before she swallowed. A tub filled to the brim with soothing hot water was just a few minutes away. She simply had to find the strength to get her body up and moving, and face Mateo in the hallway. She'd seen him watch her with those cool onyx eyes. Dark gaze, dark clothes that should have been pretentious yet weren't.

Pushing the thought of him away, Lynn thought about soaking in a tub until her fingers wrinkled. Just a few minutes more. The quick knock on the door made her softly groan. She didn't want to put on a bright face, didn't think she had the strength for it. Another piece of Midnight Dark, as the door swung open.

"I didn't say come in," she muttered with a mouthful of chocolate just as Mateo's gaze focused in on the bag of Ghirardelli's.

“You ready?”

She was too tired to think about it. “I need a couple of minutes more.”

“You tried to get rid of me.” Cool voice, his hands tucked in his pockets. Again her dressing room seemed much too small with him inside.

“I have an alarm set up and there’ve been no more letters.” And at this point she was more nervous around Mateo than some anonymous creep. “I don’t think I need you...” She paused and started over. “I don’t think I need a bodyguard anymore. I can ask Simon to walk me home. Or André.”

“We both know that’s not why you wanted to get rid of me.” Those cool dark eyes were merciless.

“Maybe. It doesn’t matter now.” She didn’t have the strength to shrug. “Give me a few more minutes.”

“Your leg bothering you?”

“It’s fine.” Even her skin was hurting. Only a few more minutes and she could drown in hot water and try to forget she’d have to do it all again tomorrow.

“Why do you do this to yourself?” His voice went soft, nearly soothing.

“Do what?”

“You’re exhausted. You’re in pain. You work like a damned horse.” If she wasn’t mistaken, there was a hint of baffled respect in that gruff tone.

“It’s what I do.” Sometimes she hated it. “I’ve worked for it my whole life.” After the surgery, when she was told there was a chance she wouldn’t dance again, the searing panic had been accompanied by a tiny guilty kernel of relief.

“You ever wanted to do something else?”

Because he already knew her dirty secret, Lynn reached into the bag of chocolates. Since he was here and she didn’t want to leave just yet she offered him a blue-wrapped piece. His fingers brushed over her palm, his touch brief and electrifying. Even through aching muscles, she felt a tiny coiling of heat.

“I never thought about doing anything else.” She was never allowed to. The rich dark taste of chocolate flooded her taste buds. “My family sent me here to dance.”

“Where are your parents now?”

“Still back in Ukraine.” They used to come for every big show. Now, she was lucky if they made it here once in three years. And Aunt Maria was too busy taking care of her ailing mother. Sacrifices. Always sacrifices.

“My mother hated it when I became a cop.” His eyes were distant in the mirror.

“Really?” She hadn’t known he was a cop. She’d slept with him and barely knew him. “You were a policeman?”

He nodded, but didn’t elaborate.

“You miss it?”

“Yeah.” He stood. “Let’s go.”

Discipline had been ingrained in her for years. She stood despite the screaming protests of her muscles, but when he took her bag she didn’t say a thing.

The ride home smelled like cigarettes and leather. The short walk to her door was just a blur.

“Go relax.” Mateo walked in after her as she struggled to remember the alarm code. Not even thinking to protest that he knew the code, Lynn staggered into the bathroom to find hot water bliss.

Warmth seeped into her muscles and had her melting in relief. She didn’t bother with salts or bath bubbles, just sank into the small claw-footed tub and let the water pour over her and soothe the pains.

When he walked in with a glass full of something orange, she didn’t have the energy to hide her body from his gaze.

“You’ll scald yourself.”

“It feels good.”

He sat on the white edge of the tub. Somehow it wasn’t strange having him here. “Drink this.”

Moving her arm was too much effort. “What is it?”

“Orange juice.”

“I’ll drop it.”

He didn’t argue. Instead he brought the glass close to her lips.

“You shouldn’t be in here.” Since the glass was there, nearly touching her lips, she took a long cold sip.

“Tell me to go.” Those onyx eyes challenged her to do just that while she was naked in hot water drinking orange juice.

She didn’t have the energy to flush.

Because it tasted good and all of a sudden she was thirsty, Lynn gulped the juice. “You shouldn’t be here,” she said again and leaned back in the hot and churning water.

When she opened her eyes, he stood holding a huge green towel.

“Why are you doing this?” She sounded like a cranky child. Because of it, she made the effort to stand up and let him drape the towel around her, his movements gentle as he rubbed the moisture off her skin.

“Why are you taking care of me?”

“Somebody has to.” He carried her out of the steam-filled bathroom, his arms strong and secure around her. She didn’t have to pose, to lock her feet, do anything but simply put her forehead on his shoulder and be carried. He laid her face down on the bed.

“I’m too tired for sex games.” Except she felt a low tug of arousal lazily floating in her veins.

Warm palms cradled her feet. “I had another game in mind.” His breath softly caressed her skin.

He pressed a thumb into the aching arch of her left foot, gently but firmly squeezed and rubbed before giving the same treatment to her other foot. They felt tiny inside his hands, dainty and female, and when he pushed to have her flex her toes, she let herself be pampered. Just this once.

His hands continued upward, pressing into the muscles of her calves, the inside of her knees, her thighs. She stiffened when his fingers softly traced over the scar above her knee. Then she felt his lips over it, tracing it, as if soothing it with soft, soft kisses.

Desire coiled harder in her belly.

She didn't want to move, didn't want to burst the moment. Instead she spread her thighs apart and softly said his name. "Mateo."

"Are you sure you want this?"

She wasn't sure about anything except for this. "I am."

In the warm silence, he traced slow open-mouthed kisses over the back of her thighs, moving higher towards her buttocks. His hands were on her calves, stroking the sensitive skin with light teasing caresses.

A shudder rippled through her as his lips touched a tender spot just below her spine, lingered there before continuing the journey upwards, each kiss along her back a sensual delicious touch. Another shiver when he paused between her shoulder blades to lightly scrape his teeth over her skin, then kiss away the tiny sting that added a small edge of pain to the sweetness of pleasure.

His hands tenderly palmed the soft globes of her buttocks before leaving her skin. Foil ripped. Then his weight pressed into her, covering her with warmth, the tip of him probing inside her.

She lifted up her hips and turned her head so she could see them in the mirror, his muscles taut as he loomed over her with his arms on each side of her shoulders, a tiny cross hanging down from his neck.

A soft and shallow penetration. A slow withdrawal so he could start again, pushing in deeper with each stroke, riding her soft and tender, filling her with his body, caressing her with his cock.

"Is this what you want, *preciosa*?"

She fisted her hands in the sheet, as that hard muscled body covered her pale skin.

He slowed his strokes, just pulsed inside her wet slick heat. "Tell me you want this."

"Yes." She couldn't breathe. "I want this."

A slow glide of his cock. "Tell me to fuck you."

"Yes. Do it."

His hands massaged her buttocks, spread them apart so that he could trace a wicked line right on the crease. She shuddered at his touch, watching him in the mirror.

"Tell me to fuck you." Low rough words.

She dragged in liquid air. "Fuck me."

Look, but don't touch...

Veiled Desire

© 2010 Alisha Rai

Leyla Karimi can't keep her eyes off the hunky guy living in the house behind her. How could *any* woman resist ogling Dr. Mason Barrett, especially when he makes it so easy by parading around in his skin and skivvies?

If it was only their age difference, she would have made a move a long time ago. Except Mason is more than a neighbor. He's her baby brother's oldest friend. It's not like they can have a casual fling and walk away in the morning.

Mason's been doing a little lusty—okay a *lot*—for quite some time. When he catches Leyla peeking, it's a sure sign she could finally be ready to heat up his nights with loving. One taste of her lips, though, and he doesn't want a "little" of anything. He wants it all.

Unwilling to jeopardize a lifetime of friendship for a one-night stand, Leyla is reluctant to throw caution to the wind. When he's kissing her senseless, though, it's hard to remember all the reasons why she should hold back...

Warning: Contains a hot hero who doesn't mind baring it all in the name of love, a heroine who doesn't settle for less, a sweet romance, steamy sex in a car and more good lovin' in bed.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Veiled Desire:

As Leyla chewed her last bite, savoring the taste of strawberry, cream cheese and cinnamon, she glanced up to find Mason's gaze on her mouth, his eyes just a bit unfocused. He looked hungry. And since his plate was clean, she figured it wasn't for food.

Her heart rate accelerated. Though she was careful with her love life, she'd received her fair share of admiring looks over the years. She knew what male interest looked like. But...Mason?

Well, why not? Hadn't she spent months wrestling with her attraction and feelings for him? Why wouldn't that desire be reciprocated?

Baby.

Sweetheart.

This is a nice thing to wake up to...

"Why don't you call me Lee-Lee anymore?" she blurted out. Sasha had tagged her with the nickname in childhood. Though her brother had grown out of it, Mason had continued to use it affectionately. But now that she considered it, he had switched to only calling her by her given name for months.

He didn't seem at all startled by her pulling the topic out of thin air. "Because it's a child's name. Neither of us are children, are we?"

She was a bit too rattled to answer. Her heart pounding, she swallowed the lump in her throat and deliberately set her fork to the side. Leyla dipped her finger in the remaining syrup on her plate. His eyes flicked down to follow the lazy figure eight she made and followed her finger back up to her mouth, where she enclosed it and...sucked.

His eyes flared, and he bit his lower lip. Hard.

Oh my. Well, this was very interesting.

Leyla had never considered herself a wilting flower, so as much as she wanted to swoon a little, she stiffened her spine at the obvious signs of desire she was suddenly noting all over him. Dilated eyes, chest rising and falling. Even his nipples were hard.

Want to taste. Then maybe he would reciprocate.

Her head was spinning from the onslaught of the sudden epiphany. Did he just want her for sex? Because that would never work. She wasn't set up to be a fuck buddy. But if he wanted more, did she? What about Sasha? How would her brother react?

Her natural humor kicked in, and she tried to fight the sudden urge to laugh at herself. Sasha had always been the impulsive Karimi, but here she was, ready to go nuts on the basis of a couple of hot looks. Time to slow down and really think about this. He hadn't given her that much encouragement, if she looked at it objectively.

To distract herself, she picked up her plate and stood. "You done?" Without waiting for anything more than his nod, she picked up his empty plate as well and carried them both to the sink. A small pile of dishes had already been gathered there.

As she grabbed the sponge and drizzled some soap on it, she heard the scrape of his chair behind her. "You don't have to do that."

"I don't mind."

"Seriously, leave it."

Trying to diffuse some of her tension, she forced a smile into her voice and made a tsking noise. "Look at all these dirty dishes. You and I both know you'll let these gather until you don't have any other choice. I still have a few minutes, and I'll just—"

Without warning, hard hands closed over her hips, and she dropped the sponge. He swiveled her around. Reaching behind her, he wrenched the water off. "Goddamn it, Leyla. Stop treating me like a kid."

She blinked up at him, stunned at both the anger on his face and the hard tone of his voice. "I'm not."

"You are. I'm not your son, and I'm not your brother. I can do my own fucking dishes."

Her eyes narrowed. "You don't need to swear at me."

He sneered. "Are you going to chastise me for my language now?"

"Someone needs to. You idiot. I certainly don't think I'm your mother."

“Then stop acting like it. You don’t have to clean up after me. You certainly don’t need to do my fu—”

She slapped her hands against his chest. “That’s a nasty swear, Mason. Say it again, and I will make you sorry. I was doing the dishes because you cooked, you ass.”

He stilled. “Do you mind if I use it and I’m not swearing at you?”

“What?”

“Fuck.”

The short, graphic word looked erotic on his full lips. She caught her breath.

“Do you object to the word or the context?”

“The-the context.”

His lips quirked. “I’ll keep that in mind. I apologize. I’m sorry if I overreacted.”

“I’m not your sister,” she blurted out.

“I know that. I’ve known that for a while. The question is, do you know it?”

“Yes.” She realized at that moment that her slightly damp hands were flat against his chest.

His naked, hard, hot chest.

Leyla had never touched him so intimately. Hugs, pecks on the cheek, pats on the back; that was it. The way she’d been raised, males and females who were platonic friends didn’t touch each other inappropriately. Mason knew and respected that.

She couldn’t look at his face. Instead, she studied her hands, so small against the wide expanse of his chest. Her one hand curved over his developed pec. She only had to move just a smidgeon to scrape the nail of her pinky over his nipple.

Then he was growling, a low rumbling noise, using his tight grip on her hips to pull her closer and crowd her against the counter. He shoved one hand into her hair, tilted her head and lowered his lips to hers.

All she could think was that she no longer needed to wonder if he desired her. He didn’t bother with an exploratory foray or gentle teasing. He kissed her as if they’d been kissing for years, as if he had an absolute right to her lips and her mouth. It was hot and carnal, his mouth open on hers, his tongue stroking against hers and inside. When she twined her arms around his neck and sank into him, he made a rough noise and captured the zipper on her hoodie. One quick tug had it undone, and then it was like her shirt just magically undid itself of its buttons for him as well. He pushed it to the side with rough impatience until her breast filled his hand.

When he pinched her nipple, Leyla figured she was pretty much done for. Her breasts were sensitive, but Mason touched her with just the perfect amount of pressure. She arched her back and whimpered into his mouth. God, she wanted more.

He ripped his mouth away and studied her with hot eyes. She knew what she would see if she glanced down at herself right then. Tousled hair, unbuttoned top, her right breast plumped up by his hand, her nipple long and tight. She didn't want to look down at herself. The reality would force her brain back into action. There was a certain comfort and simplicity in letting one's vagina do the talking. "Mason, please..."

Slashes of red crested Mason's high cheekbones. "You're so beautiful." He dipped his head, pulling her nipple into the wet cavern of his mouth.

If she'd thought that Mason knew how to touch a nipple, that was nothing compared to how well he could suck one. He was a freakin' maestro of the nipple, suckling hard and fast, teasing her with light flicks of his tongue. She looked down at his blond head against her skin. Instantly, doubts and worries crept into her mind. She shut her eyes and they faded. She didn't want to think. Just feel.

He drew away from her nipple. "One day, I want to spend just an hour or two sucking your breasts. Will you let me do that?"

What was a girl supposed to say to that? Yes please? She nodded, since she really couldn't think of anything she'd rather have at that moment.

"Good." He flicked his nail against the wet tip of her breast and she shuddered. His eyes narrowed. "Are you close? Already?"

"Mason, I need..."

"Don't worry. I know."



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