

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



TWO WEEK
Trial
MISSY JANE

Two-Week Trial

Missy Jane

Hi. My name is Mari. I'm of average height, average weight, average looks and I hold an average position at Hardy's All Goods, my personal version of retail hell. To sum up, I'm nothing special. So why has Devon Campbell, the city's Most Eligible Bachelor—and my unrequited high-school crush—suddenly crashed back into my life, claiming I'm the one who got away?

Devon can't possibly want to keep me for the long haul, right? My screwed-up past is enough to make anyone run screaming in the opposite direction. Still, he's determined I give him a chance...and I'd be crazy to turn down his offer of a two-week trial.

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Two-Week Trial

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TWO-WEEK TRIAL

Missy Jane

Dedication

To all of my friends in the online writing community: Dustin, you followed me from other sites to Writer's Café, where I found Nichele, Ron, Sandra, Gini, Daniel and Michael. Thank you for taking the time to critique my work. I'm a better writer because of all of you.

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Chapter One

He started with my feet, which I thought really odd as I tried to remember if any guy had ever started with my feet before. Fighting the tickling sensation, I put a lot of thought into it to keep from laughing as he kneaded my toes before lightly licking one. His large, strong hands curled around the arch of each foot, massaging with intimate precision and sending tingles straight to my sex.

Time held no meaning for my lover, as he spent long moments setting my body on fire with his tongue sliding up my shin. His fingers danced across my quivering thighs but avoided the one spot that needed him most. My clit throbbed and desire burned in my veins. He moved over me slowly, massaging, caressing and tasting every inch of skin from my ankles up. Even parts of my body I'd never considered erogenous received a goodly amount of his expert attention.

Within seconds I seemed to melt into a puddle. Oh, it was so damn good! As his warm mouth moved past my knees my mind wandered, thinking of exactly what I could do to him in return once he'd finished. His magic fingers slid through my curls and, to my great disappointment, kept going to my waist. The ache in my moistening pussy made me whimper and I considered begging for release. He moved along my ribs to my breasts, where he finally paused for a minute or two of play. His thorough teasing of my hardening nipples sent a shiver up my spine that made me gasp. I whispered his name, a caress across my lips as sensuous as his fingertips on my skin.

His hands eventually curved around my head, where he threaded my hair through his fingers. He moaned as he sucked my lips into his mouth. His passionate kiss burned through me, straight down to my toes, and seemed to go on forever.

"Oh, Devon," I groaned in utter bliss.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and ran my hands up his well-defined biceps to encircle his neck. I held him captive against me, his thick cock hard against my soft belly. We were both panting, trying to breathe between kisses. I rubbed my body against his, loving the sensation of his warm, sweat-dampened skin as it slid over mine. It was the most erotic moment I'd ever experienced and I didn't want it to end.

But end it did...to the sound of my alarm clock.

"Damn it!"

I knew yelling wouldn't help. It certainly wasn't going to bring my dream guy into reality and make him whole between my legs. If I'd known what could do that, I would've done it two months ago when he'd first appeared on billboards all over town. Unfortunately, I started my day as frustrated as usual as I readied for work. I was dragging and soon running late...again.

Stepping out of my apartment, I considered taking the bus but it was a beautiful morning and walking took about the same amount of time. I decided to stop at the coffee shop, since I was already late, and picked up my usual mocha with a triple shot of espresso. Nothing like too much caffeine to get me through my usual Monday blues, which unfortunately included a staff meeting. I walked in during my manager's recitation on tardiness and received many stares and a few snickers, which I diligently ignored. After the meeting my boss, Sean, held me back with a glare and I knew what was coming.

"Mari, this is the third week in a row you've been late on Monday morning. I think you need to tone down your weekends if you plan on remaining in the realm of the happily employed."

I tried to look properly chastised as I wondered again why he preferred an unflattering military buzz cut. Sean was cute in a man-in-uniform sense, though I'd never seen him in anything but the requisite slacks and polo our store preferred. I wanted to point out to him that "happily" didn't quite cover it but since "employed" did, I simply kept my mouth shut.

“I really hate to have to do this, but we’ve gone beyond the verbal warnings at this point and I’m going to have to write you up.”

I nodded silently, not exactly shocked at what I’d expected the last two times I’d been late. The paperwork took about five minutes and then I rushed off to restock from the weekend. Retail sales. God, how I hate it. Every idiot in creation comes out of the woodwork on the best of days. On the worst... Well, let’s just say sometimes a high-powered rifle sounds like a good accessory to have.

The retail hell I worked in, dubbed Hardy’s All Goods, was located right off the highway, minutes from downtown Houston and all the hustle and bustle of the fourth largest city in the country. Every now and again a high roller would wander through our doors, take a look at the chaos and walk right back out. We didn’t exactly cater to that crowd. We attracted more of a blue-collar clientele, people headed home from work who suddenly remembered they were out of toothpaste or deodorant. During normal working hours, we got to see the stay-at-home moms with drooling babies and rambunctious toddlers who apparently ran the show.

This was my life, day in and day out. Yeah, I know suicide is always an alternative.

On the Monday of my discontent, I was stacking a display of diapers ten minutes before my lunch break when he walked in. No. “Walked” isn’t quite right. Okay, he stalked—glided, waltzed?—into my store and into my life. Maybe blew in like a tornado is a better term, but at the time I didn’t know he was going to send me into a whirlwind of change. I hadn’t seen him in person since high school, but hell, who could miss that face? And that body, those eyes and...did I mention his ass? He was the epitome of manliness, the Romeo to my Juliet, a modern-day Adonis and the most eligible bachelor in town.

Devon Campbell. Six-two, jet-black hair, green eyes and a very athletic body beneath his perfectly tailored suit. His name alone made me break out in a sweat, as well as dampening other parts of my anatomy. The CEO of a local energy company and heir to a virtual dynasty, he was the fantasy man of my erotic dreams and totally out of

my league. He'd been a senior when I was a lowly sophomore at the only school I'd spent an entire year in, but we'd never been friends despite being in a couple of classes together. There'd been one wonderful month of partnering with him for tutoring, but he hadn't seemed to even notice I was female and I'd barely been able to string two words together.

So seeing him make a beeline for me as I knelt on the dirty linoleum floor damn near made me pass out.

He walked up to me with pure confidence in his stride, as if the world was at his beck and call and should be grateful for his presence. I paused in the act of stacking diaper packages and looked up at him, arching an eyebrow in silent question since I'd forgotten how to speak.

"Good morning, do you sell...um...pencils here?" he asked in a wonderfully deep voice that made my knees quiver.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and smiled weakly. Both saddened and relieved at the lack of recognition in his gaze. "Yes, sir, we do. Aisle five," I replied, in an amazingly calm voice.

"Thank you."

He regally swung his head from side to side in an attempt to find said aisle. I took pity on him, knowing damn well the aisles weren't numbered in any obvious way. I stood from my vertically challenged display and motioned him to follow me. We walked in silence, him close on my heels as if afraid of getting lost in the columns of retail hell. Aisle five loomed before us within seconds and I studiously turned, trying not to stumble on jutting merchandise.

"Mechanical or wooden?" I asked, stopping before a wall of pencils in their various incarnations.

"Excuse me?"

I looked up at him from my five-four level and let my plain brown gaze fall into his for a second before remembering my place. “What kind of pencils do you need? Mechanical or wooden?”

He smiled and it lit up his devilishly handsome face, from dimples to perfect brow. My face heated and I quickly looked back at the pencils. Grabbing a package at random—okay, truth be told I grabbed the most expensive ones—I held them out.

“Here, these work well.”

“Really? They all kind of look the same to me.”

I shrugged. “Well, if there’s any truth in advertising, these are the best.”

He laughed, a purely masculine sound that hardened my nipples. His gaze lowered to the offending peaks and I blushed again.

“Truth in advertising, isn’t that an oxymoron?” he asked my breasts, before returning his gaze to mine.

“Um, yeah, usually. Of course, I’ve found my Chia Pet grows just like it shows on the commercials so I guess there’s some hope left.”

He laughed again. “Ah, then you’re definitely experienced enough to appreciate the intricacies of a fine pencil.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “Yes, well, pencil connoisseur that I am, I must again impress upon you the finer points of this particular package in hand. In a word...expensive.”

He laughed loudly at that, even putting a hand on his gut as if it were about to burst. I smiled, even as I wondered if he was laughing at my lame joke or at me.

“That’s great. Absolutely fabulous. I knew coming in here would get me exactly what I needed.”

I smiled and once again held out the pencils. He ignored them and pulled out his wallet.

"I don't know if you remember me from Wilshire High. My name is Devon Campbell," he paused to look at my nametag, "Mari. You've shortened it."

"Uh..."

"Here's my card. I would very much like to take you to dinner tonight. Are you available?"

I took his card numbly, still trying to wrap my mind around the last two sentences out of his mouth. "Dinner? With me?"

"Of course. That is, unless you're...busy?"

He looked pointedly at my left hand and amazingly my brain caught up to the conversation.

"Uh, no... I mean, no I'm not busy. And yes, dinner would be great."

"Wonderful. Call me on the cell number listed at the bottom around six o'clock. You can give me directions to your house and I'll pick you up."

"Okay."

He smiled again and took the pencils from my hand, brushing his fingers against mine and sending my pulse into overdrive.

"Thanks, Mari, see you tonight."

"Okay."

He turned and headed for the registers, whistling as he walked away. A thought hit me and I had a moment of panic.

"Hey! Devon?" I hollered, chasing him at a brisk walk.

"Yes?"

"Where are we going?"

"That's a surprise," he said with a smile.

"What should I wear?"

He took a moment to look me over, starting with my eyes and ever so slowly working his way down my five-four frame. My skin heated at the touch of his gaze as it caressed my body like well-known fingers. Goose bumps broke out on my arms and I knew I was blushing yet again. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"What time does your shift end?"

"F-four o'clock." I don't know how I was able to answer, considering I wasn't even breathing anymore.

"My assistant will pick you up and take you shopping. She'll know exactly what to get."

I opened my mouth to reply, but he'd already turned around and headed off to pay for his pencils. I stood gaping like a fish before remembering I still had a diaper display to finish.

* * * * *

At exactly 3:58 by our time clock, a serious-looking woman in a severe navy business suit walked into the store. She looked to the left then to the right, as if waiting to cross traffic, then headed straight for me. I'd moved from diapers to filling the candy next to the front registers, just finishing as she peered at my nametag.

"Mari, my name is Mrs. Peele. I'm Mr. Campbell's assistant."

"Mrs. Peel? Like *The Avengers*?" I asked with a smile.

She arched an eyebrow, her lips remaining in an expressionless line, and gave me a curt nod. "Is your shift nearly through?"

"Yup, just finished. All I need to do is put the extras in the stockroom and punch out." I quickly gathered the candy boxes and tried to ignore my nervousness. "Be right back," I said over my shoulder as I headed away.

I finished taking care of business and followed Mrs. Peele outside, more than a little shocked to find a black limousine waiting for us as I tried not to gape. We headed straight for town, passing through my neighborhood from the safety of the highway

and the solitude of the darkened windows. My palms were sweaty and my knees were shaking. For the first time I wondered what the hell I was getting myself into. Sure, everyone knew who Devon Campbell was, but I didn't really *know* him and no one knew I was in his car. Suddenly various scenes of kidnapping and torture filled my overactive imagination, none including the fact I was next to worthless in the scheme of things.

We arrived at Neiman Marcus in record time and proceeded to spend a ridiculous amount of money on an outfit I expected to wear once. After all, little black evening dresses weren't really required at any of the clubs I tended to enter on the off chance I actually had a date. Mrs. Peele put me in three-inch heels, in which I had only a little practice, and even went so far as to buy me a nifty black handbag. I wasn't expecting to enter the lingerie department at all, so the black lace thong and strapless bra she picked out damn near gave me a heart attack. I didn't dare complain about any of it; after all, it wasn't *my* money we were spending.

Next, we got our nails done and then I got my hair done. I'd never dared to put my unruly black locks up in a twist, but somehow the hairdresser tamed my shoulder-length mane and did it. I looked almost elegant with a few tendrils falling against my olive skin. By the time we were finished it was well past six o'clock and I wondered if I was still supposed to call Devon. My question was answered when the limo pulled up to a skyscraper in the heart of downtown. It was home to Devon's energy company and the tallest building in Houston I craned my neck to look at all the windows as we walked to the door, and prayed we weren't headed for the top.

We were.

Mrs. Peele dutifully delivered me to a closed office door which stood imposingly in the center of a large foyer. "He's in there, Ms. Hart, expecting you. Go right on in," she said before turning and heading back to the elevator.

I watched her disappear, drew a deep breath and let it out slowly before walking to the door. I was about to turn the knob when movement from the corner of my eye

caught my attention. I glanced that way and realized the black panels on either side of the door were made of glass, and it was my reflection I'd noticed. Hoping Devon wasn't staring at me from the other side, I did a quick inventory. My hair looked great and the black evening dress was perfect. I'd declined Mrs. Peele's offer to have my makeup done because I didn't normally wear it. I wanted to impress Devon but not by acting like someone else.

I smoothed the dress over my flat stomach and trembling thighs. A few guys had said I was too skinny but I didn't look starved. My strict budget kept me thin, but retail stocking toned my muscles. Overall, I felt average. Definitely not the norm for Mr. Devon Campbell.

With a silent word of encouragement I placed my hand on the knob again and opened the door. Devon's office took up the entire western half of the top floor of the building, giving an impressive view of the city below. He stood at a window, watching the sunset as I walked in. He turned around slowly, the last rays of the sun glinting off the glass in his hand.

"Mari," he said a little breathlessly, and I wondered if he was drunk.

"Hello."

"Come here. Watch the sunset with me," he said, holding out his hand.

As I crossed the room I noticed a small table set up with covered dishes and a candle in between. Very romantic and completely out of place in his office. I went to him as if in a daze, placing my hand in his and feeling a tingle of excitement at his touch. He watched me with a hunger in his eyes I'd never seen before in any man. It was exciting and unnerving at the same time. I fought not to fidget under his intense stare.

"I know I said I wanted to take you to dinner, but the more I thought about it, the more the idea of having you here all to myself appealed to me. I hope you don't mind."

It wasn't a question but I answered anyway in the hopes of hiding my nervousness. "Not at all. This is fine."

He turned to stand behind me as I moved closer to the window, inches away from the glass. I could see his reflection watching me intently as I tried to ignore the miniscule cars below. It was an awfully long way down.

"Would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you. I don't really drink much."

"Oh? Well, that's a plus I think."

I smiled and saw his smile reflected back. He walked away and placed his glass on the table, then came back to stand behind me again.

"I love watching the sunset from this room. It's why I work late every day, but don't ever tell anyone. They think I just really like my job." He gave a short laugh as I smiled.

"Your secret's safe with me."

"Is it? Good. And you're safe with me, Mari."

"Oh?"

That oddly timed reassurance made me more nervous as we watched the sun melt behind the buildings before us. We remained silent until the last rays disappeared, then he startled me with a hand on my lower back.

"Hungry?" I nodded even as I wondered if the butterflies in my stomach would let me eat. He gently led me to the table and held out my chair. "I hope you like Thai. It's the closest restaurant and I wanted the food to be warm when you got here."

He uncovered the dishes and I tried not to drool as the delicious scents wafted up to my nose.

"Mmm, it smells really good."

"Their food usually is. I hope you like it."

"Thank you."

He moved his chair closer to me and sat so our knees were touching. I smiled nervously at him and watched as he poured the wine.

"Is this okay? I can go downstairs and get you a soda if you prefer."

"Oh no, this is fine. I've only had wine a couple of times, but I like it."

He grinned and set the bottle back in a silver bucket of ice on the floor. I picked up my fork and started moving food around my plate, hoping he didn't plan to stare at me the whole time. Just as I considered saying that out loud, he began to eat.

The next few minutes were spent eating and remembering our high school days. He'd been much more popular than me, the standard football player with a cheerleader girlfriend. I'd been a nobody who'd blended into the walls. We laughed over our mutual hatred of the Precalculus teacher from hell and compared opinions on classmates. Once the food was gone and I was much more relaxed, he pulled me from my chair and took me back to the windows. The city lights spread out before us like stars and I sighed in contentment at the sight. Devon stepped behind me and I gasped as he suddenly wrapped his arms around my waist. He pressed his face against my hair, pulling me back against his chest.

"God, you smell good," he said, moving his face from my hair to my neck.

My heart sped up and suddenly I had trouble catching my breath. "Devon?"

"Mari, I have a confession to make."

"Oh?" I asked, as panic crept in.

"I used to play with your hair in Speech. Remember how you sat in front of me?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"It was soft and always smelled so good. You never even looked at me so I figured you weren't interested in me at all. I've thought about you a lot over the past few years and finally hired a private investigator to find you."

"What?" I wiggled out of his arms and turned to face him. Even in the dim light he looked completely unrepentant, and I thought he might be joking.

"I'm sorry if that sounds crazy, but I lost track of you after I graduated," he explained calmly.

"I moved a few more times after that."

"Ah, no wonder."

"Why didn't you talk to me before that?"

He simply smiled, his face a mask of innocence. "Well, I wasn't sure you would speak to me."

"Yeah, right. Hello, Most Popular Guy in School, and now that you're the city's Most Eligible Bachelor, what woman wouldn't talk to you? Are you kidding?"

His smile immediately faded. "Is that why you're here now? Because of who I am?"

His voice dropped to a deep growl and I sensed the danger the wrong answer could put me in with him. The last thing I wanted was an abrupt ending to this once-in-a-lifetime evening.

"Well...not because of all this," I said, waving my hand to encompass the room. "I think you're a very good-looking guy, and from the little bits of conversations we've had, you always seemed nice."

The hint of anger faded from his gaze and his lips twitched in the makings of a smile. "Nice?"

"Uh, yeah...nice. Not mean or cruel."

Instead of smiling, his expression blanked into a neutral mask I couldn't decipher. I preferred the smile.

"Hmm, I guess I can live with nice."

I considered questioning his change of tone. He wasn't angry, of that I was almost certain. However, I didn't know what was running through that brilliant mind of his. After a second of mental deliberation, I decided a change of topic might be safer.

"So, why were you searching for me?"

He gave me a mischievous grin and pulled me back into his arms. "Because you're perfect."

"Perfect? No, that must be my evil twin you remember."

He laughed. "You are absolutely adorable. And you have the most perfect mouth I've ever seen."

"Watched any Angelina Jolie movies lately?" He laughed again, and leaned down toward me. "Dev –"

My pulse fluttered from the insistent brush of his mouth against mine. He licked my lower lip and then took both of them between his, sucking and nibbling. I opened my mouth to him and closed my eyes, instantly realizing how inadequate my dreams had been. The real Devon in my arms was so much more. He moved his hands slowly away from my waist as he kissed me, one going up, one going down. Threading his strong fingers into my hair and loosening the twist, he drew my mouth more firmly against his. He spread his right hand across one side of my ass, pulling me against his erection. I let out a moan and was answered by his.

He turned us around, my eyes still firmly shut lest I wake from this fantasy. When he pushed me against a firm surface I went willingly. I opened my eyes as he pulled back long enough to strip off his jacket and tie, dropping them both on the carpet. I gripped the edge of his desk and pulled myself more solidly onto it, spreading my legs to accommodate his body.

"I've wanted you here like this for so long," he said, panting as he took my mouth again.

I ran my hands up his chest, intent on pulling his shirt from his pants, when common sense finally reared its ugly head. I barely knew this guy, regardless of our past, and fantasy man or not, I'd never been a one-night-stand type of girl.

"Devon, wait..."

I panted as he kissed his way down my neck. "What's wrong?"

His eyes were closed as he ran his lips over the tops of my breasts. I briefly wondered how the straps on my dress had come off without my knowledge, before literally shaking my head in an attempt to clear the passion-induced fog.

“Devon, wait!” He must have heard the panic in my voice, because he immediately stopped. His eyes opened and slowly rolled up to look at me, his mouth still on my skin. “I-I’m sorry. I can’t do this.”

Devon straightened and I hopped off his desk, fixing my dress around me as I pushed away from him.

“Mari, what’s wrong?”

I could hear the genuine concern in his voice. He held his hands out but made no attempt to grab me.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t. I know you spent a lot of money on me already and —”

“Screw the money, Mari. I’m not concerned about that. Please, sweetheart. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

I turned my back on him and was heading for the door when his strong hands fell on my shoulders. I froze and unconsciously hunched down a bit. I didn’t mean to. I’d thought the old fears had left me long ago, but Devon must have sensed what I’d tried so diligently to banish for the past five years and he reacted. His hands immediately left me, their absence like a blast of ice water. Swallowing down the tears that immediately threatened, I rushed to the door.

“I’m s-sorry, Mr. Campbell. I have to go.”

I all but ran from his office, not looking back until I’d reached the elevator. I remained alone as I prayed for it to come quickly. There was a limo waiting outside and the driver opened the door as soon as he saw me.

“Miss Hart, Mr. Campbell asks that you allow me to take you home.”

I stood indecisively for a moment, and finally gave in to the urge to look behind me. There was no one there. Devon hadn’t followed me out the door. He’d let me run.

“Miss Hart?”

I looked back at the limo and took a deep breath. I’d already calmed since leaving Devon’s office and his overpowering presence. “Okay.”

I sat alone in the luxurious space, fighting tears as hated memories poured through my mind. Living with bad foster families most of my life had taught me a sense of survival no child should have to learn. Thankfully I'd never been raped, but had gotten so close a time or two it still gave me nightmares. Large men often frightened me, regardless of how well I got to know them, and Devon was an ex-football player who still kept in shape. My heart tried to tell me he would never hurt me that way, but trust was something I never gave freely.

The ride home passed without my notice and soon we were pulling to a stop outside my apartment. I wondered briefly how the driver knew my address without my input, but then decided it really didn't matter. Obviously Devon's resources were very good. It would've only taken a few hours before he knew all about me and just how screwed up I really am.

I wondered if he'd still want me and cried myself to sleep that night, after consoling myself with triple-chocolate ice cream with whipped cream on top.

Chapter Two

The next morning I woke to the sound of knocking at my front door. It took a minute for the fog of sleep to clear and humiliating memories to return. I felt like I'd been run over by a dump truck and probably looked about the same. Wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt, panties and my ratty bunny slippers, I trudged to the front door.

My normally cautious self should've had me looking through the peephole before turning the knob. Unfortunately, the lack of sleep affected my judgment and the pounding on the door began to match the drumbeat in my head. I yanked the door open with no other thought than to stop the noise and immediately shut my eyes against the bright sun.

For a moment there was complete silence. I put a hand to my head and took a deep breath before opening my eyes to see the spectacle on my doorstep. I quickly shut my eyes again, rubbed them vigorously and reopened them. Nothing had changed.

Devon stood before me with a dozen long-stemmed white roses in hand, his black stretch limo sitting in the parking lot.

"Good morning, Mari, sorry I woke you. Um...can I come in?"

I looked up at him and the wary look of insecurity on his face melted my reservations. He stood there as stunningly sexy in jeans and a t-shirt molded to his muscular frame as he'd been in his designer suit. For a moment I was speechless. Then I realized my silence upset him. His perfect lips turned down and a line creased his handsome forehead. I didn't trust my voice not to croak, so I simply nodded and stepped back to let him in.

A knee-melting smile broke out on his face as he stepped past me into my apartment. He looked around the confined space as I closed the door. I was tempted to

avoid his gaze when he turned to face me, but told myself five years ago I was finished being a coward – and last night I'd caved. This morning I had something to prove.

"So, you found me," I said to break the silence.

"Yeah." He let out a breath and held out the roses. "I brought these for you. Please, tell me you're not allergic."

I frowned at the slight grin on his face. "Thank you, and no. I'm not allergic to anything that I know of."

"That's good to know. So, this is your place. I like it, it's..."

"Small, barren, depressing –"

"I was going to say homey," he replied quickly.

I just shrugged, taking the flowers from him and heading to my miniscule kitchen. I didn't own a vase, but a large plastic cup proved capable of holding the roses after I'd shortened the stems. I placed them on my kitchen counter and turned back to face Devon. He'd made himself comfortable on my secondhand loveseat. It had a sheet thrown over it to hide a few cigarette burns from its previous owner. He looked so at ease in my little apartment, as if he sat in such shabby settings every day. I, of course, knew better. His house – can you say mansion? – had been photographed by more than a few magazines. I'd longingly flipped through some of them while in the checkout line.

I walked slowly toward him, suddenly nervous of being too close. He smiled up at me and patted the space beside him, which looked way too small. I swallowed the lump in my throat and sat down. The sensation of his denim-clad thigh against my bare skin was exciting and frightening at the same time. I would've jumped right back up if he hadn't thrown his arm around my shoulders.

"So does this mean I'm forgiven?"

For a moment my mind went blank. Forgiven? Him? Wasn't I the one who'd screwed up yesterday? Didn't I run out on him? He must've taken my silence as indecision of a different sort as he frowned again and shook his head.

"I'm so sorry, Mari. I didn't mean to scare you. I told myself to go slow, really I did, but you have no idea the effect you have on me. Hell, it's killing me to just sit here with you and not ravish you senseless."

"Oh," I squeaked, my shoulders tensing beneath his hand.

He pulled his arm back enough to run the tips of his fingers across the nape of my neck, sending a delicious shiver up my spine.

"I swear I would never hurt you. I know we don't know each other well but, please, just tell me how to earn your trust."

I relaxed the slightest bit. It wasn't that I feared Devon, not really. He wasn't a cruel or mean man, just the opposite. I've always been an excellent judge of character, and I knew he was trustworthy. The problem was in trusting *anyone* at this point in my life. If Devon had researched my background, he would know I had insecurities. He'd know I'd been completely alone for a long time.

"I know I can trust you, Devon. At least I think I can, right now while this is new and we're just starting to learn about each other. But I'm not the same person I was in high school. What about later, in a few weeks when the novelty wears off and you grow bored?"

I could tell by the look in his eyes that I'd royally screwed up, but I wasn't sure how. He seemed more than offended, as if I'd just slapped him and called his honor into question at the same time. I guess in a sense I had. He pulled his arm from my shoulders slowly and stood. I fought the urge to grab his arm, knowing his departure would be for the best. Devon Campbell was so far out of my league I should've gotten a nosebleed just from thinking about him. I sighed in resignation as he walked away.

He stopped halfway to my door and abruptly turned back to face me. I looked up as he approached and opened my mouth to speak when he pivoted again. I suddenly realized he was pacing and had the insane urge to giggle. I slapped a hand over my mouth and watched him walk back and forth, a thoughtful expression on his handsome face.

He was on his fourth rotation when the fascination finally ended for me and I stood to intercept him. My carpet was hardly new. Frantic pacing was certainly more than it could handle. He stopped and we spoke at the same time.

“Devon—”

“Who was the last guy you spent more than two weeks with?”

I shut my mouth on the rest of my plea as I considered his question. No one came readily to mind.

“Exactly,” he exclaimed as if I’d answered, pointing a finger in my direction for emphasis.

“Devon, what does it matter?”

“It matters because you don’t want to give me a chance. Sweetheart, why are you assuming I’d grow bored with you? What makes you think this is a passing thing?”

I huffed out a breath in annoyance and put my hands on my hips. “We haven’t seen each other in years and even back then we weren’t exactly friends.”

“I swear I never forgot you. I’ll admit I didn’t start looking for you right away. Between getting my degree and helping my father and uncle start the business, I didn’t have much time for a social life. By the time things settled into a normal pace it took a little while for me to know where to begin. But you’ve never been far from my thoughts and now that I’ve found you, I’m not ready to give up. Why can’t you give this a chance?”

I shrugged my shoulders and slumped back onto my sofa, wrapping my arms around my waist. Devon approached slowly and knelt before me, placing his hands on my bare knees. I stifled a gasp at the sensation and tried to ignore the fact that I was nearly naked.

“Just try, Mari. Give me those two weeks. If I can’t prove to you that you’re special to me, that I want you in my life for as long as you’ll stay, then I’ll leave you alone. I promise.”

Tears welled up in my eyes and I fought them diligently. The last thing I wanted was for him to see me cry. How could I tell him that I already knew I wasn't special? No one ever wanted me for very long. I'd learned that as a child when my mom abandoned me to follow her ex-boyfriend. Devon cupped my face in his hands and slowly pulled me toward him as he leaned forward. I closed my eyes as his warm lips brushed against mine.

There was so much tenderness in his kiss I actually began to feel special, cherished. I leaned into him and wrapped my arms around his neck. His kiss was as potent as before, but no longer rushed. He took his time, licking my top lip then the bottom before slipping his tongue inside my mouth. I opened my legs to make room for his body and he pulled me to the edge of the sofa. I expected his hands to wander as before but he kept them on my back, just holding me to his chest. I moaned at the taste of him and he pulled away, resting his forehead against mine.

"Mari," he whispered, and it sounded like a plea. I didn't know what to think or do at this point. I wanted him with me so badly, but I was still afraid of the consequences. This man could shatter my heart by barely trying, of that I had no doubt. "Mari, sweetheart, please. Two weeks, just promise to give me two weeks of your time and I swear you won't regret it."

I closed my eyes and seriously considered what could happen in two weeks. Devon probably didn't know I'd never had a steady boyfriend. After my mom left when I was ten, I went into the system until they spit me out without ceremony on my eighteenth birthday. I was completely alone and, despite my best efforts, scared. I'd survived the best I could, but trusting people to stay for the long haul wasn't something I was used to. I didn't even have any longtime friends, just acquaintances who knew only the basics about me.

"Mari?"

I opened my eyes and raised my head to find myself staring into his mesmerizing emerald gaze. "Why do you even want me, Devon? I'm no one."

He frowned and withdrew his hands from my back, making me feel cold and exposed. I pulled my arms back to allow his escape even though everything in me screamed to hold him tight. I thought he would leave but, as before, he surprised me. He cupped my face in his hands and stared into my eyes with a look of determination on his face.

“Maricela, I know you don’t realize how special you are, but trust me when I say I do. I’ve spent the last month trying to work up the nerve to approach you, trying to decide what to say to not scare you off. I guess I didn’t do a very good job,” he said with a little laugh. “But I’ve wanted to know you since the first moment I saw you walk into class. I think you’re gorgeous and smart. Even with the little time we’ve spent together I know I want to be near you as much as possible. Please, just give me a chance. If it doesn’t work out I’ll admit defeat and leave you alone, okay?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and closed my eyes. What he asked for didn’t sound unreasonable. Two weeks wasn’t very long in the scheme of things. Surely I could guard my heart for that length of time, and once he realized he didn’t want me it would be back to normal.

Yeah right. I couldn’t find my voice, so I just nodded. He pulled me into his arms and hugged me fiercely.

“You won’t regret it. I swear.”

I hoped he was right, and decided to just go with the flow...even if it killed me.

* * * * *

Devon wanted to spend the day with me but I had to work. I was tempted to call in sick but after being written up the day before, decided against it. He waited patiently in my living room as I showered and got ready, then took me to breakfast at a restaurant in town I’d never heard of. I was embarrassed to walk in wearing my uniform, a dark blue polo and black slacks, but he didn’t even blink. Devon threw his arm around my waist and walked me to our table like we were royalty. I swear everyone was staring.

“Do you like your job?”

I took my gaze from the menu long enough to look up at his question. “As much as anyone in retail I guess.”

He laughed, the deep, masculine sound reverberating through my system. I wanted to spend the entire time just staring at him but I refrained. Barely.

“I’ll take that to mean not very much. Believe it or not I once worked in retail. I didn’t last a month.” He snorted and shook his head at the memory.

I arched a brow in curiosity. “Oh really? Where did you work, one of those high-end department stores? Or perhaps a golf specialty store?”

He stopped laughing and looked serious for a moment. I suddenly realized how bitter I’d sounded and reddened in embarrassment. I looked away, but he reached across the table and turned my head back with a finger on my chin.

“You seem to have a few preconceived notions about me that simply aren’t true. I don’t come from old money. Everything I have I’ve earned, right alongside my father and uncle. We built our company from the bottom up.”

I swallowed and met his gaze. “I’m sorry. That was rude of me.”

He released my chin to run the backs of his fingers down the side of my face. “Not a problem, sweetheart. I just don’t want you making me out to be something I’m not. Especially if you’re going to use it as an excuse to run away from me again. I’ll give you all the space and time you need but I expect you to give me a fair chance. No preconceived notions or misperceptions based on rumors and magazine articles. Agreed?”

“Do you promise to be honest?”

He grinned. “Absolutely. But it’s still up to you to give me the benefit of the doubt. All the honesty in the world won’t matter if you refuse to believe it.”

I nodded and was saved from further comment by the arrival of our drinks. We placed our orders and then passed the time talking about terrible bosses.

“My manager, Sean, is all right I guess. He’s an ex-Marine and sometimes I think he forgets that the rest of us weren’t in the military with him. I swear that man is the biggest neat freak – and you’ve seen the store. Can you imagine being able to keep that place clean and organized for even an hour?”

Devon shook his head before taking a sip of coffee. “Sounds like my uncle. He and my dad were both in the army. I don’t remember my dad ever being like that, but my uncle never married and doesn’t have kids. He seems to forget sometimes that we didn’t all get that training.”

Our food arrived and I glanced at my watch. I decided not to worry too much about the time and enjoyed the meal. We ate and talked about ourselves. Devon started by telling me about his childhood and life in the Campbell household amongst his many siblings. I was fascinated. I’d forgotten he had such a large family. He talked about each of his three sisters and four brothers with love in his voice. I sat transfixed by his enthusiasm. He was third from the youngest and the most successful professionally. It didn’t sound as if there was anything more than friendly competition between any of them and I envied their closeness.

“Why didn’t anyone else get into the family business?”

He swallowed a sip of juice and appeared to think it over. “Well, my older siblings were already establishing or established in their chosen careers by the time we got started. My uncle had been talking about it for years, but it wasn’t until I was in college that my dad got on board. With my degree in business management, I was able to help them with a lot of the beginning stages in getting the company started. I liked what I saw and decided to stick with it.” He shrugged and picked up his napkin. “Who knows, maybe my younger brother and sister will eventually join us.”

I watched him dab at his mouth and tried to imagine having such a large family. “They sound really great. Your family, I mean.”

“Yeah, they are. I’d do anything for them, and they for me. We’ve always been really close, but the best thing about getting my own place was not having to wait in

line for the bathroom.” He grinned and it made me smile. “The first night in my apartment I took a bath for an hour and a half. Then I called my little sister and told her about it. She cussed me out.”

We both laughed.

“I don’t blame her. Shame on you for rubbing it in.”

His grin was completely unrepentant and I shook my head. A comfortable silence lingered for a couple of minutes as we ate.

I sensed him watching as I picked at the eggs on my plate. “What about you? Tell me about your family.”

I looked up in surprise then frowned at him suspiciously. “I thought you’d hired a detective to learn about me.”

He looked cautious, which only upped my suspicion.

“Well, yeah I did, but he really didn’t get much. I know you were in the foster care system until your eighteenth birthday, but no details. No one I hung out with at school seemed to know much about you either. Do you want to talk about it?”

I looked away and drummed my fingers on the table, indecision churning in my gut. Did I want to talk about it? Did I want to tell this wonderful, amazing man about my boring and depressing life? I considered exactly what to say, knowing he wouldn’t accept silence as an answer. I cleared my throat.

“Well, I haven’t seen my parents since I was small. As far as I know I’m an only child. And I’ve never met any other members of my family.”

I sensed his stare as I drank my coffee, taking a deep interest in studying the bottom of the cup.

“Oh. Hmm. Well, I guess I don’t have to be worried about impressing your parents then, eh? Whew, that’s a load off.”

I glanced up into his smiling face and couldn't help but laugh. I shook my head, amazed that he'd said just the right thing to ease my tension. "Nope. You just have me to impress."

He took my hand from the table and raised it to his lips, placing a kiss in the center of my palm. Then he looked me in the eyes.

"I plan on it, sweetheart. Don't doubt it for a moment."

I shivered and pulled my hand back slowly. He was still watching me when I started eating again.

* * * * *

We finished our breakfast and headed for my store. I couldn't imagine what everyone would think when they saw me step out of his limo. He laughed when I told him and offered the use of it anytime. I grinned at the idea of going to my blue-collar job in such style. The parking lot was nearly empty when we arrived and Devon had his driver pull up to the front doors.

"Do you get a lunch break?" he asked as I moved away from him to reach the open door.

"Just thirty minutes. I usually get something out of the vending machine."

He made a face to show what he thought of that idea and I laughed.

"Do you know what time you'll be going today?"

"No. I'm closing so I'll be last. Maybe seven?"

"Can you call me later and tell me for sure? Give me about an hour and I'll bring you a real dinner."

I stopped at the edge of the seat with one leg out the door and looked back at him over my shoulder. "You don't have to do that, Devon."

He slid across the bench seat until his thigh touched mine. "I want to, Mari. Please, let me bring you dinner."

I couldn't stop the smile that bloomed from his simple request. He smiled back and gently grasped the back of my head. He kissed me slowly and I leaned into him until I heard someone outside clear their throat loudly. I jerked away from Devon and looked out the door. Sean stood on the sidewalk with his arms crossed, tapping a foot impatiently as he glanced at his watch.

"What time does your shift start?" Devon whispered in my ear. He then took the lobe between his teeth and I almost couldn't answer.

"T-twelve thirty," I replied with a shiver.

"Well, it's twelve twenty-two. I get you for another eight minutes."

He pulled me fully back inside the limo and proceeded to kiss me senseless. I thought I heard his driver chuckle.

I walked into the store at exactly twelve twenty-nine and noticed Sean pacing across the front of the store. I hustled to the time clock. Everyone watched me. I pasted on a big smile and pretended I didn't care. Sean looked really angry, but since I wasn't late I had no clue why and chose to ignore him. He usually talked to me at different times during the day about inventory or even just to ask how I was doing. I didn't see him the rest of the afternoon and vaguely wondered what his problem could be.

Sean was an enigma a few of the women I worked with kept trying to decipher. As an ex-military man, he came off as strict and straitlaced, rarely smiling or joking around with anyone. He kept in shape and I'd admired his broad-shouldered, muscular build many times, but for some reason he'd never appealed to me as dating material. I'd flirted with him a little in the first few weeks of my employment, but the fascination wore off and we lapsed into our current relationship. He was my manager and demanded respect. I was the lowly employee and did what he said without arguing. I'd bitched behind his back sometimes but for the most part, we got along. I'd never expected that to change.

The afternoon dragged on endlessly and I called Devon to let him know I would have a late lunch break. The store closed at ten, but Sean wasn't going to let me eat until eight. I was pissed but refused to show it. Devon didn't seem to mind.

"Eight? That's perfect, sweetheart. I'll be in the parking lot. Just come outside after you clock out and we'll eat in the limo."

His deep, sexy voice sounded more intimate by phone and I blushed to the roots of my hair, but somehow kept my voice steady. "You really don't have to do this, Devon. It's kind of late for dinner."

He chuckled and my nipples hardened.

"Not at all. It will be my pleasure."

"All right. See you then."

"Bye, baby, think about me."

I laughed and hung up the phone. Like I could possibly keep from thinking about him.

He was in my thoughts all evening, but at 7:58, the oldest man on earth stepped up to my register and started unloading his basket onto the conveyor belt. I huffed out a breath and looked up to see if my "Ten Items or Less" sign was lit. It was. He didn't seem to notice as he placed all twenty-two items on the conveyor as slowly as possible. I ground my teeth in frustration, but flashed him a friendly smile when he looked up.

Four minutes later he started arguing with me over the price of his toilet paper. I had to wait two minutes for Sean to arrive with the ad to straighten it out. I waited another full minute for the man to find his coupons and three for him to straighten and hand them to me. He took two more minutes to gather his money. I walked around the counter and loaded his bags into his cart, telling the lady behind him I was closed. Apparently my light being turned off wasn't enough of a sign.

It was 8:17, when I told Sean I was taking my lunch break. He looked at his watch and shook his head.

“Karla leaves at eight thirty and she’s already counting down. You should’ve gone at eight like you were supposed to.”

I just stared at him for a second, convinced he was joking. He stared right back and didn’t crack a smile.

“Sean, I had a customer. I just finished and haven’t had a break all day.”

He shrugged and turned away. “Sorry, Mari. Looks like you’re not getting one today.”

I gasped and took a step forward, intent on grabbing him by the arm—or possibly neck—so I could argue my point. My forward motion was stopped by strong arms around my waist. I grabbed them and looked over my shoulder.

“Let it go, baby. That asshole’s just itching to fire you. I know his type.”

The concern in Devon’s eyes and voice drained the ire right out of me. I relaxed into him and he held me for a moment, placing a quick kiss on my temple.

“I’m so sorry. I hope you didn’t go through a lot of trouble for nothing.”

He grinned and let me go, walking over to my lane and leaning on the check-writing counter. I took my place behind the register and turned my light back on. Luckily there were only a couple of customers in the store and they were still wandering around. I took in Devon’s appearance and sighed in admiration. He still wore jeans, but now sported a white button-up shirt with long sleeves and a silk tie. The emerald strip brought out his eyes.

“No trouble at all, sweetheart. I just hate that you’ve gone all day without eating.”

I let out a humorless chuckle. “Certainly not the first time.”

He arched a brow in question, but a customer walked up and he moved away. I expected him to leave while I checked out the lady with the overflowing basket. He shocked me by not only staying, but helping her unload her basket and engaging us both in conversation as I rang her up. She walked away with a smile on her face.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said quietly.

The smile faded from Devon's face and he leaned over the counter. "Will you get in trouble?"

"No."

"Do you mind me being here?"

"No," I said quickly.

His smile returned and he shrugged. "Then I'm staying. I don't have anywhere else I need to be."

I bit my lip nervously and looked away from the intensity of his gaze for a moment before turning back. "Surely there's somewhere else you'd rather be."

He looked into my eyes for a moment before dropping his gaze slowly down my body. The intense look made me shiver. He shook his head.

"No. Not at this moment there isn't."

I looked away and caught Sean watching us from a few aisles over. He stood with his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face. He was actually a bit intimidating, with a look in his eyes I'd never seen before, and I knew I'd have to find out what was wrong with him soon. I frowned when he abruptly turned away once he saw me notice him.

"I wish I knew what his damn problem is."

I hadn't realized Devon heard me until he responded. "Who?"

"Sean. He was watching us and he looked pissed." Devon chuckled, drawing my attention back to him. "What's so funny?"

He looked surprised by the question and narrowed his eyes, looking at me warily. When he opened his mouth to respond, a group of teenagers walked up with a cart full of junk food. Devon stepped out of their way but remained close while I rang them up.

For the next hour I had one customer after another. Devon alternated between bagging groceries and reading the magazines next to my register. I tried to ignore his presence and do my job but it wasn't easy. Most of my female customers had the same problem.

The rush finally ended and Devon returned to lean against my check-writing stand. I smiled at him and straightened the coupons in my drawer.

"You really don't know, do you?" he asked.

I frowned and tried to remember what we'd been talking about. "Know what?"

"If I had a beautiful woman working close to me every day, then some other guy started hanging around, I'd be pissed too."

Oh yeah. We were talking about Sean. I laughed and put the straightened coupons away before grabbing a paper towel to wipe down my conveyor belt. "Right. Sean has absolutely no interest in me other than my work ethic. We get along okay, but don't really talk about anything but the job."

Devon actually snorted. "I can't believe you haven't noticed the way he looks at you."

Grabbing a spray bottle, I cleaned the conveyor more vigorously than needed, trying to think of a way to change the subject. Sean was only a couple of years older than me but he'd always seemed older because of his attitude. I'd been mildly attracted to him until the first time he'd bitched me out about something stupid. Now we had a precarious pseudo-friendship and I just tried to stay out of his way.

"You're crazy. Just because *you* think I'm okay doesn't mean any other man does."

Devon's shadow fell over me as he leaned across the counter and lifted my chin with his fingers until I was looking at him.

"Baby, I think you're much more than okay. That sweet innocence you wear like a gown makes you even more beautiful. I know you didn't notice, but every man in the restaurant this morning was looking at you with the same hunger Sean does. Honestly, it was starting to piss me off. The only thing that kept me from putting you on my lap so they'd know you were with me was how oblivious you acted."

I bit my lip and he dropped his gaze to my mouth. He swallowed and seemed about to lean in to kiss me when Sean walked up.

"Sir, the store closes in five minutes."

I jerked back from Devon in surprise, embarrassed and worried about the anger in Sean's low tone. Devon stood slowly, keeping his eyes on me. Once he'd straightened to his full height, he turned his attention to Sean, who stood a few feet away.

I looked between the two men, marveling at their physical differences. Sean was shorter than Devon and a couple of inches taller than me. His short blond hair was a huge contrast to Devon's thick, dark locks. Without the height difference, their builds were eerily similar and I marveled that Sean had never made my pulse race like Devon. As if hearing my thoughts, Sean's blue-eyed gaze watched me intently while he studiously ignored Devon.

"Mari, are you done cleaning?"

I swallowed and put down the spray bottle. "Yes, sir."

"Load your rejects in a handbasket and put them away after you count down."

He abruptly turned and walked away as I seethed in silent anger.

"Jerk. Rejects aren't my damn job. The morning shift always takes care of them."

Devon smiled in encouragement as he handed me a basket. I tried to smile back as I took the discarded items left all around my area and tossed them into it.

"There are still a few customers in the store. I'll put those things away while you ring up the stragglers."

I looked up in surprise. "You don't have to do that."

His gaze turned serious. "Hell yeah I do. I want you to myself at some point tonight, and I'll be damned if I'll let that asshole keep you here any later than absolutely necessary."

He took the basket with a wink and walked away as customers started shuffling toward me. I watched his ass in those snug jeans and sighed. This was going to be the longest five minutes of my life.

Chapter Three

Thirty minutes later I was finally walking out of the store, agitated as hell. Sean had used every excuse possible to drag his feet after I'd counted down and prepared to leave. I had to stand by as he locked the door, moving slower than I'd ever seen him. I tried not to do or say anything that might piss him off but my patience was long gone and I started tapping my foot. He finished with the lock and turned to face me, crossing his arms against his chest and drawing my gaze to his bulging biceps.

"You know he's just using you, right?"

I frowned and took a step back, shocked by the statement and vehemence in his voice. He might be a hard-ass for policy and procedure but most of the time Sean could be pretty easy going.

"What are you talking about?"

He glanced pointedly at the limo waiting patiently behind me and then looked back into my eyes. "Devon Campbell is a notorious ladies' man, Mari. Surely you've read the articles about him. He'll keep you long enough to entertain himself but then he'll kick you to the curb without a second thought."

I swallowed hard as my usual insecurities tried to surface. I knew I wasn't good enough for Devon, but it hurt for Sean to point it out too. "It's just dinner. There's nothing serious between us. We went to school together."

I'd looked away when I answered, but as I turned back I thought I saw relief on Sean's face. It was gone so quickly I wasn't sure, but he was no longer frowning as he lowered his arms and put his hands in his pockets.

"Good. That's good, Mari. Look, I know we're not exactly friends, but I've also noticed you don't seem to have any close friends. I just want you to be careful, okay? If you need someone to talk to...I'm here."

He took a step closer and I tried to think of an appropriate response when I heard footsteps behind me. Warmth flooded me when Devon's hands rested on my shoulders.

"Everything all right here?"

I smiled up at him over my shoulder. The casual tone of his voice didn't hide the scowl on his face as he stared Sean down. I looked between the two men, again noticing their differences. Sean's confident stance of a few seconds ago had melted into a tired imitation. His shoulders had dropped the slightest bit but his facial expression remained neutral. He met Devon's stare evenly.

"Yeah, fine. Just locking up." He turned his gaze to me. "Goodnight, Mari. See you tomorrow morning."

I frowned and shook my head. "I'm off tomorrow."

He turned to leave, but halted at my response and looked back at me with an unreadable expression. "You are?"

His surprise annoyed me since he wrote the damn schedule. I simply nodded and turned away from him, suddenly exhausted and more than ready to leave. Devon put his arm around my shoulders and steered me toward his limo.

"Uh...okay then. See you Thursday," Sean called out.

Devon remained silent as he helped me into the limo. The lingering scent of Italian food met me and my stomach growled loudly. I turned away in embarrassment as Devon slid onto the seat and shut the door. He chuckled and moved toward me.

"Hungry? The food is probably cold by now."

I gave a weak smile and shrugged as the car began to move. "That's okay. I don't like my food very hot anyway."

He smiled back and reached across to the opposite seat, where two covered dishes sat waiting. As he removed the lids the scent increased, making my stomach growl again. I slapped a hand over my abdomen. Devon moved the dishes around before grabbing my waist and pulling me onto his lap.

"Devon, what are you doing?"

"Holding you, baby. I'll feed you breadsticks until we get to your place. I think Italian might be a little too messy to eat on the move."

I leaned into his chest. He held a breadstick up to my mouth and I took a small, tentative bite. It was delicious. I couldn't help the sound of pleasure that escaped. Devon seemed transfixed by the movement of my lips as I chewed and his attention made me nervous. I swallowed and looked up at him.

"That's really good," I said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I'll have to taste for myself." Rather than taking a bite of the breadstick as I'd expected, Devon leaned down and slowly licked my lips. "Mmm, that *is* good. But I think I need a better taste."

He tossed the breadstick back onto the platter and pulled me closer, taking over my mouth in an all-consuming kiss. I melted while he plundered and all coherent thought fled. He turned me around and before I knew it, I was straddling him. From the feel of the erection pushing against his zipper, his body seemed very happy about the new position and I was tempted to rub against the hardened length. He held the back of my head with one hand and my ass with the other. A slip of paper wouldn't have fit between us and I couldn't remember why I'd thought this was a bad idea. Just as I was considering sliding my hands beneath his shirt, he pulled back and looked into my eyes.

"We're at your apartment. Can I come in for dinner?"

"Huh?"

The thoughts swirling through my mind had nothing to do with dinner. Devon grinned as if he'd realized that and slowly let go of me.

"We're here. The car stopped."

I frowned and looked out the window as he eased me off his lap and back onto the seat. The door suddenly opened and I saw the familiar sidewalk in front of my apartment. "Oh. We're here."

Devon grinned and got out of the car. He leaned back in and reached out his hand. I took it without a second thought and he pulled me out of the limo.

"I'll get the food while you unlock the door."

Nodding, I walked to the door in a lust-filled daze. My keys were in my pocket but it took a few seconds to pull them out. I looked down at myself and realized my clothes were in disarray. I hastily straightened them then stepped into my apartment.

Devon's deep voice drifted through the open door as he spoke to his driver and I walked into the kitchen. All I had to drink was milk or water, and it embarrassed me. Devon was probably used to wine or, at the least, beer. But I wasn't a drinker in any sense of the word.

The door closed and I heard him turn the lock. I considered looking out the window to make sure the limo still sat waiting but didn't want to seem rude. My body wanted Devon to stay the night, but my brain said "no way". My fragile heart remained confused.

"Are you all right?"

I looked up into his wonderful green eyes. Was I all right? The question was harder than it should've been and made tears burn the back of my throat. I shrugged as I fought them. "Um, yeah. I'm fine."

Devon set the food on my coffee table and stood beside the sofa looking uncertain. I hated that look. On him it seemed so foreign. It had been awhile but I remembered his self-confident grin from years ago, and it was plastered all over the billboards advertising his company. Seeing him without it seemed a crime.

"If you want, we can eat right from the serving dishes," he said quietly.

I smiled and hoped it didn't look as forced as it felt. He seemed to relax a bit and walked toward me, making my heart race.

"I only have milk or water," I mumbled.

He reached me and, just as I would've turned away, gently grasped my chin and planted a quick kiss on my lips. "Perfect. I'll take milk, please."

As soon as he released me, I busied myself getting our glasses of milk. I heard him behind me, arranging the serving dishes on my scuffed coffee table, and became a bit overwhelmed at having him in my apartment for dinner.

"Need help?"

His voice in my ear warmed me from head to toe even as a chill slid down my spine. I took a deep breath and shook my head before putting the milk jug back in the refrigerator.

"I've got it. You can sit down."

I turned with two full plastic cups in my hands to find him standing right behind me, a heated look in his eyes. He smiled and I couldn't help but smile back.

"I'll take those."

He took the cups from my hands and went to the sofa. I admired the view from behind as he bent over to put down our drinks.

"Thanks."

"No problem, sweetheart. Ready to eat now?"

"Sure."

Despite my reservations and the butterflies playing kickball in my stomach, I ate nearly every bit of my lasagna. I'd taken a seat on the floor, facing him from the other side of the coffee table, and he'd frowned. However, I knew the loveseat was too small for me to eat comfortably beside him, his leg rubbing against mine. I would've been self-conscious the whole time.

"I guess you liked it?"

I looked up from practically licking my plate to find an amused grin on Devon's handsome face. I smiled back and nodded. "It was delicious. Thank you."

"You're very welcome. I'm sorry it wasn't exactly fresh from the oven."

"No, it was perfect. I can't remember the last time I had Italian from a restaurant. I buy the frozen dinners sometimes but it's just not the same."

He frowned before quickly looking away and I felt kind of stupid for saying that. Devon probably ate out every night.

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed it," he said quietly. I stood and began to clean up but he stopped me with a hand on my wrist. "I'll just toss them in the bag. I promised the restaurant owner I'd take them back in the morning without attempting to wash his precious dishes."

"He let you?"

"Oh yeah. He's a good friend of my father's."

He smiled again and pulled me around the coffee table toward him. I decided not to resist and tried to think of something safe to talk about.

"Um, would you like some more milk?"

"No, but I would like more Mari."

I giggled as he pulled me onto his lap. "Dev—"

Once again, he silenced me with a kiss. It was just as mind-blowing as the others but I knew we treaded on dangerous ground. There was nothing to stop us this time. No time clock or driver, nothing but my vague sense of propriety and it was shaky at best. He kept his hands on my waist as he suckled my lower lip before switching to the top. I gripped his shoulders, knowing I should stop him but completely helpless to do so. He nibbled a path down my chin to my neck, and then back up my jawline to my ear.

"What are you doing tomorrow?"

It took a few seconds for me to realize he'd asked me a question. "What? Uh, tomorrow?"

"Yeah. You said you're off tomorrow?"

"Mmm, yeah I am. No plans yet."

I kneaded his shoulders before running my hands down his muscular back. He pulled me closer.

"Spend the day with me...please?"

I started panting as he kissed the sensitive spot behind my ear. "D-don't you have to work? Oh God, Devon."

He groaned and pulled away slowly to look at me. "I haven't taken a day of vacation in two years. I think I'm due."

"Oh, uh...okay."

"Actually, I went ahead and took the next two weeks off."

"W-what?" I fought the seed of panic that tried to bloom as he continued kissing me. After all, just because he was taking two weeks off didn't mean it was just for me.

"I want to spend every free minute with you."

Oh. Crap.

"Um...Devon, I'm really not that interesting."

His lips pressed against my pulse for a second before he pulled back to look me in the eye. "Oh, baby, you're a hell of a lot more than interesting."

I sighed and gave in to the smile that wanted to spread across my mouth. He smiled back then started kissing me again. I couldn't help but move against him. His hard body fit so well against my softness, especially the erection captive within his jeans. We were getting a little out of control when he suddenly pulled away from me. I opened my eyes slowly, feeling a bit dazed as I looked at him. His head was thrown back and he seemed to be staring intently at my ceiling. We were both panting. I frowned in confusion.

"What's wrong?"

He lifted his head and gave a weak grin before pushing a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "I'm trying to behave, sweetheart. But damn, you feel so good in my arms."

I was at a loss for words. I'm the one who'd been pushing him away before, but now I didn't want him to stop. He would probably think I was moody.

"Oh..."

He sat up straighter and gazed intently into my eyes, completely arresting me in his stare. "If I swear to you that I'll behave, even keep all of my clothes on, can I stay the night?"

"Here?"

He laughed. "Yeah, here. With you in my arms all night long."

I bit my lip and thought it over. His eyes dropped to my mouth and he licked his lips. I wanted to whimper. Falling asleep in his arms would be a fantasy come true. I didn't truly believe he'd want to keep me long-term, but why not enjoy what I could while I had him?

"Um...yeah, okay. But you have to keep your jeans on."

He hugged me to him and laughed. "No problem. I swear I'll behave."

Damn. Did that mean I had to as well?

Chapter Four

He slipped his fingers beneath my silk dress and my heart nearly stopped. My hands were shaking so badly, I was surprised when the last button on his shirt came undone. Then his mouthwatering chest was revealed in all its muscular glory. Lightly dusted with jet-black hair, it took my breath away and I leaned down to run my tongue over one perfect nipple.

“Oh God, Mari, yesss...” he groaned into my neck as he nibbled his way south.

He quickly plunged his hands deeper beneath my dress and whisked it over my head. I gasped in excitement as he stood back and looked at what was revealed.

“I love black lace,” he murmured reverently.

“I can tell,” I said breathlessly, laughing as I unfastened his pants.

He stood watching me free his erection from the confines of his clothes. Then he toed off his shoes and pulled off both slacks and briefs.

“Wow, you are the sexiest man,” I said with appreciative appraisal.

He smiled and pulled me to his chest. He was the largest man I’d ever been with and feeling his hard cock pressed against me was more than a little intimidating. I had a second of panic when I wondered if I was going to be good enough to satisfy him but my worries disappeared when he reached around and unfastened my bra with expert quickness. His lips immediately latched onto one hardened nipple.

“Oh! Devon!”

I arched my back, gripping his hair with one hand and clutching him to me. His free hand made its way to the lace of my thong, which he gripped and ripped right off. I’d never been so excited in my life. I was damn near ready to climax already and he

hadn't even gotten to my clit yet. That was quickly rectified as his fingers traced my damp curls, down into the crevice of my legs.

"Oh yes, please, please," I begged, as his fingertips teased my sensitized skin.

"Yeah baby. I'm gonna make you come and you're gonna scream my name for me, aren't you?"

"Yes, oh yes!"

He slipped a finger into my wetness and I shuddered beneath him. I wrapped my legs around his waist, suddenly realizing I still wore my heels. I almost laughed at the sight of them over his shoulders, but then he slipped a second finger in to join the first and all coherent thought shattered. I bucked against his hand, riding it as he plunged his fingers in and out. Within seconds I was screaming his name as I came apart in his arms.

"Mari, oh God, baby, please. Stop...you've got to stop."

I frowned at the strain in Devon's voice and realized my eyes were tightly closed. There was also the scent of lavender I recognized from my bedroom and I was lying down.

Opening my eyes slowly, I realized we weren't in his office at all. That had been a dream. We were in my bed, it was morning and I was plastered to the front of Devon, who looked as if he might be in pain. I started to move and quickly realized which part of his anatomy ailed him.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, Devon. I was dreaming."

He grunted and released me slowly while I tried to wiggle away from him as quickly as possible. I blushed at the heat in his gaze as he took in my rumpled form.

"No problem, sweetheart. That must've been one hell of a dream. I'd be jealous if it wasn't my name you were calling out."

I wondered how furiously I could blush before my head would explode. He grinned as if reading my thoughts and I scowled back.

"You're not funny."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to embarrass you. Anyway, that was the truth. You were moaning my name."

I rolled off the bed, away from him and his knowing gaze. He was so confident, so damn sexy. I had no way to fight against him. "I know. Um...I'm sorry if I...uh, hurt you."

Turning back to face him, I barely caught the amusement in his gaze before he hid it behind a mask of indifference. He shrugged one shoulder and leaned back against my pillows.

"I'm fine. It's you I was worried about. The way you were moaning and rubbing up against me, I thought you might be in pain."

I frowned, not sure if he was playing with me or not. His face gave away nothing. "No. I'm fine."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell me what you were dreaming about."

It wasn't a question, but I shook my head anyway. I turned away and pulled clean clothes from the small plastic drawers I used as a dresser. Sean had accidentally doubled the order on them last year, so I got them at seventy-five percent off. I couldn't imagine what Devon thought of my sorry excuse for bedroom furniture.

"I'm going to take a quick shower."

Devon stretched, his long, lean body expanding past the limits of my small twin bed. I wanted to laugh at how we'd kept bumping into each other as we lay down to sleep. I was used to sleeping alone and he was used to a much larger bed. It had taken some getting used to.

"All right. Once you're done we'll head over to my place so I can shower and change, then we'll do whatever you want."

Seeing him splayed across my bed like an offering put all kinds of naughty thoughts into my mind. Whatever I wanted? I didn't know where to begin.

* * * * *

"I called ahead and told my cook to have breakfast ready when we arrive. I'll eat with you and then take a quick shower, all right?"

I looked away from the window of the limousine to find Devon watching me, waiting patiently for my reply. "Sure. That's fine."

He smiled and leaned back against his seat beside me. We'd been riding in silence and the growing sizes of the houses we passed told me we'd be there soon. Nervousness, excitement and fear coalesced in my gut, making me want to puke. Devon's house would be glorious but I had no idea how to act, surrounded by wealth. I just prayed I wouldn't make a fool of myself in front of his staff.

"Hey, what's wrong, beautiful? Why so quiet?"

He leaned into me and his masculine scent invaded my senses. I took a deep breath before remembering to answer. "Nothing, I'm just a little tired."

I'd spent most of the night trying to ignore him pressed against my back so I could fall asleep. That proved nearly impossible. He raised a brow in question before running his fingers down the side of my face.

"No problem. After breakfast we can just take a nap if you wish."

I smiled at the thought of lying with Devon in his bed. He certainly wouldn't have a small twin mattress. His bed could probably hold both of us with our arms stretched out to our sides.

"No, I'll be fine. I don't want to waste my day off in bed."

He gave me a heated look and ran his gaze down my body before shaking his head. "Damn. I don't think being in bed with you all day would be a waste."

The bad thing was, neither did I.

We spent the rest of the ride in silence and I nearly swallowed my tongue when we arrived at his house. It was even more gorgeous in reality than it had been in the magazine. Designed as an energy-saving home of the future, it was a three-story

collaboration of wood and glass paneling. Greens and browns in every hue imaginable combined to give the whole house an earthy feel. I loved it.

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

Devon appeared pleased by my reaction. "Thank you. My brother designed it. Did I mention he's an architect?" The pride in his voice was unmistakable.

"No. He's very talented."

He murmured his agreement and moved away as we pulled into the circular driveway. "Just to warn you, my father might be here. He likes to come by unannounced from time to time. But don't worry, he's completely harmless."

All of the blood drained from my face at the thought of meeting Devon's father. I looked down at the t-shirt and jeans that had seemed like adequate apparel just a few minutes ago. Devon had already climbed out of the limo and poked his head back through the door to find me assessing my figure.

"Sweetheart, you look beautiful. Don't worry."

I looked up to find him smiling at me in a way that left me completely breathless. I took his outstretched hand, allowing him to pull me from the car. He kept a firm hold as we walked up the stone steps to his front door, as if afraid I might run away. To be honest, I'd thought about it. I'd expected someone to open the door for us, a butler or some other hired hand, but Devon fished a key ring from the front pocket of his well-worn jeans and opened it himself.

We walked in and I barely stifled a gasp at the beauty of his house. The magazine spread hadn't done it justice and I glanced around the large open foyer trying to take in everything at once.

"What do you think?" Devon's deep, sexy voice cut through my astonishment and I looked up to find him watching me. "Do you like it?"

The wary look in his eyes surprised me. He really wanted to know what I thought and seemed worried about my reaction. I smiled, even as I wondered why my opinion mattered.

"It's beautiful, Devon, even more so than in the magazines."

He raised a brow in surprise before pulling me behind him through a tall doorway. I looked up at the vaulted ceiling of the foyer, bathed in light from the high windows, and sighed as they disappeared from view. We were now in a large living room filled with white furniture and a fireplace large enough to roast an elephant. This room had a vaulted ceiling as well and I wondered if there were even three floors or if it just appeared that way from outside.

Devon pulled me slowly through that room and into a long hallway with framed photos along both walls. We walked silently on the plush carpet as the faces of his family smiled out at us. I saw a familiar handsome face and hesitated, pulling him to a stop with our clasped hands.

"Is that you?"

He stepped back to look over my shoulder and laughed. "Oh yeah. That's me in all my shining glory. What do you think? Was I sexy with braces?"

I laughed with him and shook my head. "Sexy? I don't know, but you were still cute."

He scoffed. "Cute? Puppies are cute."

I laughed at his offended tone and turned to face him. "I see they did their job. You have the sexiest smile I've ever seen."

He looked down at me and heat flared in his eyes. His playful banter was gone, replaced by a look of longing that made me sweat. I watched his throat as he swallowed before stepping back and taking my hand again.

"Let's go see what's cooking. I'm starved."

The look he gave me said he was hungry for more than food. I was completely helpless in the face of that look and just gave a short nod, letting him pull me along.

The kitchen was massive and filled with shining stainless steel appliances. It was as though I were in the middle of a professional kitchen and fought the urge to look for hidden cameras. A short woman who looked to be in her forties stood at the stove, slowly stirring something in a large silver pot.

"Rose," Devon said, walking over and giving the woman a one-armed hug.

She smiled up at him and I was happy to note the look in her eyes seemed more motherly than female appreciation. Not that I was jealous or anything. Yeah right.

"There you are finally. Your breakfast is getting cold."

"Sorry if we took longer than expected. This is Mari. Mari, this is Rose."

I walked over and shook the hand she offered, smaller than mine but strong and confident. She smiled at me and waved us both over to a table set against one wall. Two covered plates sat there awaiting our arrival.

"Mmm, smells like an omelet," Devon said.

Rose chuckled and shook her head. "As if I don't make you omelets every morning. Mari, I hope you like them. Devon never seems to tire of my omelets."

I smiled back and walked over to the chair Devon held out for me. "Yes, ma'am. I love omelets."

Without another word, he sat down and uncovered our dishes. The aroma of freshly cooked eggs and vegetables made my mouth water.

"Oh yeah, lots of bacon."

I looked over at his plate and had to stifle a laugh at the amount of bacon crumbled over his eggs. "Wow. So...um, you like bacon?"

Devon looked up at me with his fork halfway to his mouth and grinned. "Yup."

"I wasn't certain what you would like, dear, so I kept it simply vegetables and put the bacon on the side. Are you a vegetarian?"

This time I did laugh and shook my head as I turned to answer Rose. "Oh no. I love to eat meat but this is perfect. I love vegetables too."

My answer seemed to please her and something inside me eased. I wanted so much to not embarrass Devon or upset him in any way. I just hoped his father didn't show up.

We finished eating with Rose telling us about a new recipe she planned to try, Devon listening intently to every word. I didn't know what I'd expected but the easy banter between him and his cook surprised me. I wondered what other surprises he had in store, and could hardly wait to find out.

* * * * *

Devon dragged me upstairs to his bedroom and playfully tried to talk me into taking a shower with him. He teased and tickled, leaving me gasping for breath in the center of his king-sized bed. It was the softest, most luxurious surface I'd ever lain on and I immediately fell in love with it.

"Think about me all wet and naked while I'm gone," he said with a wink.

I laughed to cover my embarrassment as he stepped through the bathroom door, knowing I would indeed be thinking of him as he showered. I heard the water come on and stared up at his ceiling, a soothing shade of blue. What would it be like to wake up every morning in this bed? I shook my head to dispel such thoughts. Two weeks. That's what I'd agreed to but now it seemed like such a short time to enjoy his company.

With a groan, I wiped my hands down my face and sat up. Looking around his spacious room, I noticed a bookshelf set against one wall. Curiosity got the best of me and I walked over to take a closer look. Devon was a horror fan, but I was happy to see some classics among the gore. I picked up his well-worn *Of Mice and Men* and walked back to the bed, flopping down onto my back to read. I was so engrossed in my favorite book, I didn't even hear the water turn off.

"You like Steinbeck?"

His deep voice startled me and I jumped, accidentally dropping the book onto the floor. "You made me lose my page."

I'd rolled over to grab the book without glancing at more than his face. As I sat up and turned back around to scowl at him, the breath froze in my lungs when I took in his appearance.

"Sorry, baby. I'm so used to changing out here I forgot to take clothes into the bathroom with me."

He wore a grin and a towel, wrapped low around his lean hips and catching water droplets as they streamed down his muscled chest. I remembered to breathe...barely.

"Oh, okay," I said weakly.

His grin widened at my breathless response and he took a step in my direction.

"Wanna help me dry off?"

I started and tore my gaze away from the fascinating water droplets to look at his face. "Huh?"

He laughed before heading to his walk-in closet, letting go of the towel just before stepping through the door and giving me a brief glimpse of his muscular ass. "Hey, have you been to the art museum lately?"

I picked my jaw up off the floor but it took a moment for me to remember how to speak. "N-no. I've never been to any of the museums."

He stuck his head out of the closet and frowned at me. I could see his bare shoulders and wondered if he'd managed to cover anything else yet.

"Never? Really? Well hell, we can hit at least a couple of them today if you want."

My pulse sped up for a different reason this time. I rose from the bed but stayed beside it, nearly jumping up and down with joy. "We can? Seriously?"

I couldn't keep the excitement from my voice. I'd always wanted to go to the museums but never really had the time. Besides, it seemed silly to waste money when I always had a bill to pay. Devon stepped out of the closet dressed in jeans and a royal

blue t-shirt. Both were a perfect fit and put his wonderful body on mouth-watering display. I sighed.

“Absolutely, baby, anything you want.”

My eyes were on his crotch when he said that and I blinked to refocus my train of thought. “What?”

“The museums. We’ll go to whichever ones you want.”

Elation filled me and I smiled up at him, happier than I’d been in a very long time. He froze, studying my face as if he’d never seen me smile before. I laughed nervously and raised a brow in question. “What?”

He shook his head as he stepped closer and slowly smiled back. “That smile. I’d swear it’s the first time you’ve looked really happy with me.” I blushed and glanced away as he closed the final distance between us. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. Just promise to keep smiling at me like that.”

I looked back to find him watching me expectantly. “I’d really like to go to the art museum.”

He grinned and held out his hand. I took it without hesitation and he pulled me into his arms. “Your wish is my command, princess.”

He kissed me on the forehead and led me from the room. I *was* starting to feel like a princess from a fairy tale. I just prayed this fantasy wouldn’t end at midnight.

Chapter Five

Devon's neighborhood was a ten-minute drive from the museum district so I talked him into walking. It wasn't that I minded riding around in his limo, I just wasn't sure I could trust myself in there anymore. The taste of Devon's skin still tingled on my tongue and his scent still taunted my senses. Keeping a bit of distance between us seemed like a good idea at that point.

The weather was perfect for a stroll down the tree-lined streets and I inhaled the fresh air. I felt wonderful, better than I had in a long time. Devon held my hand as if he'd been doing so for years and I couldn't think of a single reason to protest.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Looking up into his heady gaze, my smile froze at the contentment on his face. He seemed happy to be with me. So why was I still afraid? "I've always wanted to go to the art museum."

"Why haven't you?"

I shrugged and looked away, not certain if I should bring up the issue of money. I hoped he already knew I wasn't after his, but there was such a gap between us there. I refused to allow any negativity into our conversation. "Is it true there are live butterflies at the Museum of Natural History?"

He frowned at my change of subject but answered anyway, raising his free hand to point ahead of us. "Yup. See that glass pyramid? They're housed in there. It's a bit humid inside but beautiful. Want to go there first?"

"Sure, why not."

We crossed the street and headed for a building I'd been curious about since my childhood. It was as if I were ten again, passing by on the bus with my face plastered to the window. Excitement bubbled up inside until I was all but running for the entrance.

Devon just laughed as I pulled him along. The line almost made me cry until Devon walked around it to a much shorter one marked "Members". He bought tickets to every attraction available until I thought the price would stop my heart. He didn't even blink.

"All right, beautiful. Let's go see some butterflies."

Unable to help myself, I giggled and grabbed his hand. He just laughed again and I didn't even care if he was laughing at me. The line wasn't very long and in no time we were stepping through a set of glass doors into paradise.

"Ohhh, it's beautiful!"

"You've really never been here before?"

I turned at the sound of disbelief in his voice and stared into his piercing gaze. He was so damn handsome it took my breath away and seemed to sneak up on me at times like this. We were standing close together in a small alcove, surrounded by trees I couldn't name and more butterflies than I'd ever seen in my life.

"N-no, I haven't."

Somehow he stepped even closer. "Sixth grade, Ms. Brown's class at Dryer Middle School. You mean to tell me you never made that trip?"

I blinked up at him in complete confusion. How in the hell did he know where I went to sixth grade and who'd taught me?

"Uh, no. I was only there for the first semester before we moved to the other side of town."

His brow smoothed and he looked as if I'd answered the million dollar question. "To where, exactly?"

"What?"

"You moved before the end of Christmas break, but where did you go?"

"How do you know I was in Ms. Brown's class?"

He smiled and placed his hands on my hips. His nearness was distracting enough, but his hands on me nearly caused every thought to fly out of my head.

"I was in Mr. Wilkerson's across the hall and two doors down. Every morning I watched you walk through the doors five minutes late and run for your classroom, unraveled braids swaying as you tried to get through the door before the tardy bell rang. I was a big, bad eighth grader who thought I ruled the school. I'd never had trouble getting girls to talk to me. All but one little sixth grader who caught my attention for some reason and left me wondering what happened to her over Christmas break."

"Oh."

I was at a complete loss for words. I clearly remembered sixth grade as a horrible year of no friends and mean teachers. For the first time, I'd spent an entire semester at one school and had hoped to make a friend or two. Unfortunately, it was also my first time in a middle-class neighborhood. My foster mother had gotten a job cleaning houses in the area and used one of their addresses to get me into the school. At the time I'd been in awe of how nice everything looked. As an adult I'd come to realize it was just the suburbs, not Beverly Hills.

"I didn't even realize how much I'd missed seeing you until my senior year. You popped up again out of nowhere and mesmerized me even more."

"You never tried to talk to me." He frowned down at me and I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. "Well, I mean...other than for tutoring and to make excuses when I felt you messing with my hair."

"The hell I didn't. Why do you think I used to play with your hair? Plus I didn't really need tutoring for Pre-Calculus. I only did those things to get your attention."

A blush filled my face as I remembered the gentle tugging on my braid every morning. I always did my best to ignore it, fighting my desire to turn around and talk to him. I'd remembered the tutoring, but was shocked that he did too.

"I...I thought you and your friends were always laughing at me."

"Oh, baby, no." He pulled me into his embrace and wrapped his strong arms around me. "They were usually laughing at *me* because no matter how hard I tried to get your attention, you did such a good job of ignoring me."

I sighed and melted against him, feeling like an idiot for the missed opportunity of our youth. What would my life be like if I'd known he wanted me back then? Would he have had his fill before graduation and I'd be in the same spot, sans adult Devon Campbell? He kissed my temple and leaned back to look into my eyes.

"I'm sorry, Devon. I had no idea."

His frown eased into a sincere smile that caused an ache in my chest. I was definitely falling hard, with no hope of slowing my descent.

"No worries. Having you here now is all that matters."

He leaned in slowly, as if giving me time to push him away, but I had no intention of stopping him. The warmth of his breath brushed across my lips before his mouth met mine and I opened to him. His arms tightened around me, his hands on my lower back, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. The kiss was more sweet than sensual, an agreement more than a surrender. He ended it slowly and leaned his forehead against mine.

We looked into each other's eyes and he opened his mouth to speak.

"Eeew! Mom, are they kissing?"

I tried to jump out of his arms at the girlish squeal that interrupted our moment so succinctly. Devon held on to me and chuckled. We both looked over to see a woman quickly ushering a beautiful little girl with bright red pigtails from our secluded spot.

"Oops," I said.

"Good thing I kept the kiss light. Damn, Mari, you make me forget everything but you when you're in my arms."

His chuckle kept me from feeling embarrassed and the swift kiss he planted on my mouth kept me from responding. He turned me around and with a hand on my hip, led

me from the seclusion of the trees. We spent over an hour walking along the paths hand in hand, watching butterflies flit from one spot to another. My bright yellow shirt garnered a lot of attention from the beautiful creatures and I was delighted when they kept landing on me. Devon watched me with a keen interest that made me nervous but I tried to ignore it.

We walked out of the butterfly exhibit and entered the main halls of the museum. I was like a child, staring in awe at the displays ranging from dinosaurs to mummies. Devon walked beside me to each one, patiently watching me read the signs on items I knew he'd seen many times before.

"I hope you're not bored," I said an hour and a half later.

He grinned and shook his head before kissing my hand. "Not at all. I love watching your face as you learn something new."

I looked away. "You must think I'm an idiot. A lot of this we probably learned in school."

He abruptly stopped walking, pulling me to a halt with my hand in his. When I looked back at him, his expression was almost angry. He slowly raised his free hand and cupped the side of my face.

"Mari, I never have and never will think you're an idiot." I opened my mouth to apologize but he ran his thumb over my bottom lip, effectively silencing me. "I know you've been through a lot in your life but I really need you to give me a chance. I don't just mean time. I need your trust if this is going to work. I swear I won't hurt you."

He continued caressing my bottom lip with his thumb, so I nodded my agreement rather than trying to speak. My throat burned with the threat of tears from his sincere plea and I became a bit overwhelmed. He kissed me again and we continued on our way to the planetarium.

Chapter Six

We ate a late lunch at the deli on the bottom floor of the art museum. I could barely contain my elation at being there long enough to eat. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston was housed in two large buildings with colorful sculptures on the front sidewalk. As a child, I'd been fascinated by the sculptures and curious about what was hidden inside the museum. I remember my mother once promising to take me there, but it was one of many broken promises.

Devon plied me with questions about where I'd spent the years between sixth grade and tenth. I told him about the various foster families and schools I'd been passed between during those years.

"So all that time you were just in another school district?" The question seemed rhetorical so I remained silent as I finished my lunch. "I'd always wondered. I wasn't lying when I said I've thought about you over the years."

I had no clue what to say so I gathered my trash instead. "I'm done. Ready to go into the museum?"

He gave me a look that said he knew I was purposely changing the subject. I waited, nervously wondering if he was going to let me off the hook again. Relief filled me when he rose and threw away our trash without another word. He reached for me and I immediately took his hand, thanking the fates for putting me back in Devon Campbell's path.

We took our time walking through the many halls of MFAH. I was in awe of the ancient Greece exhibit and we laughed a little at most of the abstract art. I only recognized one of the Picassos, but once he realized that was my favorite artist, Devon pointed out each and every one. Two hours later, my side hurt from laughing and I realized I was having the best day of my life. I didn't want it to ever end.

"Ready for the next one?"

I looked up into Devon's questioning gaze and returned the look. "Next what?"

"Museum, baby. There's still a contemporary arts museum, the Heath Museum, Holocaust Museum...oh, and even the Children's Museum if you want."

I laughed, a bit overwhelmed.

"I had no idea there were that many."

"They don't call this the museum district for nothing. There are actually a few smaller ones like the Museum of Printing History as well, but I don't think we'll have time for all of them."

He looked around as if deciding which direction we should be heading as I stared helplessly at him. I was at a complete loss for words and realized he put me in that state quite often.

"Devon, we can do something else if you want. We've already visited the two I most wanted to see."

He looked back down at me with an eyebrow raised. His curious expression clearly stating he didn't know whether to believe me or not. I hated commandeering his entire day even if he swore not to care.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. What do you want to do?"

He grinned mischievously. "Nothing we can do in public."

I hit him playfully on the arm. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Campbell. I'm not that kind of girl."

He pulled me into his arms for a brief hug and kissed the top of my head. "Believe me, baby, I'm well aware of that. It's just one of your finer qualities." He turned before I could think of an answer and pulled me back toward the Museum of Natural History. "I bought IMAX tickets. Want to watch the one about the sharks?"

"Um, sure."

We made it to the theater just as the lights were going down and Devon pulled me up to sit in the very top row. There weren't many people at the showing and we had the entire row to ourselves. I'd never been in the IMAX theater before and marveled at the sheer size of it. Devon put his arm around me and pulled me against his side.

"You okay?" His warm breath tickled my ear as he whispered and sent a chill down my spine.

"Yeah."

"Ever made out in a movie theater?"

I snorted and shook my head. He leaned closer and cupped one large hand against my cheek. Before I could think to protest, he kissed me. Our ticket stubs claimed we watched the shark movie but I couldn't tell you a single thing about it, except by the time it ended I was a writhing mass of need. Devon expertly drove me to the brink of mindlessness with his all-consuming mastery of my lips. His hands didn't even roam any farther than my waist. It was just his lips on mine, his tongue in my mouth and his arm holding me close. He held me like a precious gem, tight to his chest but gently. It took all of my control to stay quiet as I tasted him and inhaled his unique scent. Like a fine wine, he went straight to my head and I nearly forgot we were in public. He pulled away from my mouth, licking my bottom lip one last time, and looked down into my unfocused gaze with a smile.

"Baby, it's over." At first I didn't understand and a sense of panic filled me. Over? Already? But he'd said two weeks and it had been a day! He must have gleaned my thoughts from the look on my face because he quickly kissed me again. "The movie, Mari. It's finished."

"Oh."

I sat up quickly to hide my expression and embarrassment. He stood and pulled me up beside him as the theater emptied. We walked out in silence to find the sun slowly sinking behind the trees. I yawned and stretched, vaguely wondering if Devon would mind carrying me home.

"I'll call for my car."

I looked up in surprise and relief. "That would be great."

"Yeah, you look a little beat."

"I am."

I wrapped an arm around his waist to lean against his chest. He put his arm around my shoulders and fished his cell phone from his jeans pocket. He spoke briefly to his driver, joking and carrying on much as he had with his cook. I smiled to myself as I listened, falling harder for him by the minute. I wondered if any of the society women who'd tried to catch him knew just how down-to-earth Devon Campbell could be, and found that thought amusing.

Rather than the limo I'd expected, a dark green Hummer pulled up to the curb in front of us a few minutes later. I raised a brow and followed quietly as Devon opened the rear door. He let me in first before scooting in close enough for our thighs to touch. Jack, his driver, smiled at me from the rearview mirror.

"Have fun?"

"A blast! Have you ever been to the planetarium?"

He nodded as Devon shut the door. "Oh yeah. I used to take my kids there all the time."

I sat forward as the car began to roll and listened to Jack talk about his favorite attractions at the museum. He knew a lot about it and confessed to still visiting alone now that his two children were grown and gone. He drove through the neighborhood at a leisurely pace, mindful of the many pedestrians enjoying the mild weather. Within minutes we were pulling into Devon's driveway and Jack turned to face me.

"So, what was your favorite part?"

I grinned. "The butterflies."

He chuckled. "Most girls love them."

"They're so beautiful. Aren't they, Devon?"

I looked over my shoulder to find him watching me intently, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Yeah, absolutely.”

He reached over and brushed my hair behind my ear. I smiled at him and had the insane urge to lean in for a kiss. Before I could indulge, his door opened and Jack stood there with a knowing grin. I’d been so distracted by Devon I hadn’t realized Jack had gotten out of the driver’s seat.

“Home sweet home,” Devon said before getting out.

“Yeah.” I took the hand he offered, letting him pull me from the vehicle and to his front door. Before I knew it we were back in his room and the bed looked more inviting than ever. I was more tired than I’d realized and swayed unintentionally.

“Whoa.” Devon caught me around the waist to steady me with a concerned look on his face. “Why don’t you lie down while I go see about dinner?”

“Sorry. I don’t know why I’m so tired.”

He grinned and kissed my temple before gently pushing me onto the bed. I crawled to the center to lie on top of the covers as he removed my shoes.

“You had a lot of excitement today, baby. And we definitely walked a few miles. Just rest. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

I murmured an agreement as my eyes closed, falling asleep before he even left the room.

* * * * *

When I woke, I was still alone on Devon’s bed. I could hear music from somewhere in the house through the open bedroom door. My bladder protested loudly enough to drag me out of bed and I went to the only unfamiliar door in his room. The bathroom was bigger than my apartment and definitely nicer in real life than a magazine spread. I took care of business quickly, lest the call of his Jacuzzi grow too tempting to resist. Somehow, I didn’t think he would mind finding me there.

The bedroom was still empty so I walked out to find the source of the music. It was a piano concerto I'd heard before but I wasn't versed enough in classical music to know its name. A sense of peaceful contentment filled me as I listened to the graceful notes. I walked down an unfamiliar hallway, past empty bedrooms made up in neutral colors. I vaguely wondered how many people lived in the house and fought the ridiculous jealousy that thought wrought. The hallway ended at an open doorway and I hesitated, afraid of intruding where I wasn't wanted.

From where I stood, I saw the end of a black grand piano and a low couch covered in maroon velvet. I glanced around in indecision, unsure whether or not to enter the room. I'd nearly talked myself into turning around when the music stopped and I heard the sound of someone approaching. Looking back the way I'd come, I knew I wouldn't be out of sight quickly enough. I took a deep breath and stepped through the door. The theme of maroon and gold dominated what was obviously a music room. My jaw dropped as I took in the various instruments in cases and on stands all around me.

"Quite a sight isn't it?"

The deep voice brought me out of my musings abruptly and I snapped my head around to find an unfamiliar man watching me. He was older and very handsome, his resemblance to Devon unmistakable. His father had stopped by after all.

"Uh...um..."

He grinned as I faltered and looked for a way to escape gracefully.

"You must be Mari. Devon told me you were beautiful but I'd never realized how inadequate that word might be."

I choked out a laugh and took his outstretched hand for a quick shake. Unfortunately he had other plans and held onto my hand when I tried to release his gentle grip.

"Y-you're his father?"

"Yes, I am. You can call me Daniel."

"And you can let go of her hand now, Dad."

We both turned toward the door where Devon stood with a grin on his face. His father brought my hand up for a quick kiss and Devon stepped up to my side.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mari. Now I see why my son's been twisted in knots for the past few days."

He finally released my hand and I stepped back into Devon's arms. "Thank you."

With a pleasant smile, he returned to the piano.

"Dinner is ready, baby. Are you hungry?"

I looked up to find Devon's intense gaze on me, as if my answer was of vast importance. I glanced over at his father, who had begun to play again. Devon placed his hands on either side of my face and gave me a deep kiss, before looking at me with one brow raised in question.

"Y-yes, I am. What time is it?"

"Just after eight. I went to wake you and found an empty bed. You had me worried for a second there."

The truth showed in his eyes. He'd been very worried to find me gone. Guilt flashed through me and I put my arms around his waist for a brief hug. He returned it and kept me against him when I tried to pull back, my hands resting on his chest.

"Sorry. I heard the music and got curious."

Devon looked across the room to where his father was playing. I couldn't decipher the expression on his face, but it was gone when he returned his attention to me.

"He's really good, been playing all my life and absolutely loves it. I take it you like classical?"

"A bit."

"Have you ever been to the symphony?" The look of longing I'm sure was on my face must've been answer enough for him. "We'll have to remedy that."

“Really?” I threw my arms around his neck and wanted to jump up and down in excitement. He held me tighter and grinned.

“Absolutely. I already told you we’ll do whatever you want. For now, let’s go eat. You look like you could blow away in a strong wind.”

He kissed me and turned us toward the door. We made our way downstairs to the kitchen but walked through it to a formal dining room. Two places were set at one end of the large rectangular table. A single candle flickered between the plates of steaming vegetables and steak. A bottle of wine chilled in a gleaming silver bucket set off to the side. My mouth watered as the aroma filled me and I sat in the chair Devon held out for me.

“I hope you like steak.”

The urge to laugh hysterically was hard to fight, but I was able to tamp it down. “Um, yeah. I don’t really get to eat it much, but I’m definitely a carnivore.”

He took his seat and looked down at his plate. I wondered if he was hiding his expression and felt a little foolish.

“Mari, I hope you don’t think I’m flaunting. I just want to give you the best of everything.”

This time I hid *my* expression as I took a sip of wine. It was delicious and I took a moment to savor it. He watched me, waiting for a response. I gave what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

“No, I don’t think that at all. We just live in completely different worlds, Devon.”

“Do you mind visiting mine for a while?”

I raised a brow and he grinned. We both laughed before cutting into our steaks and some of my tension eased. The dinner passed quickly and almost silently as we both enjoyed our food. Devon told me a little about taking piano lessons when he was small. He hadn’t enjoyed them and turned to other instruments.

“I noticed a harp,” I said.

He laughed and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "You did, did you? Well, I could lie and say I bought it for one of my sisters but I won't. The first time I heard someone playing the harp I fell in love with the sound. I took lessons for a few months before another instrument grabbed my interest."

"Can you still play it?"

He pondered the answer for a moment as he finished his wine. "Perhaps a short melody. I can't claim to do it justice but if you want, I'll try to play something for you."

"I'd love that."

Rather than respond, he stood and went back into the kitchen, muttering something about dessert. I finished my food and looked around the opulent dining room. Set up to entertain at least twenty guests, the large space made me feel quite small and I wondered again what I was getting into here. Devon had been a complete gentleman so far. I really didn't have reason to complain and hoped we could remain friends after the two weeks were up. Despite his reassurances, I really didn't think he'd want to keep me.

"Now, what is that sad look for? I just went to grab the pie."

I did my best to muster a smile as he approached my side of the table, pie in hand. He set the pastry in front of me before going down on his haunches by my side.

"Mari, what's wrong? Are you still tired, baby?"

Tears sprang unbidden to my eyes and I slapped both hands over my face. I didn't want to sob like a baby in front of him but the wine was already going to my head and making me emotional. He grabbed my shoulders and lifted me as he stood, pulling me up against his chest before cradling my head in his hands.

"Talk to me, Mari. Tell me what's wrong. Please."

I sniffled and tried to compose myself before lowering my hands. It took a supreme effort, but I finally looked him in the eye. "You're just too good to be true, Devon," I whispered, as if saying it too loud would break the spell. He looked exasperated for a

moment but then took a deep breath and leaned his forehead against mine. I expected him to whisper back some reassurance. I didn't even know what I wanted to hear but his continued silence worried me. Finally, when it seemed he wasn't going to say anything, I spoke.

"I'm so sorry. You're probably getting sick of my insecurities. I swear I don't mean to sound like a broken record."

I tried to ease out of his embrace, but he tightened his hold. He pressed his warm lips against my forehead and kept them there for what seemed like an eternity before he finally spoke.

"Stay the night with me. I want to fall asleep with you in my arms again."

My heart raced and I didn't know what to do. He ran his hands up and down my back in an effort to soothe me but it did little to ease my fears. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, closing my eyes when I answered, as if that could hide me from the world. "Yes."

With that simple word he relaxed against me as his tension dissolved with my surrender. I leaned into him. For better or worse I was going to stay the night in his arms again. He released me and sat in my chair, pulling me onto his lap in one fluid movement. I didn't bother to protest.

We shared a large slice of pie but I barely tasted it, completely inundated with the heat of his body against mine. He kept smiling at me and was obviously in a much better mood. I concentrated on chewing and nodding in all the right places as he talked about his company. The conversation turned from him to me so quickly, I was agreeing before I realized what he'd said.

"Wait, what?"

The serious expression on his face told me better than words that I'd missed something important. He took a deep breath and kept his gaze on mine before repeating his proposal.

"I said we have a lot of customer service positions open right now in my company. Many of them are in the building downtown and a few are in our office on the south side. I also have a position open in my office as a file clerk that I'm sure you can handle. It would just take a phone call, Mari, and you could say goodbye to that job you hate to come work for me."

I sat in stunned silence. The implications were staggering. Work for Devon? In his office, day after day, near his masculine scent and sexy voice? How in the hell would I get anything done?

"But...what if, um..." He raised a questioning brow as he patiently waited for me to voice my concerns. "What if this doesn't work out?"

I waved a hand between us for emphasis, hoping I wouldn't have to get any more specific. He frowned and rubbed his chin with the hand not occupied with keeping me in his lap.

"Well, other than the file clerk position, we wouldn't even see each other if you worked for me, except maybe in passing. However, if it really concerns you we could wait until my two weeks are up and then once you decide to keep me, I'll hire you."

By his grin I knew he believed this was the perfect solution. I was still in shock about the "keep me" comment. How in the hell could he honestly believe I would reject him... Oh wait, I'd already tried. I sighed as if completely put out by the whole thing and leaned against his chest.

"That's fine. Can we go to bed now?" His eyebrows shot up and my cheeks burned. "Sleep! I meant sleep."

"I know what you meant, baby. I also know you're still tired. What time do you have to go in tomorrow?"

"Mmm, I open tomorrow, so I have to be there by six thirty."

He grunted and shook his head. "Damn. I guess we need to get to sleep then. I'll have to run you by your place in the morning so you can change."

I murmured my agreement as he rose with me in his arms. The need to protest died a quick death as he walked to his bedroom without so much as a huff. Being cradled against his chest made me feel cherished and I wanted to savor the foreign sensation for as long as possible.

“Remember to keep your pants on,” I whispered, already falling asleep.

He chuckled and the last thing I remember is his kiss.

Chapter Seven

Once again we were in Devon's office and he'd just given me the best orgasm of my life. Part of me knew this was a dream. The other part didn't give a damn.

"Oh yeah, baby. That was number one. Let's see if we can't get a couple more out of you before I get mine, huh?" he whispered into my ear, nipping at my lobe.

I couldn't even think of my own name, much less an adequate response as he slid his body down between my thighs and knelt before me. I was draped like an offering on his desk, spread-eagle before his perfect face, already soaked and excited. He put his hands on my knees and gently pushed my legs apart, making room for his broad shoulders. Then he stopped for a second and looked up at me, our gazes locking with an almost audible click.

"I've wanted you for what feels like forever, Mari, and now I'm not going to want to let you go."

"I-I'm not going anywhere, Devon. You can be certain of that."

I was panting, bringing a grin to his handsome face. He didn't look smug as some guys would in his position. Instead, he looked happy and it made me smile in return.

"Good. Then we have all the time in the world."

He leaned forward and licked a line from my knee straight up to the top of my thigh. He nibbled on the crease there and then made his way inward. My breath caught when his lips found my clit and pure ecstasy ensued. I came again quickly, screaming his name as I pumped my hips against his face.

He stood and wiped his face with his shirt. I wrapped my legs around his waist and used them to pull him forward, gripping his hard cock with both hands. It was glorious. So good against my palms.

“Now I’m more than ready, Devon. I want you in me, please.”

“Yes, baby. I’ll give you anything you want – and me most of all.”

He grabbed my hips and pulled me to the edge of the desk, placing the tip of his cock where I needed it. One quick thrust and he plunged into me, taking away my breath and my senses.

“Oh God, you feel so fucking good,” he gasped as he continued to thrust in and out of me.

He was utterly perfect. As if he were made just for me, two pieces of a puzzle. I stopped thinking at that point and just gave myself over to sensation. The firmness of his ass beneath my fingertips, the sound of his hips slamming against me, the smell of his sweat mixing with his aftershave, all of it coming together to create this amazing moment in time.

My orgasm built and I started calling his name ever louder with each thrust. He grunted encouragement as he picked up the pace.

“Come on, baby. One more time for me. Oh God, you’re gonna make me come already,” he exclaimed, a heartbeat before I screamed his name in climax.

“Mari!”

I came awake with a start to find Devon beneath me, sweating and cursing under his breath. His large t-shirt that I’d slept in was bunched around my waist. I straddled him, cradling his erection snugly against my pussy. I was wet and tingling, he was rock hard and pulsing against me. He gripped my hips with both hands, holding me in place against him. My pulse raced and sweat gathered at the small of my back.

“Devon?”

My voice quivered with uncertainty and fear. I couldn’t keep teasing him like this, unintentional or not. His eyes were shut tightly as emotions played across his face while he fought for control of his body. Desperate anguish was quickly replaced by cool acceptance and his breathing slowed.

"It's okay, baby. I'm sorry if I scared you. I'm going to let go and you can just slide right off me, okay?"

I looked at where we were joined, my pink cotton panties against his plaid pajama pants. My nipples hardened at the sight and I moaned involuntarily. "No," I whispered.

He opened his eyes and frowned at me, uncomprehending. "No?"

I shook my head. "No."

Then I did the bravest thing I've ever done. I leaned down and kissed him, slowly, completely. I kissed him as if he were a cool drink on a hot summer day, savoring every nuance of his flesh against mine. I tightened my knees against his waist and plunged my hands into his hair and took over his mouth as if I was starved for it. He groaned and slid his hands from my hips to my ass, kneading each cheek as he pulled me against him. We licked and suckled, tasting each other as if it was the first time.

He pulled me back with his hands on either side of my face and looked me in the eyes. "Mari, baby, are you sure?"

"Yes, Devon, please. I need you."

Faster than thought, he rolled me under him and plunged his tongue back into my mouth. I was barely aware of him pulling my shirt up until he stopped kissing me long enough to pull it over my head. I gasped as the cool air brushed across my nipples and nearly passed out when it was immediately replaced with the warmth of his mouth.

"Oh, Devon."

He growled against my breasts, alternating between them as he suckled. I writhed on the bed, unable to stay still beneath him. Skin sliding against skin, we caressed and kissed, squeezed and rubbed, until no part of him remained untouched by any part of me. His pants were gone without my notice and my panties remained the final barrier. Devon sat up and put his hands on my thighs, before once again looking me in the eyes.

"Baby, are you sure? I don't want you to regret this...ever."

I was too wound up to stop but took the time to think it over anyway. I wouldn't cheat either of us with a hasty decision that might lead to regret. Swallowing down the last of my fear, I kept my steady gaze on his and nodded my assent. He was panting and still watching my face for any sign of uncertainty when I hooked my thumbs in the waistband of my panties.

"M-Mari?"

I pulled my final line of defense down my legs slowly, keeping my knees together as I leaned forward to push my panties over them. Devon watched as if in a daze until they reached my calves. Then he removed them the rest of the way with one hand. I leaned back against the pillows, my legs still together, as he rubbed the pink cotton against his mouth. He smiled at me and the look was so full of promise my body responded. My nipples grew harder, my sex grew slicker and my skin was burning hot. All reservations were gone. I was as ready for him as I would ever be.

I opened my arms and he came to me without further hesitation, kissing and nibbling on my shoulder and neck. My legs fell open to receive him and he settled against me perfectly, just like in my dream. His skin warmed beneath my fingers as I caressed his arms and back. I wanted to touch and taste him everywhere. I kissed wherever I could reach, his temple and forehead, while he laved attention on my breasts.

"Oh, Devon."

I couldn't help the moan that escaped as he took my nipple back into his mouth, gently tugging it between his teeth. I dug my nails into his ass, trying to get him inside me where I needed him most.

"Wait...baby, wait."

"What?"

The lust-filled fog in my mind slowly dissipated as Devon tried to pull away. Wariness filled me and I wondered what I'd done wrong.

"A condom. I have to grab a condom."

He leaned away from me to his bedside table and retrieved a condom from the drawer. I fought the ridiculous jealousy that tried to come from knowing he had them close at hand. He was a much-sought-after bachelor. Of course he was ready for sex in his bedroom at a moment's notice. I distracted myself by running my hands up and down his muscular thighs. His hands were shaking as he tried to roll the condom down his cock. The sign of his nervousness made me smile.

"Ready?"

I looked up to find him watching me again, another question on his face. He still expected me to say no. I made it up to him by saying yes with my hands. He was well proportioned and hard as steel in my palms. He groaned as I learned the length of him with my fingers, enjoying the sensation of his strength and virility. He only allowed my play for a few seconds before positioning himself over me again. I wrapped my legs around his waist so there would be no more hesitation. I knew what I wanted and now he did too.

Devon stayed up on his knees as he kissed me again. I pushed my fingers into his hair to keep him there. I was so caught up in the passion of his kiss it took a moment for me to realize one of his hands was between my legs. He ran a fingertip through my curls and swirled it through my moisture.

"Mmmmm."

He found the opening of my pussy, wet and ready for his entry. A single finger slid inside, slow and steady, as if testing my readiness. I whimpered into his mouth but didn't relinquish my hold. He continued to plunge his tongue in and out, even as his finger did the same below. My hips rocked toward him reflexively and he slid a second finger in with the first.

"Ohhhhh."

A few more thrusts and he left my mouth to suckle my throat. I threw my head back and whispered his name. With his thighs against mine, he pushed my legs open farther and added a third finger into my pussy.

“Almost there, sweetheart. I can feel you throbbing against my fingers.”

I couldn't speak so I just thrust against his hand as he pumped his fingers in and out. My orgasm moved slowly through me, building from the depths of my soul. Devon sat back without stopping the movement of his hand and gently pressed his thumb against my clit.

“Devon!”

I came fast and hard, shaking and crying, grabbing at the bed sheets as my entire body convulsed. I barely had time to catch my breath before Devon was over me, filling me in a single steady thrust.

“Oh God, Mari.”

He groaned as he settled within me to the base of his cock and remained still with his forehead against mine.

“Devon?”

“Just a second, baby. You feel so fucking good. I'm afraid if I move I'll come already.”

I smiled and ran my hands over his back and down to his delectable ass. The firm muscles were warm and filled my palms. It was erotic holding him that way and made me wetter just thinking about it. I squeezed my inner muscles and he gasped, grabbing my shoulders as he slowly slid out. I opened my mouth to protest when he thrust back in quickly and turned my complaint into a moan. He moved again and settled into a rhythm against me, in and out, slow and steady. The look of pleasure on his face was the best aphrodisiac.

Before long another climax began to build and I started thrusting against him. He picked up the pace until flesh slapping against flesh joined the animalistic sounds of our panting. It was primal and possessive and brought me to the edge quickly. This time I screamed for him a heartbeat before he growled my name and the warmth of his release filled me. He dropped his head onto my chest, his breath warming the space between my breasts. I vaguely wondered if it was my heart I heard racing or his.

"That...was...incredible," he said, before rolling off me.

He reached over and pulled me against him. I leaned on his chest and curled my fingers into his chest hair. Words couldn't describe how perfect that moment in time was, so I didn't try. I just sighed in contentment and within seconds fell back to sleep.

* * * * *

"Mari. Baby, it's time to get up."

My body was completely boneless, as if years of tension had simply slipped away. I smiled with my eyes still closed and heard Devon chuckle above me. That made me frown as I tried to remember why I felt so damn good. Oh yeah...I'd had a couple of orgasms.

"No, baby. I liked the smile better."

His deep, sexy voice washed over me, tingling my senses and bringing the smile back to my face. I opened my eyes to find a matching smile on his as he looked down at me. We were still in bed and I was cradled in his arm. He leaned on his elbow above me looking absolutely yummy.

"Hello."

He chuckled again. "Hello, beautiful."

"What time is it?"

He raised his head to peer at the bedside table then returned his gaze to me.

"Just after five."

"Damn. I have to get ready for work." I stretched, unintentionally rolling out of his embrace. He let me go and sat up. We were both still naked and a ridiculous sense of modesty flashed through me.

"Let's take a shower and then have breakfast. You can wear something of mine for the drive to your place."

He stood without another word and strode naked across the room to his dresser. I watched, licking my lips at the picture of masculinity he presented. He opened a drawer and rummaged through it, giving me an enticing view of his ass. I just couldn't leave it there in the open without touching, so I stood and went to him. Normally I'm very modest and walking around naked isn't my thing, but the look he gave me as I approached was worth every doubt that crossed my mind. This time *he* licked his lips.

"Damn. Seeing you like this, naked and blushing, has me hard as a rock."

I looked down to see he was indeed rigid as he pulled me against him. I ran my hands up his chest and into his hair. "I'll be late."

My protest was halfhearted at best and I knew he heard it in my voice. He grinned and gently pushed me toward the bathroom door.

"How about we kill two birds with one stone and just fool around in the shower?"

The image that put in my mind nearly made me faint with arousal and I moaned my approval. Devon turned me around and walked me straight to the glass door of his shower. He reached in and started the water, adjusting it without a word as I turned into him and ran my hands up and down his chest. I couldn't seem to keep them off his scrumptious body.

"Ready?"

I looked up to find him watching me with hunger in his gaze. I suspected mine matched his intensity and stepped past him into the shower without a word. The door closed and his chest pressed against my back. The warm water hitting my breasts was no match for the heat of his palms cupping them, sending shivers down my spine. He nibbled on my ear and pinched my nipples between his fingers.

"Hand me that bar of soap, baby. I need to get you cleaned up."

I did as he asked and pulled my hair off my neck, using both hands to hold it in a pile on top of my head as I turned around to face him. Devon grinned in apparent appreciation of my submissive pose. I was willing to be at his mercy for as long as he wanted me there. The next few minutes consisted of Devon meticulously washing my

body, from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. I kept my eyes closed through most of it as I leaned helplessly against the wall in boneless satisfaction. Once I was thoroughly rinsed, he took my face between his hands and kissed me sweetly. I threw my arms around him and deepened the contact. Within seconds I was wrapped around him and we were both panting mindlessly. Finally he had the sense to pull away.

"Mari, you'll be late if we don't finish and get out of here."

I sighed in resignation. "I know. You just taste so damn good."

He grinned and kissed the tip of my nose. "So do you, but I like to savor my treats, not rush them."

He slipped his hand between my thighs as he made that statement, making me gasp and involuntarily thrust my hips forward. His large palm cradled my pussy gently and set fire to my blood.

"Devon..."

"I know, believe me. I'd give anything to have you all to myself today."

I shook my head in frustration and dropped my arms. It took a moment for him to step away from me, but he finally did and turned toward the spray. I watched him wash quickly and methodically. All attempts I made to help him were carefully deflected.

"If you touch me you *will* be late for work."

I laughed at his warning but kept my hands to myself after that.

We left the shower and dried off, then Devon handed me a new toothbrush before utilizing his own. I brushed my teeth and followed him back into his bedroom, combing my fingers through my wet hair. It seemed odd walking around naked, something I never did even though I lived alone. Devon had no qualms about strolling around in the buff, and found something for me to wear before donning his own clothes. I dressed in one of his t-shirts and a pair of shorts that fell to my shins. He laughed when he saw me, but swore I looked adorable. I felt ridiculous.

He grabbed my hand and led me through the house to his three-car garage. The limo took up a lot of room, but there was still the Hummer, a pickup truck, a Porsche and two different styles of motorcycle. I eyed them warily as he led me to the Hummer.

"The Porsche isn't mine," he said quietly.

I looked over to find him watching me. "Oh?"

"Yeah. It belongs to my dad. He stayed over last night. And one of the motorcycles belongs to Jack."

"Oh...uh, okay."

He helped me into the passenger's seat without another word and shut the door. I waited until he was pulling out of the garage to continue the conversation. "So, the other bike is yours?"

"Yeah. Do you like to ride?"

I laughed and watched the landscape as he left the driveway and pulled onto the street. "I've never been on one before."

He glanced at me briefly before returning his attention to the road. "Oh? Well, we can fix that easy enough."

"When?"

"Whenever you want. How about I pick you up from work on my bike?"

I'd expected him to offer to see me after work, but hearing it out loud was still a relief.

"Yeah, sure. That would be great."

He smiled at me. I smiled back. And all was well in my world.

* * * * *

Once we reached my apartment, I only had time to change into my uniform and run right out the door. Devon didn't even go in with me, opting instead to keep the truck running for a quick exit. We pulled into the parking lot at exactly six thirty and

Sean scowled at me from the front door. I opened my door, about to hop out, when Devon grabbed my arm. I looked back to find him leaning toward me for a kiss, which I eagerly gave in to.

"I'm sorry we didn't have time for breakfast. If I bring you something, will you be able to snack while you work?"

"Yeah, but you don't have to do that."

"I want to. See you in a little bit."

"Okay."

I got out of the Hummer with a sigh of regret and walked over to where Sean was unlocking the door. He gave me a look of disapproval which I ignored as I turned to wave at Devon.

"You two look pretty cozy this morning."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as I followed Sean into the store. He locked the door behind me and stayed on my heels as I went to clock in.

"Good morning, Sean. How are you today?"

He grunted and unlocked his office door. "Have fun on your day off? You were with him, weren't you?"

I frowned in annoyance, but he was too busy booting up his computer to notice.

"That's really none of your business. But for your information, yes. I had a wonderful day off yesterday."

I waited with my arms crossed and a blank look on my face for him to get my cash drawer together so I could go to my register. He seemed to be moving slower than ever but I was determined not to let him ruin my day. Thoughts of Devon kept me content.

"Here, Mari. I need you to work late today. Belinda called in so I'll need you here until six."

He turned away as if it was a done deal, but for once I decided to stand my ground. "I can't do that, Sean, I've got plans. I can stay until five but that's it."

He turned back to me with a look of surprise on his face. "What plans?"

"That's also none of your business. I'm scheduled off at four, so I'll already be here an hour later. Cynthia and Raymond will be here by then. That should be plenty of help."

I turned away before he could argue and went to my register. The fact of the matter was, he couldn't keep me any later than I was scheduled and we both knew it. I was pissed that he would even try, and wondered if maybe Devon was right. Could Sean be interested in me?

On a typical morning, Sean would stay in the office until unlocking the front door at seven while I readied my checkout lane and the front of the store. This morning he surprised me by walking out of the office behind me and watching as I set up my register.

"I don't understand what you see in him, Mari. Is it his money? Is it because he's a local celebrity?"

I dropped my cash into the register and slammed the door shut. When I looked up, he was watching me with his arms crossed against his chest and his brow furrowed. He looked honestly confused and there were dark circles under his eyes. A sense of concern suddenly filled me and I lost some of my initial anger. Sean lived alone and, though I knew he had a lot of friends, he never had a woman come around or call.

"Sean, what's going on? You've never been this nosey about my personal life before and you seem really on edge. Is everything okay with you?"

He looked startled by my question and dropped his arms before taking a step closer. The conveyor belt separated us but he could easily reach me across the short distance. There was a longing in his gaze I'd never seen before and he swallowed before opening his mouth to respond.

"I just want to know what's so special about him, Mari. I've never seen you look at a man before the way you look at Devon Campbell."

I blinked and took a step back, breaking the lock his gaze held me in. He was watching me intently and it made me self-conscious.

"W-we went to school together. I had a crush on him and he says he never forgot me. He's been really great so far, Sean."

He took a deep breath and looked away, releasing it slowly as his gaze ran over the front of the store. I don't know why I waited to hear some kind of reassurance from him. Sean was really no more than my manager but he was the closest thing to a friend I allowed. Acquaintances were the norm in my world. Life was much simpler that way.

"That's good, Mari. Just remember what I said. If you need anything, just let me know."

He abruptly turned and walked away, the sad tone of his voice leaving me more wary than before. I couldn't deny any longer that Sean had feelings for me. Exactly how deep those feeling ran I didn't know, but with Devon in my life there was no room to explore them. Since Sean was my manager it was probably for the best to ignore his interest anyway. I just shook my head and tried to find something to do.

Seven o'clock arrived quickly and Sean unlocked the front door. Two regular customers strolled in, talking all the way to the back of the store where they would peruse our canned food for a good half hour. I watched them with a grin on my face, wondering if I would be that active when I reached my seventies. My attention was still on them when someone cleared their throat behind me. I swung around to find Devon waiting with a bag in one hand and coffee in the other.

"Hey, beautiful. I hope you like croissants."

I beamed at him, wishing again that I'd had the day off. "Yes, thanks."

"Great. I got you coffee too."

"Mmm, perfect."

"Yes you are."

I rolled my eyes, but smiled so he wouldn't take offense. He set my coffee on the check-writing stand and handed me the bag.

"Do I smell chocolate?"

He laughed, most likely at the thrill in my voice. I'm definitely a certified chocoholic.

"Only one of them. The other has bacon, egg and cheese. I wanted to feed you properly at the house but we ran out of time."

My face heated at the reminder of our morning activities and he chuckled at my reaction. With a sigh of complete bliss, I took out my breakfast and tore off a bite-sized piece. "What are you doing today?"

Devon shrugged and leaned casually against the counter, looking like he had the entire day to spend there. "No plans until you get off. What time is that, anyway?"

I swallowed another bite. "It was supposed to be four, but someone called in. Sean told me to stay until six but I said no. We compromised at five."

Devon looked over to where Sean was trying to look busy stocking an end cap. "Hmm. Maybe I need to have a talk with him after all." He turned his attention back to me. "Have you thought about my offer of employment? I swear, Mari, just say the word and you'll have a job. Wherever you want."

I finished my croissant and put the chocolate one aside. I dusted my hands off before wiping my mouth as I thought over his offer. It was definitely a good opportunity but I didn't want to be beholden to him for anything.

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

He nodded in acceptance even as the look on his face said he'd rather argue. I smiled to soften the blow and he smiled back.

"All right, sweetheart. I guess I'll take off so your boss doesn't blow a fuse. Do you know what time you go to lunch?"

"I should be able to go at eleven."

"All right. I'll see you then."

I opened my mouth to argue but he kissed the tip of his finger and placed it against my lips. I closed my mouth to kiss him back and he winked before turning away.

"Bye, Devon."

I watched him leave, dreading the long day ahead.

Chapter Eight

The rest of my workday was uneventful with the exception of the thirty minutes I spent in Devon's arms. He'd brought me a sandwich for lunch and kept me on his lap while I ate. It took all of my concentration to remember how to chew as he whispered naughty things in my ear with his deep, sexy voice. His large hands stayed busy on my body and as soon as I finished eating he took over my mouth. Even knowing we had no time, I kissed him until we were both left wanting, rubbing against him as his erection strained behind his zipper. Jack was kind enough to alert us when I had two minutes left on my break and I quickly straightened my clothes and gave Devon one last kiss. It took a lot of willpower to step out of the limo, but I did and found Sean watching from the front windows.

"This is ridiculous," I grumbled as Devon stepped out behind me.

He smirked and gave Sean a wave before slipping into the front passenger seat. I watched the limo pull away then went to clock back in.

Sean did everything in his power to keep me past five o'clock until I finally threatened to quit. I don't know who was more surprised, me or him. He eyed me warily with a suspicious glint in his eyes.

"Mari, you've been here over two years. Would you really quit over a little scheduling change?"

I huffed out a breath and put my hands on my hips. "There's nothing little about it, Sean. I told you this morning I couldn't stay and my schedule clearly shows me off at four. This is bull and you know it. Why are you doing this anyway?"

We were alone in the office. I'd already put my cash drawer away and had been heading for the time clock when he'd called me in and shut the door. I looked around

the small, windowless space and tried to fight down my unease at being alone with him.

"I'm not doing anything. Belinda called in and I need someone here who knows as much as she does. That's you, whether you like it or not."

He stood and walked around his desk, placing himself between me and the door. I had no idea if it was intentional but suddenly my unease shot up tenfold.

"Sean, the issue with Belinda isn't my fault or my problem. I'm not trying to be a bitch, but I can't stay any later. I'm already going on an hour and a half."

He huffed out a breath and ran a hand through his short hair. "I wouldn't ask you to stay if I didn't need you."

I snorted. "Ask? There was no asking in your tone and you know it. You told me I had to stay, which I don't, and I said no."

"It's not like I do this all the time. You know I'm usually reasonable with the schedule. Is this about writing you up on Monday? Mari, I had to. Everyone knew you'd already been warned."

"No. This has nothing to do with that. I expected to be written up and I've already promised to work on getting here on time, especially on Mondays."

"Sure. That's great. Look, just help me finish stocking the toys, okay? You know I just got a shipment in and it needs to go out."

I rolled my eyes and fought the urge to stamp my foot. "I can't help you with that. Look, I have to go."

I took a step toward him, expecting him to move out of my way. He stood his ground and glared at me with his hands on his hips. "No."

I hesitated. "What do you mean, no?"

He took a deep breath and released it slowly, taking a step closer to me. I stepped back, but was stopped by his desk.

"You're not leaving."

"The hell I'm not!"

I gasped as Sean suddenly grabbed my arms, shaking me slightly as he spoke. "You're just going to *him* aren't you? I can't let you do that, Mari. He's not the man for you. He'll just hurt you in the long run."

The fire in his gaze spoke of anger and possessive jealousy. I'd never given him a reason to look at me that way. My pulse sped up and sweat gathered at the base of my spine.

"What are you *doing*? Let go of me!"

I tried to pull away, but his grip was strong and he pushed me back against his desk.

"I've tried to be patient. I wanted you to get to know me before I said anything. Why in the hell did you have to start dating that playboy? Am I not good enough for you?"

My arms were starting to hurt and I knew they'd be bruised. His grip kept tightening and he showed no sign of noticing my meager struggles. Fear was a live thing in my chest, crawling up my spine to choke me. Five years had passed since I'd been so helpless and I fought the tears that burned behind my eyes. I didn't know what Sean's ultimate goal was, but I'd be damned if I'd lie prone to his assault.

He pushed me fully onto the desk, leaning over me in a suggestive pose. He was still questioning my motives with Devon and didn't seem to realize how intimately he was pressed against me. It was obvious he wasn't turned-on, and that alone kept me from kneeing him in the balls. I tried reasoning with him instead as I pushed against his chest.

"Sean, let go. This isn't appropriate. You shouldn't be touching me."

"You barely look at me, Mari. I've tried to talk to you but you never give an inch. I've offered to buy you lunch. I just wanted to get to know you better!"

I choked back a sob and pushed against his chest again. “Y-you’re my manager. I didn’t know, Sean. I thought you were just trying to be nice.”

He laughed without humor and shook his head. “Nice? Looking at you every day without being able to touch you makes me ache, Mari. I don’t want to be fucking *nice*.”

I gasped and wiggled against him. “You’re hurting me!”

Somehow my words finally penetrated his anger and he froze. He looked down at his hands on my arms and then at my body. His face flushed a deep crimson and he quickly stepped back. He pulled me up from the desk but didn’t release me.

“I... Mari, I’m sorry.”

I swallowed and once again fought tears. “Let go.”

His grip loosened and I thought he’d let go of my arms, but he suddenly pulled me closer and pressed a hard kiss to my mouth. This time I didn’t hesitate to raise my knee but my aim was off and I caught him in the thigh.

He jumped back and I slapped him across the face. That received the desired reaction and he finally let go of my arms.

“Fuck! Mari, wait—”

I pushed past him and yanked the door open, running from his office and out of the store. He made no further move to stop me and I didn’t look back.

Devon was leaning against his motorcycle when I ran outside, swinging an extra helmet in his hand. His ready smile disappeared the moment he saw my face and then his eyes dipped to my arms. Time seemed to stand still as he took in the bruises on my arms, the tears on my face and my disheveled appearance. I tried to wipe away the tears and smile but he was already ripping the helmet from his head and stepping away from his bike.

“Dev—”

“Where is he? Did that son of a bitch hurt you? Tell me, Mari, where the fuck is he?”

He was yelling and already walking past me to the doors. I spun around to grab the back of his shirt in a feeble attempt to stop him. I may as well have been a fly for all the effect I had on his forward momentum. He simply dragged me along as he stormed into the store. Heads turned in our direction as I stumbled along behind him. I became frantic as old fears surfaced with a vengeance. Violence had been a normal part of my childhood but I'd worked hard as an adult to banish it from my life. Intellectually, I knew Devon only wanted to protect me. I even knew Sean deserved to get his ass kicked, but I just wanted to go home and hide.

"In here, Mr. Campbell."

To my surprise, Sean stood at his office door, holding his arm out in an open invitation. Devon walked up to him and stopped inches away from Sean, who had a resigned look on his face.

"I should kick your ass all across this store," Devon said in a low growl that, thankfully, didn't carry any further than my ears.

Sean simply nodded and turned to walk into his office. Devon reached behind and grabbed my arm gently, tugging me into his side. He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into Sean's office.

"Close the door, please."

Devon did as Sean asked before turning to glare at him. Sean sat behind his desk looking older than I'd ever seen him. He rubbed a hand down the reddened side of his face before meeting Devon's threatening gaze.

"Mr. Campbell, I regret to admit I'm the one who put those marks on Mari's arms. I have no excuse other than to say I let my anger get the best of me and handled the situation in the worst possible way. Now, we're both men. I'm willing to accept whatever you think I have coming, but not here at my place of business."

I shuddered involuntarily and Devon tightened his grip. I couldn't even look at Sean. I didn't know what was going to happen, but he'd scared the hell out of me and

now I couldn't bear to face him. I listened to Devon's deep inhalation as he relaxed ever so slightly.

"You do realize she could press charges?"

I whimpered at the thought of going to a police station and Devon wrapped his other arm around me, holding me against his chest.

"Yes, I do. All I can do is apologize again and swear that I never meant for that to happen. I'll admit I don't approve of her relationship with you but it's none of my business. I really don't know what else to say."

Devon ran a hand up and down my back and over my head. "Mari, sweetheart, what do you want to do?"

I shuddered and fisted his shirt in my hands. I didn't want to think. I just wanted to leave. "I want to go home."

The whispered words had barely left my mouth before Devon swung around and opened the door.

"We'll settle this later," he said over his shoulder, nudging me out the door.

I let go of him and walked out of the store to his bike, ignoring the questioning stares from my coworkers. Devon kept a hand on my waist the whole way and remained silent. He helped me put on the helmet and get seated on his motorcycle before hopping in front of me and starting it up. I wrapped my arms around him and closed my eyes, ready to lose myself in him. Wherever he wanted to go, whatever he wanted to do, I was his. My relief at being with him was so great I just wanted to drown in his presence.

The trip to his house passed in a blur and I barely remember walking through his house to his bedroom. He shut and locked his door while I stood by the bed with my arms around my waist. I had no clue what was going through his mind. Mine was a mess of fear, guilt, confusion and relief. I took a shuddering breath and he turned to look at me.

"Mari."

That was all. Just my name breathed in a whisper between his lips and I was sobbing like a baby in a puddle on the floor. I kept my hands over my face as he pulled me onto his lap, whispering promises of retribution and devotion into my ear. He held me close and I soaked up his warmth like a glutton.

"I-I'm s-sorry, Devon."

"Shh, baby. You've got nothing to apologize for."

I hiccupped and buried my face in his throat, throwing my arms around his neck. "I should've —"

"Nothing, Mari." His voice turned fierce as he tightened his grip. "Sean's a lot stronger than you. If you had struggled it might've been worse. Tell me what happened. Tell me what that bastard did to you."

My tears slowed to a trickle and I took a deep, cleansing breath. Devon sat completely still and loosened his grip enough for me to look up into his concerned gaze. He was so handsome he took my breath away. Doubts flittered in my mind again but were quickly banished by the look on his face. I thought I saw...love? Perhaps I was just projecting, because there was no doubt in my mind that I was head over heels for my knight in shining armor.

"We were arguing because he wanted me to stay. I tried to leave the office but he grabbed my arms and pushed me against the desk. It wasn't sexual. I could tell he was just angry. But he held me down and I got scared."

I watched Devon swallow and take a couple of deep breaths before attempting to speak. "He held you down on the desk?" Anger vibrated in his voice and I shuddered. "Just tell me, baby."

I cleared my throat and thought over my words carefully. "Um, yeah. But like I said, he was just arguing, not like...pushing into me or anything. When I told him to stop, he kind of looked surprised and backed off."

Devon closed his eyes and pulled me against his chest again gently. I let him hold me, knowing he now needed the comfort as much as I did.

“I could fucking kill him,” he whispered against my hair.

There was now more than anger in his tone. I tightened my grip.

“He’s not worth the trouble, Devon. I’ll just stay away from him.”

He relaxed his arms and I leaned back to look at his face.

“Will you quit, Mari? Will you come work for me now?”

The last of my tears slid down my cheeks and I watched his eyes track them to my lips.

“Yes, Devon. I’ll work for you now.”

He smiled and his relief was palpable. Then he leaned in to kiss me sweetly and chased all my nightmares away.

Chapter Nine

I woke sometime later to realize I was naked in Devon's arms and he was kissing the back of my neck. I moved against him. He suckled my skin before rubbing his lips along my jaw to my ear. The lights were off and the windows dark, the only illumination coming from his open bathroom door.

"Mmm, how long was I asleep?"

He placed a tender bite on my shoulder before answering. "A couple of hours. How do you feel?"

I thought it over and took a deep cleansing breath. "Better. Rested."

"Good. It's amazing what good loving can do for you, huh?"

I giggled as heat suffused my face at the reminder of Devon's good loving. He'd done more than brush away thoughts of Sean. He'd patiently allowed me to learn his body as he'd worshipped mine. I was surprised I hadn't slept the entire night away.

"Definitely. Have you been asleep this whole time too?"

He hesitated and kissed my neck again.

"Do you remember the week before prom when we had that big project due in Speech? I asked you to help me and you originally said yes, but then changed your mind by the next day."

I frowned at the abrupt change in subject as the details slowly surfaced but answered anyway.

"Yeah. I really wanted to help you, but when we left the classroom together your friends were laughing and elbowing each other. I thought you might get shit for talking to me."

He groaned. "Are you serious? That's why you said no?"

He sounded so upset I was almost afraid to answer. "Um...yeah."

He tightened his arm around my waist. I snuggled back against him and he groaned for a whole new reason when his naked erection prodded my ass.

"Damn. I wish I'd known. Those idiots were making a big deal out of the fact that you were talking to me. Every one of them knew I was working up the nerve to ask you to prom."

I gasped and rolled onto my back to face him. He was silhouetted with the feeble light behind him but I sensed his gaze studying me.

"You've got to be kidding."

"Nope. I wound up taking someone else, but I wanted to take you."

I shook my head in amazement and squinted as I tried to gauge his sincerity. I couldn't see the details of his face enough to know.

"Devon, you were one of the most popular guys in school. I was nobody...a sophomore."

He kissed me on the nose.

"Remember the week before that when we each gave a speech on ourselves? You stood at the front of the classroom in your torn jeans and faded t-shirt, looking defiant and adorable. Your shoulders were straight and your chin was up. I thought you were the most beautiful girl in the school."

"I was scared shitless, in little better than rags and ready to throw up."

"You were perfect, but then you started talking about everything and everyone but yourself. You mentioned your favorite subject and went on about literature. Then you said your favorite food was pasta and went into detail about Italian food. At the end I realized you did the assignment but still remained a complete mystery."

"There was a lot of bad shit going on in my life and I didn't want anyone to know."

He ran the backs of his fingers down the side of my face and then up into my hair, threading them through the strands.

"I know, baby. I understand that now. But it didn't matter what you said or why you said it. Sitting there, watching you that day, I fell in love with you. I didn't even realize it until you turned me down on the project and I was too upset to push. I was in love with you but too immature to act on it and I've regretted it ever since."

Tears stung my eyes and I didn't try to fight them as they overflowed. My chin quivered and he kissed it.

"Oh Devon."

"Don't cry. Don't be afraid of this or me...okay?"

I sniffled and nodded, unable to argue with the intensity in his tone. I wanted to tell him I loved him too, but he kissed me before I could and then rose from the bed. I watched him slip on a pair of jeans in silence.

"I'm going to run downstairs and check on dinner. I'll be right back."

He was gone before I worked up the courage to tell him how I felt. A sense of contentment fell over me as I lay there staring at the shadows on his ceiling and thinking over the day's events. Devon had made love to me slowly and I'd fallen asleep in his arms, escaping the terror of Sean's actions. I'd worked for Hardy's All Goods for just over two years and hadn't planned on leaving anytime soon. I had no real plans or life goals other than to pay my bills and have enough money to live on every week. Now everything would change. My life had been disrupted and I had no clue what would happen next. I heard the bedroom door open. The light clicked on and Devon's face soon appeared over me.

"Hey, gorgeous, how are you feeling?"

I cleared my throat but my smile faded into a frown when I got a good look at him.

"What happened?" I gently placed my hand against the swollen side of his face and stared at his black eye.

He just smirked. "I tendered your immediate resignation while you slept."

I bit my lip in slight confusion, before gasping as the implications of his statement finally made it through my sleep-fogged mind.

“You had a fight with Sean? Devon, he was a Marine!”

For some reason that made him laugh. “Yeah? I knew he’d had some type of training, but then so have I.”

He sat beside me on the bed and I dropped my hand as he leaned over with his elbows on either side of my head. Our lips were a whisper apart and mine tingled with the promise of his kiss.

“You’re okay?”

“Yeah, baby, just fine. And in case you’re wondering, Sean’s all right too. I made my point and he took it like a man. We talked afterward and I could tell he sincerely regretted hurting you. He’s not such a bad guy I guess, but I told him to stay the hell away from you.”

I swallowed down my misplaced guilt and took a shaky breath. I didn’t know why Sean had hidden his feelings from me for so long. Maybe because he was my boss, or for some reason I’d never guess. Whatever the reason, it was over now. I wasn’t going back to Hardy’s and would most likely never see him again. Devon patiently waited as he watched me digest his news.

“It’s just after seven and dinner will be ready soon. Do you want me to bring it to you, or would you like to get dressed and eat downstairs?”

I turned my attention back to him and placed a hand on the side of his face again, stroking his bruised cheek with my thumb. He turned slightly to kiss my palm before smiling down at me. My emotions welled up and I wanted to confess everything to him, my love, my fears, my doubts. Nothing was off limits now and I wanted to give him everything. I swallowed hard and fought the sting of tears. “We need to talk.”

He looked concerned for a moment but then I smiled, more brightly than before, and it seemed to put him at ease.

"All right, sweetheart, we will. But first you need to eat."

I nodded my agreement and gently pushed him away. He sat up, but remained beside me as I did too. The blanket slipped to my waist, baring my naked breasts. My first instinct was to cover myself but the look of hunger in his gaze stopped me.

"You are so damn beautiful," he whispered, as he cupped my breast in his palm.

I moaned and leaned into his touch, placing a kiss on his throat. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I want you again more than you can imagine. But dinner will be ready soon."

I slid my hands over his chest to his shoulders, and then around his neck to hug him. "That's okay. We have all night...right?"

He held me firmly and placed a kiss on my temple.

"Absolutely. I don't want you to worry about a thing, Mari. I want to take care of you. Will you let me?"

I closed my eyes and thought about letting go of all my worries and placing my fate in his capable hands. How long would it last? How much was he willing to do? He waited patiently for my answer and that in itself was reassuring.

"Yes."

He squeezed me tighter for a second before releasing me to stand up. I gripped his arms and used them to pull myself from the bed. I sensed him watching me as I casually strolled to his dresser and grabbed a shirt. I was testing him, testing my limits in his domain. Once I'd donned his shirt and a pair of shorts, I turned to gauge his reaction. He grinned and hunger remained in his eyes. There was now a possessive satisfaction in his gaze as well and he simply held out his hand for me. I walked over and placed my palm against his, entwining our fingers together.

"I'm never going to let anyone hurt you again, baby. I swear it."

I took a shuddering breath and nodded, knowing if I tried to speak he would hear tears in my voice. He didn't say anything else, just led me from the room to where our dinner waited.

We ate baked fish with steamed vegetables and it was glorious. I tried not to exclaim over every bite but it was hard. Devon didn't seem to notice my predicament as he once again recited the various positions open at his company. There were a few I was capable of but only one I was qualified for, and not the one I wanted.

"If you work in the Human Resources department, you'll be on the floor below my office. We'll be able to have lunch together most days."

I chewed slowly as I considered how to respond. "Devon, I have a high school education. That position probably requires a degree."

He looked thoughtful as he took a sip of wine. "Have you thought about going back to school?"

I shrugged as I speared a carrot with my fork. "Sure, someday. But like everything else that takes money and I've never had enough. I was working two jobs for nearly three years and then I started at the store. My schedule there was too sporadic to go to school."

He finished his food and sat back with his wineglass in hand. I watched him from the corner of my eye and pretended to be interested in the rest of my meal.

"You could take the file clerk position and work half days, then go to school in the afternoon. The community college campus is just down the street from my office."

I stopped pretending to eat and pushed my plate away, feeling embarrassed and nervous. He watched me expectantly and I didn't want to disappoint him.

"Well, I do have some money saved up but I want to get a car so I don't always have to rely on the bus. And I was hoping to move into a better apartment next year."

He put his nearly empty wineglass down and reached across the table. I put my hand in his and started to smile, but the serious look on his face stopped me.

"Move in with me, Mari."

"What?"

"Move in with me, baby, please. Don't make me sleep without you. My bed is too damn big and lonely."

I sputtered and just stared at him in shock as I tried to understand his request. "But...but..."

"I know it might seem too soon, but I've been looking for you for years."

I gave a nervous laugh. "That long?"

He leaned over to plant a gentle kiss on my lips and the contact calmed me. I placed my hands on either side of his face and pushed him away enough to look into his eyes.

"Devon, that's a big step for me. I've lived alone for a while now."

He nodded and sat back, taking a sip of wine before responding. "I know, I just... I want to take care of you. I know you've struggled and I'm more than capable of taking care of everything you could possibly need. I don't want to scare you away or take away your independence, Mari, but I don't want to live without you either."

Elation and fear warred inside me. We were nowhere near the end of his two-week trial but my heart had already decided. He was the one. Whether I could admit it out loud or not, he had me heart and soul. He ran his thumb over my forehead, smoothing away my frown.

"Devon, I'm scared of this. It's happening so fast."

To my surprise he smirked and shook his head. "As I've said, I've been looking for you."

I bit my lip and tried not to show any other sign of my nervousness. "Yeah?"

"I didn't hire the investigator until after the five-year reunion of your class. I'd hoped to see you there, but you never showed up."

"I didn't even know about it. I didn't graduate from Wilshire."

He took my hand from the table and cradled it between his palms. "Well, the investigator I hired did tell me more than I admitted."

"Like what?"

Nervousness flittered across his features and I wondered if it was anything close to mine.

"I know about Henry."

My pulse shot up and I pulled my hand from between his and stood. He rose slowly, his hands out as if afraid to spook me further.

"That was a long time ago."

"I know, baby, and I'm sorry I brought it up. I just want you to know I realize there is a lot of shit in your past that haunts you. I'm glad you broke that fuck's arm and got away. I'm just sorry any of that happened to you at all."

Images tried to surface from the horrible four months I'd spent in Henry and Jane's care. They were my last foster parents, just before I became legal, and they'd been the worst. "It's over. It doesn't matter now."

He nodded and took a step closer, putting his hands down to his sides. "Yes, it's over, and I won't let anyone hurt you again. Do you trust me, Mari?"

I looked up into his sincere green eyes and knew this time I saw love there. Fear and uncertainty tried to choke me, doubt reared its ugly head, but I was determined to beat them all and be strong. I loved him and decided in that moment he was worth fighting any battle for, even the one raging within me.

"Yes, Devon...I love you."

Surprise appeared first on his handsome face, but it was quickly replaced with joy. He laughed and took the final step toward me, pulling me into a fierce hug.

"Oh baby, I love you too. I love you so damn much."

He'd pulled me off my feet and I wrapped my arms and legs around him. I was giddy with relief and laughed along with him as he danced us around the room. He set

me on the end of the long dining table, well away from the remnants of our dinner. I smiled up at him and then swallowed hard at the intensity of his gaze.

“Mari, the past few days have been a miracle. I love having you back in my life.”

I opened my mouth to speak but before I could, he leaned down and covered it with his. He kissed me slowly but with bold intensity, sweeping his tongue into my mouth. I whimpered against his assault as he slid his fingers into my hair and held my head still for his feasting. I kissed him back, sucking on his tongue, his lips, any part of him I could access before he nibbled a path down my throat. He leaned over me, pushing me flat on my back while he pressed gentle love bites on my skin.

“I want you, here, just like this. Is that okay, baby?”

In answer, I reached down to the hem of my shirt and slowly pulled it off. He watched, licking his lips as my breasts were bared for his view. He grabbed the waistband of my shorts and pulled them down as I rose up to allow their removal.

“Your turn,” I said breathlessly, panting from the heat of his gaze.

He grinned and took his clothes off quickly so we were soon both naked in his dining room. He removed a condom from his wallet and set it on the table beside me, before running his hands slowly up my thighs. I gasped at the friction of his skin against mine and opened my legs to make room for his body.

“I love having you here like this.”

“Are you sure no one will come in?”

He leaned over me, covering me in his warmth and making my blood boil in excitement.

“No one is here but us. Don’t worry, it’s just you and me tonight.”

I ran my hands up his arms and over his shoulders. He groaned at the contact and pressed his mouth against the pulse in my neck. We stayed that way for nearly a minute, just reveling in the intimacy of our bodies pressed together. It was wonderful

and, amazingly enough, I felt loved. Then he started to move against me and all rational thought fled.

His hands smoothed down my sides until he gripped my hips, while his mouth latched onto one distended nipple. I arched my back, pushing my breast more fully into his mouth. He exhaled against my skin and suckled.

"Oh, Devon. God, you make me feel so good."

"Mmm, you taste good. I could feast on your luscious body for hours."

His roughened voice sent shivers down my spine and moisture seeped from my body. My inner muscles clenched and warm wetness prepared me for him. I was aching, ready for his hard cock, wanting him more than ever, as if it was our first time.

"Now, Devon, please. I need you in me."

Panting in excitement, he stood and grabbed the condom, nearly ripping it in half in his haste. I placed a hand over his fist and he visibly relaxed but his hands were still shaking as he rolled the condom down his erection. I licked my lips, wishing I'd taken the time to taste him before getting to this point.

"Ready? I want to make love to you, but I'm so fucking turned-on right now it's not going to be slow."

I looked him in the eye as he used one hand to put the tip of his cock at my entrance. The thumb of his other hand slid across my clit and I gasped.

"Fuck me, baby. Please."

As if I'd flicked a switch with my plea, his look turned feral and he thrust forward in one swift motion. I cried out in ecstasy as he pumped into me fiercely. He hooked his arms under my knees and lifted, raising my ass off the table and changing the angle of his penetration. We both groaned at the new sensation and I grabbed his thighs.

"So...fucking...good." I smiled in agreement and slid my hands over my belly to my breasts. "Oh yeah. Play with them for me, baby. Make those perfect nipples harder."

His erotic suggestion made me hotter and I cupped a breast in each hand. I gently tugged on my nipples, moaning as streaks of pleasure shot straight to my pussy. I got wetter by the heartbeat and my climax began to build. Devon released one of my legs and put his thumb back on my clit.

“Oh yes!”

He grinned in satisfaction and moved his thumb in a soft, steady circle. By the third rotation I was thrusting harder against him and ready to come. Just a little more friction would push me over. Suddenly he removed his thumb and lightly pinched my clit between his fingers. I screamed his name as I came hard enough to see stars.

“Oh, fuck yeah. Come for me, Mari. Squeeze my cock with that beautiful pussy.”

Tremors racked my body as I came for what seemed like hours. I whimpered and put my hands over his where he still touched my cit. He thrust harder and leaned over to kiss me. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and slid my fingers into his hair, tugging lightly. He growled and groaned as warmth flooded me.

“Oh fuck!”

He came and the look on his face turned me on even more. I loved watching the passion play across his features as he emptied. Once he was done, every muscle in his body seemed to relax as he melted into me.

“I love you, Devon.” I couldn’t stop myself from saying it.

He lifted his head and looked at me, joy shining in his eyes. “I love you too, Mari, so damn much.”

I sighed in complete contentment and let my arms fall to my sides as he stood. He left me long enough to discard the condom then carried me upstairs to his bathroom. We washed each other slowly in a bath full of bubbles, and he touched me as if I was precious. Eventually we made it back to his wonderful bed and lay facing each other.

“So...will you move in?”

I put my arms around his neck and he settled comfortably against me. Our legs tangled together and I wished this one perfect moment in time could last forever.

"Yes, Devon. I'll move in with you, but on one condition."

He didn't try to hide his relief as it flashed across his face. But it was quickly replaced with concern. "What, baby? I'll do anything."

"Well, I don't really know if it's within your control, but your gorgeous mug is plastered all over the damn city."

He chuckled and rubbed his nose against mine. "What's wrong, you don't want anyone else seeing me?"

"I don't really mind so much, but you *are* considered the city's most eligible bachelor."

His expression grew serious and he kissed me again, his mouth lingering against mine as he nibbled on my lips. "That's easily corrected. Once you move in and are seen with me all over town, there will be no doubt in anyone's mind that I'm taken."

"Mmm, yeah, okay."

My eyes drifted shut and I lost myself in his kisses.

"Mari?"

"Hmmm?"

"There is another way to fix that problem...more permanently." My pulse sped up and my eyes shot open. He looked nervous and seemed to see the fear on my face. "But that can wait for now. After all, I still have to make it through my two-week trial period...right?"

I swallowed and gave him a wary smile. "Right. We'll just take it one day at a time."

"Absolutely. One day at a time with you here in my bed every night. You'll work for me in the morning and go to school in the afternoon. I'll take care of everything, baby, and you most of all. Okay?"

I sighed in resignation and happiness. "Yes, Devon. Okay."

He kissed me again then relaxed against me and planted light kisses over my face and neck, before working his way under the covers to my breasts. I giggled and grabbed my pillow with both hands, giving him free rein over my body. His broad shoulders moved beneath the blankets as his lips explored my skin. Imagining his moves became more erotic than actually seeing them and I moaned in approval when he lightly bit my hip. My breath hitched and I squirmed from his light kisses and soft nibbles. Before long I'd kicked the blankets completely away, exposing him between my thighs.

"No, Devon...it's my turn." I could barely catch my breath enough for the command to escape. He looked up in surprise, his eyes widening farther when I sat up and moved away from his touch.

"Mari—"

"Every time you touch me I lose my mind. I've just let you have your way, but not this time. It's my turn, baby."

He grinned and moved to the center of the bed, where he spread out on his back like an offering. I'd expected an argument, or at least a little struggle. He'd never struck me as the submissive sort, but then I looked into his eyes and remembered that he loved me. I swallowed tears of joy at his gesture of surrender and crawled to his side. He appeared completely relaxed with his hands behind his head. My gaze flowed down his torso to his erection, standing tall and proud, and I realized he wasn't completely relaxed. I wrapped my fingers around the base and licked my lips. He groaned.

At first I just stroked him from root to tip, enjoying his warm skin gripped in my fist. His cock was like a steel rod wrapped in silk and the feel of it deepened my hunger. I wanted to taste his seed against my tongue but I'd never done that before and my confidence wavered. I didn't even realize I was chewing my bottom lip until he touched my mouth with the tips of his fingers.

"Baby, what's wrong? Your hands are so soft. They feel fucking amazing."

The hitch in his voice sent a flutter of desire through my chest, and warmed me thoroughly with the knowledge that I was making him feel good. I smiled and licked my lips again, glancing at the drop of moisture that beaded on the tip of his cock.

“Devon, I want to taste you.”

He groaned and moved his hands down to his sides, where he fisted the sheet beneath him. I shot another glance at his face. He watched me with intense anticipation.

“Whatever you want, baby. I’m yours to play with.”

That thought made my mouth water as well as dampening my thighs. I held him steady and leaned over to place the tip of my tongue at the base of his erection. An animalistic growl of need escaped his throat as I swiped my tongue slowly up his shaft. I reveled in the taste of his skin, licking the tip and the moisture gathered at his peak. I didn’t know exactly what to do but the sounds straining from his throat and chest egged me on as I licked and sucked the head of his cock hungrily. I loved the feel of him deep in my throat. I swallowed and he grabbed my hair gently, halting the motion of my head.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come if you don’t stop.”

“Mmmm,” I hummed in approval, ignoring his fingers in my hair.

“Baby...oh fuck...baby...”

I breathed in through my nose and moved my hand up and down his shaft while sucking the head of his pulsing cock. Nothing short of death could stop me at that point. I was too far gone in the ecstasy of his taste.

“Mari!”

He yelled my name and gave a final tug on the sides of my head before warmth filled my mouth. I swallowed down his salty essence and thrilled at the knowledge that I’d brought him to climax. He stopped tugging and gently ran his fingers through my hair as I continued to place soft kisses along his softening shaft. His contented hum made me grin in satisfaction as I crawled up his body to lie on his chest.

"Damn, that was perfect."

"Really?"

His look turned serious as he searched my face and cradled my head in his hands.

"Really. It was amazing and I love you so much it's scary."

Elation filled me and I wondered again how I'd gotten so lucky.

"I love you too, Devon. Even though I'm a bit scared too."

"You don't ever need to be afraid of me."

"I'm not; not of *you*. Just of how you make me feel. I'm afraid to wake up tomorrow to find out everything has changed."

"Tomorrow you will wake up in my arms and we'll spend the day together. Then we'll come back to our bed and fall asleep in each other's arms again."

"And live happily ever after?"

He chuckled and kissed the tip of my nose. "We'll sure as hell try, baby. I spent too many miserable years without you. I'm not letting anything mess this up without a fight."

I smiled and snuggled against him, ready to fall asleep in his arms. Later, when he curled around my body, I thought for the first time that maybe everything would be all right. Maybe I was good enough for Devon Campbell and he really wanted to keep me for a while after all. I fell asleep dreaming of the future, and this time it wasn't a nightmare.

About the Author

Ms. Missy Jane is the alter ego of a Texas mother of four who has been married to the same wonderful man for thirteen years. About five years ago, Missy finished reading a book by Mercedes Lackey and thought, "Now, what if..." And a monster was created.

Missy now spends most of her time lost in worlds of her own making, alternately loving and hating such creatures as vampires, shapeshifters and gargoyles (to name a few). When not writing, she spends her time reading, taking photos of her beautiful daughters and training her husband to believe she's always right.

Missy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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