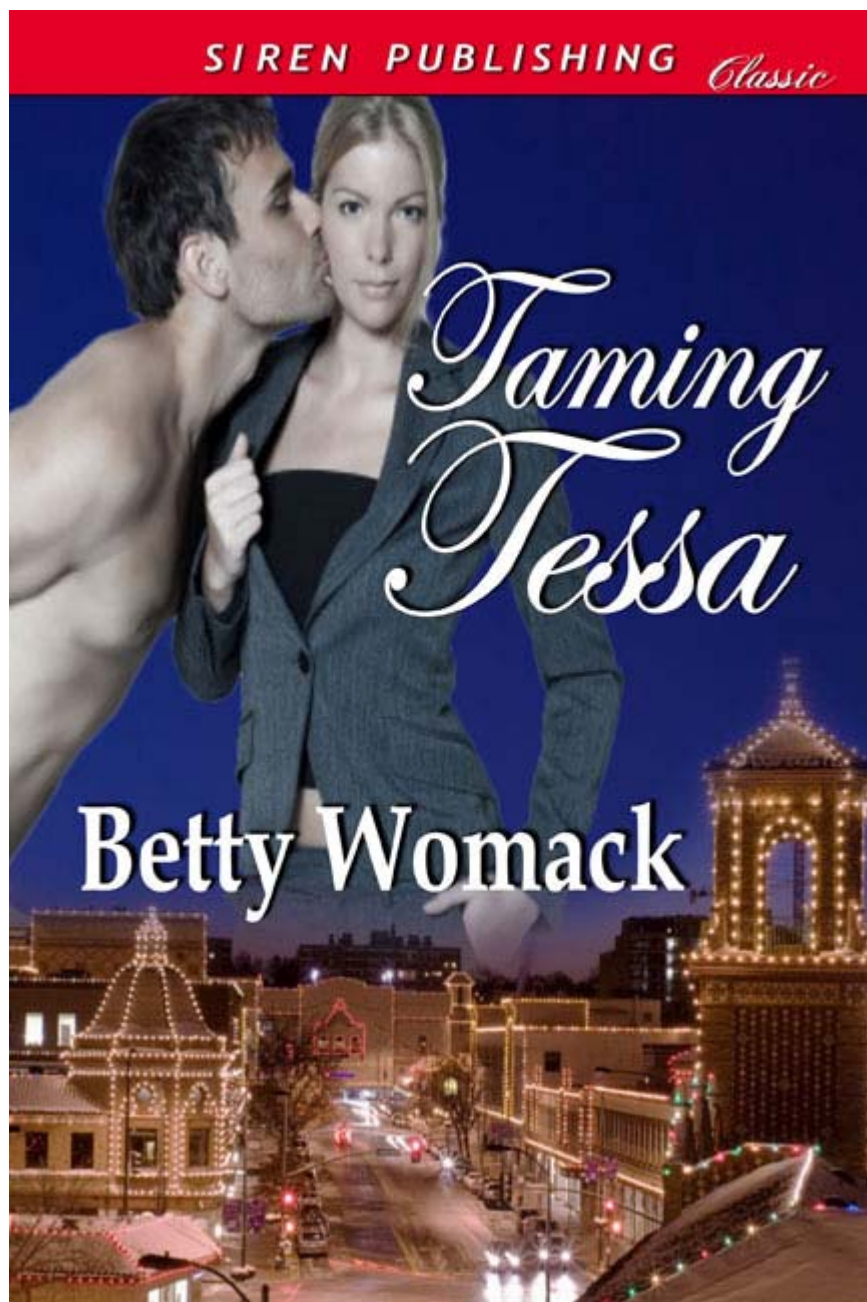


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

Taming Tessa

Betty Womack



TAMING TESSA

Betty Womack

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000."

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

TAMING TESSA

Copyright © 2010 by Betty Womack

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-795-0

First E-book Publication: April 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

All cover art and logo copyright © 2010 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

If you have purchased this copy of *Taming Tessa* by Betty Womack from BookStrand.com or its official distributors, thank you. Also, thank you for not sharing your copy of this book.

Regarding E-book Piracy

This book is copyrighted intellectual property. No other individual or group has resale rights, auction rights, membership rights, sharing rights, or any kind of rights to sell or to give away a copy of this book.

The author and the publisher work very hard to bring our paying readers high-quality reading entertainment.

This is Betty Womack's livelihood. It's fair and simple. Please respect Ms. Womack's right to earn a living from her work.

Amanda Hilton, Publisher
www.SirenPublishing.com
www.BookStrand.com

TAMING TESSA

BETTY WOMACK

Copyright © 2010

Chapter One

Jack Savage had plans, none of which included driving from downtown Kansas City through the Plaza in rush hour traffic during a snowstorm.

An attorney should never be friends with a client. There were too many drawbacks, like playing chauffeur to their brat sister, Teresa Duval.

Damn it. He had plans.

While he sat in the stalled traffic and waited for the snarl to unwind, he became more pissed off. Why would she need him to drive her anywhere? She had money and half a dozen cars.

Hell yes, he knew the answer. The chick just felt like having a servant that day. And he got the call.

Jack pulled up next to a Lamborghini in front of the address Duval gave him on the phone. Like every place on the Plaza, parking spaces were at a premium.

He glanced up at the windows of the building, groaning at the thought of going inside. The Walnuts on the Plaza was the hottest address in Kansas City to live for people with money to burn.

He'd probably get a ticket for double parking. Drake Duval could pay this one. Jack pulled the keys from the ignition of his sedan and got out. He trudged through the snow and ran up the steps to the front entrance of the building.

The doorman scowled at him long and hard before opening the heavy glass door.

“Ms. Duval is expecting me.” Jack brushed snow from the shoulders of his black wool overcoat.

“Shall I announce you, sir?”

What the hell did he look like to the snooty bastard? Some kind of derelict? “No need. She probably knows her ride is here, been looking out the window at all the sliding cars in the pretty snow.” The doorman’s eyes rounded at Jack’s flip reply. “I’ll just be going on up and getting Ms. Duval if you’ll tell me the apartment number.”

Jack was positive that the stone-faced little man sniffed with indignation.

“Mr. Link Griffin owns the apartment. I’m not sure he’d approve of Ms. Duval inviting company in.”

What made people want to be such hard asses? Especially today when he had a couple dozen things to accomplish in the next two hours.

“The number, please.”

“Six sixty-nine. The only unit on the floor.”

That fucking figured. Griffin needed lots of room for his women and trust fund money. “Thanks, friend. Maybe we can have a beer after work tonight.”

“I hardly think we would have anything in common, sir.”

Jack laughed at the man’s answer. He probably thought he’d lift his wallet.

He got off the slowest elevator in history to find himself in a fancy outer hallway on the sixth floor. The ritzy apartments were off limits unless you were invited in. The place smelled of money—lots of it.

Okay, now see if the little lady is ready for her taxi.

His moment of levity vanished when he saw the door to six sixty-nine slightly ajar. Son of a bitch. Blood.

The blood spatters began at the door and continued on to the service exit door at the end of the curving hallway. The door to the stairway yawned wide open.

A stab of cold worry hit his gut.

Tessa!

He rapped hard on the door, waiting for someone to say something.

Shit.

He looked down at the drying blood on the sand-colored carpet. Hell with waiting any longer. He shouldered the door open and went inside the quiet entry hall.

Big and void of any sign of life. A sea horse fountain splashed uselessly in the center of the entry hall. Another damned receiving area. All that empty space sure made a guy feel welcome.

“Tessa.” He didn’t like the eerie silence. Anywhere Tessa happened to be, noise followed. Right now he’d give anything to hear that cultured voice.

The double doors to the formal living room stood wide open. That didn’t mean a thing. The woman probably never closed a door or drawer after herself.

“Tessa!”

He wasn’t ticked now. His hair prickled at the back of his neck. A pile of white towels on the floor were stained a dark plum color, releasing the scent of fresh blood as warm air circulated in the room.

Band-aids and small, bloody gauze were scattered around the fancy décor. Cotton swabs had been tossed in an ashtray. Someone had something bleeding.

“Tessa!”

No time to be cautious. He rushed from room to room, opening closets and looking under beds. He would have bypassed it, but the drapes on the terrace doors fluttered slightly.

Jack picked up a heavy brass figurine of a naked chick and slowly pulled the drapes apart. He wasn't quite six feet, weighing one eighty, and dreaded a fight with Griffin's goons.

He clenched his teeth, prepared to defend Tessa from whoever hurt her.

The doors were open only a crack, but cold air poured in the room. He shoved the doors open wide and stepped outside, squinting against the wind-driven sleet.

He flinched when he saw crimson stains on the skiff of snow covering the brick terrace floor, but that wasn't what held Jack's attention.

Teresa Duval pressed her body to the icy wall, staring at him with suspicion-filled eyes.

"Tessa." He spoke softly, moving toward her. "Come inside."

For one agonizing second, she appeared ready to run for the rail. Instead, she lifted her hand and pointed to the terrace door, still hugging the damn wall.

She whispered, obviously afraid of being overheard. "Is he dead?"

"Should he be?"

"I tried to kill him."

Jack relaxed a little, figuring there hadn't been a murder committed yet. "You caused all this mess? What in the hell did you hit him with?"

"My fist." She looked ready to cry, and her chin quivered while she spoke. "I told him he was getting drunk and he slapped me. I hit him in the mouth because it hurt." She trembled, obviously frightened. "I ran and he chased me, screaming that I was a cheap whore. He caught me and started beating me. That's when I hit him in the nose."

Jack couldn't help it. The low chuckle wouldn't stay quiet. That explained all the blood.

"Tessa, I'm calling the cops just to be on the safe side. Griffin may press charges against you." The roll of her eyes triggered his

disgust again. "It always helps if the assailant feels compassion for her victim."

She bit her lip and grimaced. "I don't feel compassion."

"I know that, but you can pretend for once, can't you?" He held the phone up to drive his point home. "To keep your ass out of a cell downtown?"

She went pale with fright at the thought, looking ready to bolt again, while he punched in the numbers to the downtown precinct. The operator connected him to Detective Dave Dresslehouse's desk.

"Yeah, hey, Dresslehouse, Savage here." Jack glanced at Tessa, making sure she stayed put. "I'm removing a young woman from an apartment where an altercation took place."

Jack could hear his friend laughing. "You involved in it, Savage?"

"No. Just taking the lady home. There were a few punches thrown and some blood drawn. Nobody for the morgue, but the bastard that got hit is bleeding. From what I hear, he probably has a broken nose." He moved away from Tessa while he finished his call. "She stood up for herself. There was no attack. Just self defense."

He lowered his voice and finished his conversation. "Her family wouldn't want this to get out. I'd appreciate it if you contacted me if there is a follow up investigation."

After giving the detective all the details he could furnish, Jack closed his phone and looked at Tessa.

He wanted to shake her when signs of regret set in. She looked contrite and beautiful.

"Are you sure I didn't kill him?"

"Griffin isn't dead. No bleeding corpses have been turned in." Her look of fear made him soften his tone. "The detective said he'd check it out for me. He said the bastard is probably being patched up at Research Hospital right now and will be out carousing around by tomorrow night."

Jack couldn't work up any sympathy for the son of a bitch in question. Hearing the news that her latest boyfriend had survived didn't seem to reassure the beauty hugging the wall.

What an opening for him to ask why the hell she put up with the woman-beating party boy. Jack wouldn't say what he thought out loud. He had to get her out of the apartment fast.

His gaze fell to the stains on her coat. "None of this blood came from you, did it?"

She shook her head and barely glanced at her ruined ermine. "I have to go see how he is, or he'll..."

"Or he'll beat the hell out of you?"

Keep your mouth shut, Savage. What she does is none of your business, God damn it.

Something changed in her attitude after his personal dig.

Her long, pale-blond hair lifted in a blustering gust of wind and moved about her chapped face. With the grace of a pampered chick, she pulled her ermine coat closer about her slender body and lifted her chin.

Such a beautiful woman and so damn messed up. Why the hell did he care? He'd gotten tired of stepping around the truth about her lifestyle, ignoring her split lips and bruised cheeks. He wanted to pull her close and tell her how deep his feelings ran for her. He was in love with her and didn't know exactly when it happened. Maybe the first time she really looked at him. His life had changed in that moment and Tessa owned him, lock, stock, and bleeding heart.

Tessa spoke at last. "That's none of your business, Savage."

What did it matter to him if she left with him or not? He knew one thing for sure. Her bullshit made him tired and really cranky.

"Tessa." He stepped toward her. "I don't give a rat's ass what's going on in your crazy life. Your brother's the one concerned about you. Not me."

She gave him a dubious once over. "Then why are you here?"

"I'm being paid."

“You’re a flunky.”

“That’s a compliment coming from a trick like you.”

Aw, hell. Why had he said that? Trading verbal punches with a chick wasn’t his style. He had to question his own sanity, standing out in the bitter December weather with an aggravating broad. He had to catch a flight home to Sedona, not stand around, freezing his ass off in Kansas City.

Sudden movement from her area of the terrace indicated she’d gotten cold enough to seek shelter. Her shoulders moved in a shudder as she spoke.

“I want to go home.”

Jack pointed to the open doors. “Your servant, ma’am.”

If he read the message in her glower correctly, she considered him scum beneath her feet and he’d better step aside while her majesty made an exit from the frigid cold terrace.

She went back into the lavish apartment and grabbed her small handbag from the floor. Walking behind her, Jack checked her out like he always did. She had the sweetest ass he’d ever seen.

They took the slow elevator down to the lobby and escaped the doorman’s notice. Jack thought he might have rushed Tessa a little too hard when she lost her shoes.

He groaned, gathering them up and kneeling down for her to stick her small feet back into the ridiculous slides.

“Great winter shoes there, lady.”

Outside in the crackling cold air, her tawny eyes lingered on him longer than usual.

Oh no, man. Don’t get carried away by one look of pity from this one. Not unless she begs you.

“Savage.”

He stopped mentally taking off her clothes.

“Yeah, Tessa.”

He expected trouble when she looked up at Griffin’s windows.

“I can call a taxi.” She covered the lower half of her face with the collar of her plush coat. “I know you hate being around me. Drake shouldn’t have bothered you.”

Jack weighed the honesty of her words against her true personality. She loved screwing with his mind.

“No trouble, Tessa.” He took her arm and led her to his car. The windshield had disappeared under a blanket of snow. He opened the door for her, hoping she found the sedan worthy of her supreme highness. “Get in.”

She didn’t have to say anything. Her cat eyes spoke clearly. She resented doing anything he suggested. Damn, what a gorgeous woman. Too bad all that silky skin covered a scheming, hell-bent-for-trouble witch. He couldn’t be too pissed after noticing the spray of blood on her sleeve.

Griffin had better walk easy from now on.

They rode in silence for several blocks, the episode in the apartment sticking in Jack’s mind. He hated dead silence, and hell yes, he felt protective toward her.

He had to say something to her. She paled and glanced at him from the corner of her eyes. Man, she couldn’t be scared of him, could she?

“Are you worried? About what Griffin will do?”

She shook her head and stared out the window, making small circles on the fogged up glass. After what seemed like hours to him, she hit him with a bombshell.

“Will you take me home with you?”

She sat placid as a cherub now, sweet and soft looking, while TNT exploded under his ass. “What?”

He thought he’d misunderstood her.

Her frown said she saw him as a little slow. “Home. With you.” Her dainty shoulders lifted while she waited for his numb tongue to flap. “Well?”

Chapter Two

Could she be so repulsive to him? His shell-shocked expression had been proof enough that he'd rather drive off a bridge. She didn't ask again until he stopped the car in front of her townhouse.

"So, Savage?"

"So, Tessa?"

Damn him. He'd forced her to beg. She didn't like him that much. "Okay, I'll say it again just to see that scared rabbit look on your face." She turned to meet his steady gaze. "Me, staying at your place for a few days."

He stared at her as if she'd turned green and grown a horn on her forehead.

"Did it ever occur to you, lady, that I might have something to do?" He flicked his hand toward her in open impatience. "You'll be fine. If you're scared of Griffin, tell security to keep him off the premises."

"He said he would kill me." As luck would have it, her voice broke on the last word. Maybe he would feel sorry for her.

He remained resolute, leaning over to open the door for her. "Stay with Drake. Its two days until Christmas. He's your brother, for Christ's sake."

His suggestion would have been good for anyone but Tessa. Constant war raged between her and her brother. He'd controlled her life and her money until her twenty-second birthday. Until that time, she relied on him for everything, and he routinely invaded her privacy. Now, she had no idea how many millions she had and

enjoyed spending it on everything and anything she wanted. That included men she liked.

Funny how she'd never noticed Jack's dark eyes. "Drake is out of town by now. I'll be alone. And scared."

"Do me a favor, Tessa." His sensuous cologne snaked around her in a warm lei of exotic fragrance. "Get out. I have a plane to catch."

Her heart pounded with the hurt of his rejection and growing anger. "You jerk. You can't believe I meant any of that." She would have tumbled from the car if he hadn't caught her wrist. "You're the last man I would spend Christmas with."

Her exit would not be the theatrical scene she'd hoped to pull off. She stumbled and slid, legs straddled and skirt hiked to her ass. The ultimate disgrace came as she fell out of her shoes for the second time that day. No, now came the most unforgivable act, falling onto her back in the snow.

She heard the car door slam, but managed to scramble to her feet before Jack could get to her.

"Let me help you." He had the balls to laugh at her. "You trying out for the hockey team?"

"Get away." She slapped his hand aside. "I don't need your help. Go catch your plane to hell."

He stood back while she scrounged around for her shoes. "Need help yet, Cinderella?"

She couldn't think of anything dirty enough to call him. Carrying a shoe in each hand, she brushed past him, stomping up the walkway to her front door.

Her bare feet burned from the cold and her lips were numb. She hated herself for letting him see her in such a ridiculous situation.

At the door, she hesitated and glanced at him over her shoulder. Mister Cool watched her every move. Getting the key in the lock seemed to take forever. She finally heard the lock click and pushed the door open.

Once safely inside with the door closed, she looked out the peephole to see him driving away. The weight of being alone settled on her shoulders.

She called herself an idiot, watching the red tail lights of Jack's car disappear in the swirling snow.

Why weren't you nicer to him? He would have stayed if you'd treated him right. If you could have made him forget how much he dislikes you.

Maybe she should call the hospital and ask Griffin if he wanted to make up.

Her soft groan was the only sound in the dimly lit hallway.

Don't be a fool, Tessa. That relationship ended when you broke his pretty nose.

She knew that didn't matter. There had never been anything between them. They used each other as party dates because neither of them had anyone to care about.

Spending the night alone made her nervous. If it hadn't been storming, she'd go to one of the trendy clubs on the Plaza, maybe meet someone new.

She sighed and made a halfhearted attempt to hang up her coat. The expensive garment fell unnoticed to the floor. Out of habit, she went through the house, flipping on lights. The fact shamed her, but she feared what she couldn't see in the dark.

A thumping sound from the upper level startled her. What if someone had gotten in and hid upstairs? That was stupid thinking. The door had been locked when she came home. No one else had a key.

Okay, so you don't have to go up there right now.

The kitchen seemed the best place to wait for her courage to return. Tessa dropped her handbag on the hall table and walked into the gleaming chrome and granite kitchen. Her grandmother's service of Bavarian china and Waterford crystal sparkled in the dish cabinets. She had never used it.

Her gaze went to the stack of unopened mail on the counter where she'd dropped it several days ago. She sorted through the envelopes, tossing most of it aside. The postcard with a pretty winter scene held her attention. The note had come from her brother Drake. He'd sent a last minute invitation for her to join the family at their Squaw Creek lodge in Colorado. Sure, and be bored, questioned, and badgered by her family.

She glanced around the kitchen and made the decision of a lifetime. In the morning, she would call Drake. Better to be with her tight-assed brother than alone.

Feeling hopeful and somewhat eager, Tessa hurried up the stairs to her bedroom to pack. She laid out enough clothing for a week. That meant several suitcases for all the shoes, boots, and cosmetics that would be needed.

Thirty minutes later, she became tired of packing. Why hadn't she hired that live-in maid to do all this? She knew she'd turned that down because Drake had suggested it.

Tessa didn't want someone else in the house. It would have ended what little privacy she enjoyed. She valued that too much to give it up.

On the flip side, she wondered how living with Jack would be. He was too good looking not to be involved with someone special. Her chances with him had been zero from the day they'd met. Being her brother's attorney and friend, the chances were zero to nothing.

She remembered their first meeting. He'd walked in just in time to witness a screaming brawl between her and Drake. She couldn't remember the reason for the fight, but she did remember Jack's expression. He'd been amused.

Plus, he probably thought she was a trollop, easy and available to any shithead that came along. Maybe because he'd seen her with a lot of different men.

To hell with him.

She threw a catalog on the floor in disgust.

He didn't know her at all, and it looked like he didn't want that to change.

The small snapshot of Drake on her desk caught her eye. She wondered what he had in common with Savage. For that matter, how old was Jack Savage? He was in his late thirties, early forties maybe. No gray hair and his teeth were white when he laughed. Even if it happened to be at her.

She loved his laugh and warmed to her bones whenever he smiled at her. From their first meeting, he'd moved into her heart and there had been no room for anyone else.

* * * *

Jack leaned against the window casing and stared morosely down at the snow piling up on the side street where he lived on the re-emerging West Side. He'd moved into this neighborhood for the quiet and the fantastic view of the river and old rail yard.

There was something comforting about living near the abandoned stockyards. The West was never far away.

People like Tessa and Drake Duval were messing with his peace and quiet, and he didn't like it.

Drake had a huge set of balls to ask this of him. Being with Tessa compared to a hot summer whirlwind with a crazy witch in the center. A sexy, mouthy witch.

He figured he'd be lucky to get to the airport at all. He sipped his cognac, the last in the house, and thought about what he'd done earlier that evening.

Not much of a hero, you bastard.

Tessa hadn't been out of his thoughts since he'd left her. He was being ridiculous. The woman was just that—a woman, and a damn tough one at that. Why was he worried about her? If he didn't stop thinking that way, she'd ruin the holidays with his family and friends.

Think about the parties and women you're going to miss. Mom's fabulous meals. The women. Aw, shit!

Jack was furious with himself, but grabbed his overcoat and keys, slamming the door as he left to go pick up the world's biggest nuisance: Tessa.

He had been kidding himself, knowing from the start he was going back for her. He hated like hell to call his parents with the lame excuse that he was busy and wouldn't be home for Christmas.

He heard the disappointment in his mother's voice now and her saying she understood. He sure as hell didn't.

Driving the hazardous streets to pick up a woman he had no desire to spend time with gave him reason to question his mental capacity.

He clenched his teeth as a skidding city bus groaned past him and hit a traffic light. Not only was he crazy, he was a danger to himself. Hell fire. He was from Arizona. What the hell did he know about snow and ice? Nothing.

That settled it. If he did manage to get Tessa and himself back to his place, they weren't leaving till spring thaw. He wondered just how safe they would be from each other, caged up in his bachelor pad.

After witnessing a dozen collisions on the way to her place, he breathed easier. He pulled up in front of Tessa's townhouse, grinning when he noticed all the lights were on.

He got out of the car and glanced around the area, a habit all attorneys were wise to adopt. He never knew when an unhappy felon wanted his head.

There was at least another three inches of fresh powder on the walk. He plowed through it while his dress shoes filled with snow. Why the hell hadn't he changed his clothes? His earlier thought that he might like the fresh, crisp scent of the air died a quick death. There wasn't anything good about this weather.

He tried the bell and then pounded on the door. There was no response.

“Tessa.” He stomped his feet, testing to make sure they weren’t frozen. “Open the door, damn it.”

The doorknob turned, but nothing else happened. He grimaced, wondering what was going on. Laying his shoulder against the sturdy door, he pushed with all his strength.

He couldn’t believe it. He was airborne.

Whoa, damn it!

That’s all he had time to think while he flailed his arms and spreads his legs on the slick tile floor, then fell face down in Tessa’s hallway. When he slid to a stop and looked up, she stood over him, her smile taunting.

“Hello, Jack.”

“Why don’t you lock your damn door?” There was no dignity or anything close for him to grab on to. “Get your stuff. You’re going home with me.”

“What made you change your mind?” Her smile was smug, and her eyes sparkled with what she probably considered a victory.

“You looked like you could use a vacation.” His back hurt when he got up to stand face to face with her.

He calculated their lips would have no trouble locking since she was almost as tall as him. His fingers itched to cup her pretty chin and trace the fine line of her jaw. He was getting hard just being this close to her. Would her breasts fit in his hands?

“Jack?” She moved a fraction of an inch closer to him, smothering him with her sensuality. “I’ll go get my things.”

He woke from his erotic fog with a start. “Hurry it up. The car will be ice cold if you keep screwing around.”

Such a witty choice of words. Her soft laughter clung to him long after she’d walked serenely up the stairs, leaving him to think about the way her hips looked as she walked.

While she was upstairs humming, he paced the floor and called himself a fool.

What was he going to do with a woman so rich her fur coat lay in a heap on the floor? He picked it up and hung it on a fancy oak hall tree.

He looked around, taking in the fine brocade couches and designer club chairs in front of the stone fireplace. There had never been a fire in that thing.

The liquor cabinet was a glass affair filled with bottles of fancy labels he'd never considered buying. He was surprised to see she hadn't opened any of them.

He wondered what she would think of his two bottles, one scotch and a half bottle of cognac. Hell, he didn't care what she thought. He was going to treat her just like he always did.

You're kidding yourself, Savage. This is going to be different, and you're worried about being alone with her.

He hoped he could keep his desire for her his secret problem.

"It's about time." His gruff comment spewed from his open mouth when Tessa came down the stairs. She looked sensational in a black coat that hit the floor and fit her waist like a hug. Her long blonde hair hid under a red tam on her head.

"I hope I wasn't too long." Her gaze darted from him to the two suitcases she'd pushed down the stairs. "Is this too much?"

"Is it enough to last until March?" Her eyes rounded with shock. "Relax. We'll kill each other before then."

She reached for one of the bags. "I'll be gone long before I have to put you out of your misery."

"You got that right, sister." Jack grabbed both bags. "Open the door and lock it after we're out."

"Let me have one." Her offer sounded limp as he hurried out the door, fighting two heavy bags to the car.

"Get in the car...please." Jack threw the bags in the trunk and stomped his way back to the front of the car. He got in and turned the heater to full blast.

She huddled in her coat, watching him with a wariness he hated. He decided to ignore her and try to get home with as little trouble as possible.

What happened once they were alone in his apartment was not going to be pretty. Why had he chosen to stay here in the frozen wastes of the Midwest? Tessa had nothing to do with his decision.

Liar.

Chapter Three

“You’re mad.” Of course he was mad. He probably had planned to be with someone he cared for.

“That’s not even close.” His dark gaze drilled into her long enough to say how despicable he found her.

She knew one way of changing his mind. She would have sex with Jack. Maybe.

He didn’t speak again until they got to his apartment. “We’re here, ma’am.”

She made a face of distaste. He lived in a two-story salt-box brick house. It sat perched on the edge of a cliff and overlooked nothing but a rusting rail yard and abandoned warehouses.

He got her bags from the trunk. “You can look out a window where it’s warm.” She knew he was strong when he easily lifted both bags and ran up the short flight of steps. He unlocked the door and set her bags inside. “Well, come on in. It’s reasonably clean.”

She didn’t doubt that. He was always neat and smelled so damn good. “Where am I to sleep?”

“With me.” A hint of a teasing smile played over his sensuous mouth. “You got a problem with that?”

“Not at all.” He probably thought she was teasing. She wasn’t.

“Don’t get excited, Tessa. I have two bedrooms.”

He broke her bubble easily enough.

The inside of his house smelled like him—clean and exotically male. She took off her coat and draped it over a cocoa-brown armchair.

“They’ve invented a place in the wall for that.” He took the coat and handed it back to her. “I’ll show you where your closet is.”

“My things?” He was already halfway up the winding staircase, carrying her bags.

“Later.” He eyed her with a slight smile. “Right now, I want to get you settled in your bedroom.”

What was that little smile—a tease, a warning, or indigestion?

“I’m ready if you are.” She followed him to the upper level, hating to admit that the place was nicely furnished and spotless.

“This is where you’ll bunk.” He flipped the light switch and the room came alive with warmth. “Plenty of room for you and all your stuff.” He nodded to an open door across the room. “Your private bath.”

“Do you have candles?” He arched his dark brows. “I always have candles in my bathroom.”

“What do you take me for?” He tossed her coat onto the white down comforter on the bed. “You’ll make it without them. Or do you need me to scrub your back?”

“If you’re offering, it would be a nice change from your hostile self.”

“Oh, this is going to be fun.” His mumbled words made her smile.

“What did you say, Jack?”

“I said yes, ma’am.”

He went back downstairs, leaving her to explore.

He liked comfort and no clutter. The bed was a nice big one, covered with a sea-blue down comforter and a folded green blanket at the foot. He also liked to be warm.

Thinking there might be leftover women’s things in the double closet, she opened the doors. The soft familiar scent of his cologne was the only occupant.

That was going to change right now. She hurried to open her luggage and began to hang up her clothes.

“Tessa.” She swung around, surprised to see him in the doorway.

“What’s wrong?” Maybe he was going to take her back home. She closed the closet doors. “Has Griffin found me?”

“Wouldn’t matter if he did.” Jack handed her towels and washcloths. “I can handle that.”

Her stomach churned, and she hugged the towels to her chest. “He’s cruel.”

“And I have a thirty-eight.”

“Really?” Jack fascinated her even more now, and his cool demeanor fired her attraction to him. The idea he would protect her made her love him more.

He paused at the door, turning to look at her. “I really wanted to tell you there are no strings attached to this. Okay?”

Okay, that proves he isn’t attracted to you.

She turned down the comforter. “I didn’t think so.”

He drummed his fingers on the door and smiled at her. “I’ll try to find something for you to eat.”

She’d always wondered how being alone with him would be. None of her ideas had been accurate. The idea that he felt nothing for her hit like a ton of bricks.

She remembered the way he’d gone out of his way to avoid her, leaving Drake’s office the moment she showed up. Much to her shame, she’d driven by Drake’s office on a regular basis just to see if Jack was there.

He’d made it crystal clear she wasn’t the girl of his dreams. But maybe she’d be the woman he couldn’t forget.

The aroma of coffee made her lick her lips. Something else smelled wonderful, and she realized she hadn’t eaten since lunch yesterday.

He’d changed while she had been snooping. She’d never seen him in faded jeans and a dark blue flannel shirt. They looked good on him.

“That smells good.” Tessa looked at the table he’d set for two. “What is it?”

“Porterhouse steak and scalloped potatoes.” He frowned at her questioning of the fare. “It’s tomato soup and butter sandwiches.”

“Just like on television. Perfect.” She’d never had a butter sandwich, but they looked heavenly.

“Just eat it and keep your compliments to yourself.”

She hadn’t meant to piss him off, but she always seemed to rub him the wrong way. “Okay.”

He sat down and began to eat, glancing at her from time to time. “What?”

“I like it.” That wasn’t a lie, and she smiled, chewing the slightly dry bread. “I’ll clean up after we eat.”

“I have a dishwasher.” He poured two cups of coffee from the carafe he’d set on the table, sipping his, and shoving the creamer across the table. “I hope you don’t take sugar.”

She didn’t ask why. He was a man alone and probably didn’t eat at home often.

“No, this is great like it is.” Tessa ate quickly, finishing her soup like a starving kid. “May I have a refill?”

She held her bowl out to him.

“Got plenty and you can help yourself.”

While she refilled her bowl, she tried to make conversation. “What do you do with your spare time, Jack?”

He got up and set his bowl in the sink. “You don’t have to make small talk.” His dark gaze made a quick survey of her before he spoke again. “Finish your meal. I’m going to see what the forecast is.”

Just how hot did he find her?

His coolness was wearing thin and he’d find out between now and morning she wasn’t to be ignored. He’d go down in flames.

Finishing the soup wasn’t hard. It was delicious. After polishing off a second sandwich, she sought out the man she’d soon call her own.

She found him in the living room, deeply absorbed in something on his laptop.

He looked so comfortable, she wanted to mess with his bear trap mind. She barely earned a glance from him upon her entrance.

“What are you doing?” She smirked, hoping to get a response from him. “Writing to Mommy?”

“Since there’s nothing going on here, I’m finishing up some things I should have gotten to earlier.” He grimaced, apparently losing his concentration. “It’s called work.”

He was insulting her, not subtly, but mean and angrily.

“There’s nothing going on here because you’re a jerk.” Tessa wanted to throw a chair at him for all his hateful comments. “Let’s get this clear between us. I wouldn’t fuck a man like you. You probably don’t know how to do anything but grunt.”

Her tirade ended and he stared at her with a grin. “Well damn, Tessa.” He closed the laptop. “Is that what you’re accustomed to?”

“This isn’t about me.” She glared at him. “You seem to think I want in your pants. That’s a laugh. I don’t like horseshit on my sheets.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He turned the sound up on the TV. “I told you no strings and I meant it.”

She couldn’t stop. Tessa hated the condescending tone of his voice. She’d heard it all her life.

“Thank you so much, Jack.” She glanced out triple windows that overlooked a small yard. It was dark and she was stung by the loneliness creeping around her. “See to it you stay in your own room and don’t accidentally wander into mine.”

She stomped off to take the stairs two at a time, afraid he’d have a nasty comeback for her warning.

God, she hadn’t meant any of it. She couldn’t stop the tug of war being waged inside her. The more he resisted, the hotter her blood flamed for him.

Stripping in his bathroom was unbelievably erotic and her nipples peaked as she caught her image in the vanity mirror. She stepped into the tub and let it fill to her chin, sniffing the soap she’d taken from the

plain white dish on the tub rim. She'd never wanted to lick soap before, but this smelled like him.

Turning the bar over in her palms, the aroma burst around her like a storm of desire, the bubbles sliding down her arms to her breasts. Rubbing the soap over her body was arousing and fired the need for sex in every part of her body.

Desire throbbed between her legs and she slid the soap down to press it to her pussy, drawing it up and down against her clit. Hard and slick, just the way he would be.

Damn it! She wasn't going to get herself off before he came upstairs. Waiting would only heighten the enjoyment of hearing him beg.

Chapter Four

Jack tried to forget Tessa, didn't want to think about her being upstairs, doing only Lord knew what.

He watched the weather, the sole story in town. Snow all night, snow all day tomorrow, and maybe a break the next day.

That meant he'd be holed up with a tiger for several days and she wasn't easy to live with. What on earth had possessed him, sent him running to bring her home like a kid after a stray puppy?

He'd known from day one she had her hooks into him. There simply hadn't been a time he could let it be known how hard he was for her, what with all her traveling and playboy escorts.

She'd sent out little signals that she was interested, giving him her best come hither smiles and on occasion, rubbing against him if the chance came about. But he wouldn't be second man on the totem pole. Only once had they had a few minutes alone, at a fancy cocktail party Drake had invited him to.

The crowd was noisy and getting loaded. He'd turned down enough hash to make a mint if he took it to the streets. All around him were red-faced sloppy men and skinny, high women. The scene was straight out of his college days.

He was getting ready to leave when out of the blue, Tessa was walking toward him. Alone, she'd been flirtatious and hot enough to melt his hair. One second away from him asking her for a date, her well oiled, model-looking date came to collect her.

That had been months ago. He'd learned a lot about her in that time, things he didn't want to know. She liked to party, sometimes

drank too much, and ran with a well-heeled, anything goes crowd. She wouldn't give him the time of day and he didn't ask.

He yawned, tired of sitting downstairs and feeling too intimidated to go to his bedroom.

Hell with that, he was going to bed.

At the top of the stairs, he noticed that her door was open and the lights blazed.

He didn't care what she did as long as she was quiet about it. Maybe he should tell her goodnight, see if she needed anything.

Sucker. You haven't thought of anything but getting in bed with her. Ask for that.

He went to his room but left the door open in case she needed him. Jack couldn't believe his growing concern for Tessa. She'd rip his balls off just for laughs if the mood hit her.

After a quick shower, he dried in a hurry, glad to be home and out of the storm. He was accustomed to having the house to himself and walked around with no concern about being naked.

He reached for the switch on the bedside lamp, but her voice stopped him.

"I like the lights on."

He didn't grab his stuff or try to cover up. She had invaded his privacy. When he turned around, he saw Tessa wearing the thinnest champagne-colored gown he'd ever seen.

He didn't care if she saw his dick slap his belly. That's what she intended. "Tessa, I thought I made myself clear."

She was within reach but didn't touch him, releasing the laces that were crisscrossed over her full breasts. "You said no strings attached. I'm making sure."

He'd made that crazy statement, hadn't he?

"You're doing a good job, Tessa." He stood where he was, hands on his hips. "Damn good."

Hot blood thundered through his body, making him aware of her, not just that she was there, but the perfume in her hair, the pulse in her

temple. He could feel the soft heat from her smooth skin, the slight tremble in her slender body.

She smiled the way he'd dreamed about, the kind that said she was wet for him.

Her fingers plucked the laces free, not reaching for the gown as it fell to the floor.

Jack forgot his naked body was laid bare for her to approve or disapprove. He didn't care if she just wanted sex. That's all he wanted. Lots of it.

She moved toward him with a teasing smile. "I've wanted this for a very long time, Jack."

He pulled her into his arms, wanting her with a hunger he'd pushed away for far too long. She sighed with a softness he'd never thought she possessed.

"You're so damn hot, Tessa." He lost all control of his tongue and cock while she plastered her slender body to him. "Are you wild cat or kitten tonight?"

For a fraction of a second, her tawny eyes narrowed. "If I don't come four times, I'm all tiger."

"Promises, promises." He picked her up and laid her on his bed. "Only four times?" He dropped onto the bed to gaze at her before pulling her arm around his neck.

She laughed her ball-squeezing laugh and touched his cock. "I'll be easy on you this time."

He was rock hard and her fingers on him shoved him toward climax. "I have a present for you, baby."

If he didn't pleasure her first, he wouldn't last through one stroke. She knew what he intended and relaxed her legs. Damn, he'd always imagined she'd have a sweet pussy, but his greed wouldn't let him admire the cake before he bent to taste it.

* * * *

His tongue barely touched her clit after he opened her wet folds to lick them slowly, driving her crazy with the occasional touch to her aching bud.

She tried to pull his face to her pussy, but he held her hand and went on with his torture. "I want it all...right now."

"You only get four chances, honey." He sat up and pulled her legs over his shoulders. He was smiling at her and she wanted to claw his hard-muscled belly. Sweet heaven, what was he doing to her?

He stroked her folds with his tongue, nipping her clit occasionally, each little nibble sending fire through her body.

Her heart skipped several beats while his long fingers stroked her into a fever pitch of need to be fucked. He didn't listen to her, went on with his maddening tease. She bucked her hips to take in his fingers, clenching around him to keep the delicious fire close.

She was so close to coming, yet he knew how to hold her off, burying his face between her legs to suck her pussy lips into his mouth. He pulled her clit between his teeth and bit, gently but enough to make her scream as the hot sizzles of fuck-me shot up her backbone.

She tried to sit up, reaching for his dick, but he took her hand and squeezed her fingers. "Are you ready for number one?"

"Yes, damn you." She was more than ready, wrapping her arms around his neck when he lay down to cover her trembling body. "Make me come, Jack."

His cock throbbed in her hand and she fantasized about the feel of it inside her. Large and hot, ridged with full veins and a slick head she wanted to taste.

His scent hypnotized her, drove her to the brink of sexual desire. Her lips swelled with the blood of passion, yielded to his closing over hers. His kiss was deep and searching, rough, sweet, and promising. She wanted him, wanted him inside her slick pussy and around her with his hard body.

The tip of his cock brushed her clit and she gasped, pulling down on his hips. Pleasure coursed through her, delicious quivers spiraling from her pussy to her mouth making her laugh with ecstasy.

He was solid, his olive body honed to perfection and he pumped like a well-oiled machine, driving deeper and harder, taking her out of reality. She rose up in flames, riding a wild wind and clinging to him to stay on earth.

“Jack...Jack...I’m coming...Jack!”

She dug her nails into the hard flesh of his ass while he thrust into her. The desire to never let him finish consumed her so much that her legs hugged his waist, his energy pulling her up to his belly.

This was what she wanted, being in bed with the man she couldn’t win and could never forget.

No, remember he doesn’t want you, he’s only having sex with you.

God, she wanted him to desire her, but more than that, she wanted him to fall in love with her.

Chapter Five

“Something wrong, Tessa?” He slowed for a heartbeat to look into her eyes. “I can wait if you’re not ready for number two.” His voice was sexy, low, and gruff. “Tell me what you want, baby.”

“I want to taste you.” She’d never offered that to any man, but she wanted to have his full length in her mouth, to give him the kind of extreme pleasure he’d given her.

He rolled to his back, pulling her onto his belly. “Next time, gorgeous. Tonight is your party. At your mercy, Madame.”

She liked the way he fisted her hair to draw her face close to his. “Your mouth is perfect.” Kissing him made her gleefully happy, the firmness of his lips exciting and perfect. “It’s too bad you waited so long to show me how delicious they are.”

He stroked her back, and covered her mouth with his in a soft, searching kiss. “You’re wrong, Tessa.”

“What are you talking about?”

He shifted his position and rolled her onto her back. “You made me wait and enjoyed every second of it.”

She knew what he meant. No need being honest just yet. “I think Jack needs to fuck me again.” She inhaled deeply, wanting to cry with joy as he drove into her again.

This time, he didn’t slow down or ask what she wanted, simply drove her into the second climax for the evening. When he came, he held her tight and cushioned her ass with his hands.

She still throbbed when he pulled from her and held her in his arms. “What’s that smile for?” she asked.

He curled a strand of her hair around his finger, still smiling. "I've never seen you all fresh-fucked looking."

"Like it?" She was concerned that he found her unappealing now.

"Love it." He got out of bed to look out the window. "Want a drink?"

What should she say? He'd probably been told about her DUI and was testing her. "No thanks. You go ahead."

"I'll go get us a drink." He turned to smile at her and grabbed a blanket off the chair. "I don't like drinking alone."

While he was gone, Tessa freshened up in his bathroom. She was using his brush when he returned. "Hope you don't mind. I looked like a witch."

"Come back to bed and we'll mess it up again." He held two brandy snifters, waiting for her to join him. "I knew I was saving this for a special person."

There was no reason to refuse his hospitality. After all, they'd just had the best sex she'd ever experienced. "I'm glad to know I'm special to you, Jack."

She padded across the floor to crawl into the bed, still warm from their body heat. He joined her, propping her up against the pillows. She took the glass he held out and sipped the brandy. The brandy tasted excellent, just like him.

He swallowed a mouthful and leaned back, apparently content to have her in his bed. Several minutes passed before he spoke.

"You should be with your family."

He was speaking about his own desire to be where his family was, she thought. "Why on earth would I do that?" She tipped her glass to drain the contents.

He took the glass and eyed her with a hint of irritation. "What's with you and Drake? I know he's wondering where you are."

"That's a laugh." She sat up and glared at him. "What's it to you?"

"He's your family, Tessa."

“You want to hear about my family?” Here it came, questions and preaching from the one man she wanted no lecturing from. “My parents were old when I was born, completely in love with Drake and ignoring me. I had the misfortune of being a girl.”

He took her hand. “All kids feel a little neglected if there are several.” He probed deeper, and she suddenly remembered he was an attorney. “I’m sure they loved you. And Drake is hard to ignore.”

“Yes, he is.” She turned her head, not liking the conversation, but she couldn’t stop. “They died when I was fifteen, within six months of each other.”

His arm went about her waist. “I’m sorry. Want to talk about something else?”

“Sure.” She drew the comforter up around them. “I went to college. Did Drake ever tell you that?”

Interest gleamed in his eyes and he leaned closer to gaze at her. “So, what did you study?”

“Art.” She laughed at the idea that she’d really thought she was an artist. “I lasted two years.”

“So, you’re a college girl.” He grinned, and she hoped he wasn’t being condescending.

“No, I just spent time there. My brother gave the school a ton of money not to fail me.” She was tired of the subject. “I simply dropped out.”

The hug he gave her was like a warm lifeline.

Stop it, Tessa. He probably thinks you’re a dumbass failure. And you are.

“Let’s go downstairs and light my phony fireplace.” He got up, pulling on a pair of gray sweatpants. “Here, put on my shirt.”

“You don’t want to look at my naked ass anymore?” She smiled, fastening the middle button.

“Not at all, I just know we’ll wind up screwing on the stairs if you run around naked.” He pulled her into his arms and pressed a soft kiss to her mouth. “I have a great couch.”

His playful side came out as he led her downstairs to the living room. He picked her up and carried her to the bay window.

“What are you thinking, Jack?” She was curious about everything he thought or did.

“I was wondering if you’d like to build a snowman.” He brushed her lips with his. “Maybe tomorrow.”

He laid her on the comfortable couch, pressing her into the pillows. “Yes, maybe tomorrow.” She loved his hands on her breasts and between her legs, flooded with desire as his weight held her willing prisoner.

She gave herself over completely to him, memorizing the strong contours of his back and the shape and texture of his lips. Flash fire whipped over her body while his tongue teased her nipples. She wanted more, holding back a scream while he drove her crazy.

Panic hit when he stood and ran up the stairs. “Jack!”

He reappeared, carrying the comforter from his bed. “That’s what I like—an eager woman.”

She wanted to yell at him, maybe hit him for leaving her at such a special moment. “What are you doing?”

“Lighting the fire.” He knelt to turn on the electric flame and smiled at her. “It’s for show only. Atmosphere.”

She grabbed the comforter and spread it out in front of the fireplace. Still shaking with the lingering feeling of desertion, she lay down to gaze at him.

“I need you.”

“Are you cold?” He lay down and covered her.

“I won’t be when you light me up.”

She wove her fingers deep in his hair, loving its cool crispness, glorying in the maleness of his body. He took her breath, playing with her clit until she was wet and grinding her hips against his hand.

He groaned, his breathing labored while she circled the head of his cock in her fingers, working him until he was as slick as her. She sat up, pushing him onto his back.

He tasted good, his tip large and a perfect fit for her mouth. The veins were engorged, his hot blood surging through them to make him hard as marble. She took in his entire length and sucked until he caught her face in his hands.

“That’s so damn good, Tessa, but I want you to fuck me this time.” His dark gaze locked with hers, and she almost came as he pulled her on top of him.

She moved up to straddle his hips, sliding forward to fit him into her wet pussy. The heat that blazed through her was unbearable, and she gripped him in a ferocious vise of passion-strengthened muscle. Her hips worked against his erection, furiously, while his cock strummed her clit with every motion. Fire built in her slit, ignited and burned out of control until she came in a shattering crimson inferno. His climax was powerful, delicious to watch while he gripped her shoulders and held her until he’d filled her with his juice.

They lay together for long moments, the calm after the storm taking away the earlier fury. Tessa yawned and kissed his chest. Life was suddenly good and she was happy for the first time in a very long time.

Chapter Six

“Want to share my hot bath?” Tessa flipped the warm, soapy water at him. God, she was unbelievable between the sheets. He couldn’t get enough of her.

He finished shaving and dropped the towel that had hung from his waist. “You’re too much, Tessa.”

“Not for you.” She leaned forward and made room for him behind her. “I’ll wash your back if you’d like.”

“Let’s just relax for a minute.” Jack thought over their all-night romp and had begun to regret being a horny fool.

He’d compromised his client-attorney relationship with Drake in a way that had no explanation. He’d asked him to take care of his sister, not fuck her brains out. Not that he hadn’t gone to the moon with her. She was the most giving, sensual woman he’d ever slept with.

But she was volatile, and he knew she’d break his nose if he pissed her off. And there was also Link Griffin. He had no idea where that was going. Jack knew he was a fool of the worst kind.

“You’re quiet, Jack.” Her voice was calm, but her slender body stiffened against him. “What were you thinking?”

“A lady never asks a man something like that.” He kissed her ear.

“As you know, I’m no lady.” She turned to smile at him, and his gut wrenched in reaction to how beautiful she looked.

“You’re perfect.” He pulled her back to lie against him, trying to relax. He listened to the far off rumble of some kind of machinery and closed his eyes. He hadn’t slept at all and it was catching up with him.

She sat forward and pointed to the door. "I hear something." He couldn't believe how fast she got out of the tub and grabbed several towels. "Link has sent them after me."

"Tessa." Damn if he could figure out why she was so scared of that punk. "I think it's a snowplow come to rescue us."

Her eyes were round and filled with fright. "Are you sure?"

"I hope the hell it is, so we can get something to eat." He remembered how afraid she'd looked at Griffin's apartment. "Let me worry about that bastard, okay?"

She clung to him for a moment, but quickly regained her tough exterior. "Want to have sex before breakfast?"

Jack saw no real desire in her eyes. It was obvious to him that she was trying to regain her "I don't give a damn" attitude. He didn't care to have sex with a woman trying to get even with some other guy.

"How about sex after breakfast?" The sweet smile she gave him said she was already aroused by the idea. "Let's get dressed and see what's open."

She kissed him, her tongue twisting around his while she rubbed his cock. "I'm ravenous."

"Me too, baby." Which was he hungrier for, eggs and bacon or her fine ass? The latter of course, but he had to have strength to give her what she wanted.

He followed her up the stairs, wanting to grab her and have a roll on the floor. She'd really gotten into his blood, and now he'd be lucky to ever get her out.

"I'll be ready in a flash." She patted his ass before disappearing into the room she was supposed to occupy.

"I'll be here." Why was he here? Just to sleep with a woman that wouldn't spit on him tomorrow.

While he pulled on jeans and boots, he could hear Tessa running water, closing doors. It all sounded good to him. He'd just finished buttoning his shirt when she stood in the door, watching him.

“I’m ready.” She was a knockout in a black sweater and slacks that hugged her lush curves. “Is our car here yet?”

He had never known anyone so accustomed to being waited on. She didn’t mean just a car, but one of her fleet. “Do you feel like digging my car out of two feet of snow?” He grinned, not surprised by the question in her eyes. “If you’re wearing boots, we can walk to the café.”

She looked down at her feet and held her coat out on her arm. “Will these do?”

“Yeah, they’re boots all right.” He shook his head, knowing the butter soft, high heeled boots wouldn’t keep her feet warm. She looked so smug that he didn’t say what he really thought. “Sure, they’re perfect.”

* * * *

“Whose big idea was this?” Tessa sat on her rear, brushing at the snow on her face. “I’m not that hungry.”

Jack gripped her hand to pull her out of the snow bank she’d stumbled into. “That happens when the plow comes through.”

She would have been angry, but he looked so damn good in his big old parka and cowboy boots. “Okay. Let’s go.” He kissed her hard, his firm lips warm on hers.

While they picked their way down the sidewalk, Tessa enjoyed the squeeze of his fingers on hers. She’d never had to walk anywhere and especially not in cold weather. Snowflakes drifted down again, and she didn’t mind at all. She’d always hated winter, but that had been in the past.

She was with Jack now.

Another block and they reached the café he spoke of. The Blue Bird Bakery and Café was delightfully warm and the aromas made her mouth water.

He led her to the counter and took her coat to hang by the door. The rack was jammed with coats of the people who had gotten there earlier.

He rubbed his hands together and sat on the stool next to her. He immediately looked the menu over, licking his lips in anticipation. That could have been her reaction to him.

"Tessa, try the special." He put the menu back and spoke to the man beside him.

"Do you know everyone that comes in here?" She had noticed the pretty brunette waving at him and his smile at the woman.

"Pretty much." He gazed at her with a slow smile. "This is a small community of neighbors. That's what neighbors do. Speak to each other."

She was embarrassed, but Tessa wasn't buying that he only spoke to this woman. Jealousy was a new emotion to her. "If you say so, and I'll have the special."

"Great." He gave their order to the busy waitress and sipped his coffee.

His cell played something western and she hid her smile. Her Wild-West man had to give in to modern annoyances too. He kissed her cheek and walked to the bakery display to talk.

Curiosity was eating her up about Jack's personal life. At least he had one. His expression said he wasn't pleased with what the other person was saying. Oh God, it couldn't be Drake ruining things again.

His mood had done an about-face by the time he sat beside her.

"Has something happened?" She had to know or have a breakdown. "Was that Drake?"

"No." He waited for the waitress to place their meal in front of them and walk away. "Nothing for you to worry about. Eat your breakfast."

Okay, she had been nosy, and he didn't like it. Just one more thing she'd learned about him.

He didn't eat like a man who was hungry. He looked preoccupied and kept glancing at the door. Now she was scared. "What's going on? That phone call was about me, wasn't it?"

He handed her the small cream pitcher and pulled his expression into a smile. "Enjoy those eggs and ham. We may have to walk back here for lunch."

"I don't care about breakfast or lunch." The woman that had smiled at him earlier stared at her as if she were raping him. She scowled at her, silently telling her to mind her own business. "Link knows where I am."

He gripped her arm. "Calm down. We're not leaving until you eat something, okay?"

Fear closed her throat, and she choked on a bite of eggs. She waved off his hand that slapped her on the back several times. Okay, she could do this. She'd been in tougher spots. One, two, three, swallow the toast. The coffee washed it down and she looked at him, freezing the fear in her chest.

"I'm finished." She grabbed her coat and headed for the door. "I'll wait outside."

"No." He tossed several bills on the counter and motioned her to the bakery display case.

She couldn't believe he was buying sweets when she was facing Link's wrath. She stood beside him and smiled at the counter girl with stiff lips, finally able to choose what she wanted from the display. "I don't like those things with jelly in them. I like cream horns."

"What is a cream horn?" He looked in the case and pointed to the long johns. "No jelly, okay?"

"Whatever the hell you want." She shrugged on her coat and peered out the fogged up windows.

He picked up his parka and took the sack that the clerk placed on the counter. "Are you okay?" He followed her out the door. "Come on. Let's take the shortcut."

His shortcut was a landmine of drifts and ice that had him half carrying her back to the house. He didn't say much, just scared her to death with his constant surveillance of anything that moved in the silent streets.

She was breathless when he finally opened his door and ushered her inside.

"Stop lying to me." She flung her coat to the floor and held his arm. "I'm not stupid, so stop treating me that way."

"You're going to have to settle down." He laid his coat on a chair. "By the time Dresslehouse gets here, I want you speaking coherently and without that rage in your voice."

"I knew it." Her voice squeaked and her hands shook. "They are arresting me for breaking Link's nose."

He pulled her close and smoothed her hair. "No, this is a lot more serious."

"What else could there be?" She began to tremble uncontrollably.

"He's dead."

Chapter Seven

How long would they have to wait on that son of a bitch Dresslehouse? Tessa drank the last of the scotch and stared out the window, looking small and defenseless, hugging herself as if to ward off evil.

It was late and the sun was setting. Hiding his nervousness from her was impossible. She jumped at every sound and watched him for his reaction. He didn't blame her for being worried.

They were in a situation that was as serious as a heart attack.

He pulled the cord on the plantation blinds, and they clattered to the floor. Tessa screamed and jumped as if the roof had fallen in on them. For her sake, he had to get his shit together. She was scared enough without him stumbling around like a wild boar.

He smiled at her and pushed the blinds aside to look out the window for the tenth time. Heavy snow had begun to fall again and Jack was sweating.

Had something been found that meant they could be taken into custody? It couldn't be. They hadn't left the house in twenty-four hours.

"You have to believe this won't touch you." Jack kissed her cheek, taking the empty glass from her hand. Worry seeped up his spine when the doorbell chimed softly. Her eyes filled with fear. "That will be Dresselhouse."

"Don't leave me alone with them, please." She grabbed his hand, worry etching her forehead. "What if they arrest me?"

“You haven’t done anything. You have nothing to worry about.” Jack didn’t want her harassed or taken to the stinking jail downtown. “They’ll leave soon.”

He opened the door, facing Dresslehouse and his partner. He had never gotten used to the man’s height and weightlifter’s build.

“Can we come in, Savage?”

Did he have a choice? Not really. “Sure. Come on in.”

Tessa stood by the fireplace, eyeing the two newcomers with hard suspicion. He took her arm and guided her to the kitchen.

“Might as well have coffee while we talk.”

The two detectives followed him, sitting down at the table to take out their notebooks and pens. They smiled at Tessa when she sat down as close to the door as possible.

“Okay, gentlemen, let’s get started.” Jack wasn’t as composed as he sounded. He chose a chair next to Tessa and sipped the warmed-up coffee that tasted like mud.

“Ms. Duval, where were you last night?” Dresselhouse gazed at her with no emotion showing.

“I was here.” She chose the best answer she could have.

“All night?”

“Yes.” She lost her composure. “How did he die...I mean, was he in an accident?”

Jack spoke up, wanting her to say as little as possible. “We came straight here after I talked to you.”

Taking a slow look around the kitchen, the second detective made notes and twirled his pen at Jack. “You have a weapon, Savage?”

“I do, all registered and clean.”

“Where is it?”

“In the desk.”

“Get it, please.” Jack went to his desk and pulled the pistol from its holster. He handed it to Dresselhouse and observed the detective as he sniffed the barrel and flipped the chamber open. “You ought to

clean this thing sometime.” He put the gun back in the drawer. “Don’t look so worried. Griffin was killed with a forty-five.”

“I wasn’t worried, just waiting for you guys to leave.” Jack hid the deep breath he sucked in, relieved they weren’t going to lineup.

Tessa had tears in her eyes and slumped in her chair. She jumped when Dresselhouse spoke directly to her. “You know who his enemies were? Would one of your friends take him out?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Of course I don’t know. He wasn’t in that type of crowd.” She looked like a scared rabbit. “None of my friends have guns.”

“That’s good.” He nodded. “Did you know he was gay?”

“He was bisexual, not gay.”

Jack bit his tongue. “If you guys have all you need, I think Tessa needs to relax.”

“Just need to get a line on the hours after you left Griffin’s apartment.” The quiet detective poised his pen over the notebook.

“I picked up Tessa at Griffin’s place at five-thirty, called you before we left.” Jack kept it simple. Fewer words meant fewer mess ups. “I dropped her off at her place at six. Because she seemed scared of what Griffin might do, I went back to her home and brought her here. That was around six-thirty.”

“And you were here all night? Didn’t go out?” Dresselhouse obviously needed convincing.

“Did you notice the blizzard that came through here last night?”

“Right.” After glancing at Tessa, Dresselhouse rose and headed for the door. “I don’t have to remind you to stick around town, do I counselor?”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Jack cursed himself for not sticking with his original plans to go home. But that was hindsight. He was responsible for Tessa now, and she needed him.

He closed the door and locked it after the detectives left.

“I want to go home.” Tessa stood and tried to go up the stairs.

“Why?” Jack followed her, wanting to reassure her that there was no reason to run. “You can stay here as long as you want.”

She gazed at him like she had in the past, cool and distant. “Go ahead and ask.”

“What are you talking about?” He scraped his hand over his face. Why couldn’t she be straight with him?

“Griffin and I never had sex.” She hesitated, as if she didn’t want to reveal any more about her life. “I was in love once, last year. He was an artist I met in college. He didn’t suit Drake’s standards, and after paying my friend a lot of money, he left.”

“You didn’t lose much then.” Jack corrected the callous statement. “You surely realize he wasn’t as deeply involved as you were.”

“Yes, I know that now.” She went to the window and then turned to face him. “Link and I used each other for appearances. If I wanted to party, he’d go with me, and I did the same for him.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“It’s none of my business.” He wasn’t about to tell her how glad he was that relationship had been nothing. “But I would like to know why you let him beat around on you.”

She huffed softly. “I did my share of hurting him. I’d gotten fed up with his increased drinking binges and drugs. I told him that yesterday when he hit me and I retaliated.”

“Do you still want to go home?” He didn’t want her to leave, not yet. “Wait until morning, okay?”

She nodded and put her arms around his neck. “I hoped you’d say that.”

He should have shoved her into a cab that first day and slammed the door behind the queen of trouble, but how could he do that to the woman that melted his heart with her slightest glance? He hoped she wanted to stay with him, not because she was afraid, but because she wanted him.

* * * *

Tears rolled down her cheeks and she hid her face against his shoulder. He didn't ask questions, just held her tight until she stopped crying.

"Better now?" He stroked her hair and kissed her. "I'll do anything you want."

"I want to go to his funeral."

"Griffin's funeral?"

"Yes. He was my friend."

Jack exhaled and gazed down at her. "That is not a good idea."

"Why?"

He shook his head and looked at her with a tinge of anger in his eyes. She didn't have to hear what he thought. His hard gaze spoke all too clearly. He seemed to know everything about her, knew about all the times Link had pushed her around, left her waiting for him in front of bars while he shot up with drugs and her screaming at him to stop doing those things.

"Okay, Tessa." He raked fingers through his hair. "I'll go with you."

He took her breath with his constant consideration. "I'd like that." She hugged him, wishing the warmth between them would never fade.

"It's seven o'clock, Tessa, but the café is still open." He kissed her slowly, gently. "You get comfortable, and I'll go hunt down something to eat."

"You heard my stomach growl." She laughed at her own words. "I love being with you." She hated the loneliness that fell upon her after he let her go. Hungry or not, she didn't want him to leave her. "I'll go too."

"No." He buttoned his parka and grabbed his gloves, finishing his comment on the small porch. "I'm taking the shortcut, and you didn't do too well in that alley if I remember right." He dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "Go inside and lock the door. I'll be back soon."

She took up her watch for his return in the window seat overlooking the homes across the street. Gaily lit Christmas trees could be seen in most of the windows.

She watched a young couple across the street shoveling snow from their driveway. They were laughing, throwing snowballs at each other, happy and in love.

What would it be like to have that, a true love? Maybe with Jack? Fool, you have blown that with your easy sex and don't-give-a-damn-about-anything attitude.

She sighed heavily, lonely and confused. Two days ago she was buying a mink coat and a diamond bracelet at her favorite shop on the Plaza.

Today, here she sat in a virtual stranger's home with nothing but the memory of the best sex she'd ever had.

Glancing out at the evening darkness, she reached for her handbag and pulled out her cell phone. After hitting speed dial, her brother's voice came on the phone.

"Drake." She hesitated. "I have something to tell you."

There was the usual moment of silence on his end of the line. "Merry Christmas, Tessa." His laugh was dry and short. "What kind of trouble are you in now?"

There was no easy way to say it. "Link is dead and I am staying with Jack." There, she'd gotten the worst part out. "I'm going to the funeral and Jack is going with me."

"Unbelievable." Drake sounded angry, and it chilled his voice. "I forbid it." She heard him take in a deep breath before he continued. "I've asked you to give up that crowd for years. It's a wonder you haven't spent some time in jail because of your refusal to act like an adult."

She let the barb go uncontested. "The police questioned me and Jack." Now it was Drake's turn to wait for more information.

“What the hell? Tessa!” She figured his face was turning red while his blood pressure rose. “You didn’t tell me why they questioned you. Was Link murdered? Spill it all. Right now.”

“I am not under suspicion. Link was alive when I last saw him. Plus, I have been with Jack.” She couldn’t help the wry grin that touched her lips. “All night.”

“God help the man.”

Chapter Eight

Jack couldn't shake the nagging knot of worry in his gut. Tessa was determined to be at Link's funeral.

What a weekend. He had learned more than he wanted to know about the Duval family. The woman he'd wanted from afar had moved in and taken over his life and heart. He was well aware that he was crazy about the combustive beauty, but knew not to make plans for anything permanent.

While she spoke to the funeral director of the funeral home where Link had been taken, Jack sat on her bed listening to her side of the conversation. While she spoke to the funeral director where Link was laid out, Jack sat on her bed. She smiled his way and scribbled something on a fancy notepad.

Astounding woman. He splits her lip and she's sending flowers.

"What's wrong?" Tessa hung up the phone and gazed at him. She pushed a strand of hair away from her cheek. "You think I'm crazy, don't you Jack?"

"No." He held his hands out to squeeze her fingers. "I know you're a beautiful, caring woman."

Her arms went around his neck as she sat on his lap. "You make me so happy. I'm not afraid anymore."

He leaned back to study her face. "What were you afraid of?"

"Being alone and never finding you."

Okay. She was doing exactly what he didn't want. Mistaking tenderness and good sex for love. She assumed he wanted to make this a full time thing and it was his fault. He did want that. That would

be great, except she'd probably dump him in a New York minute if she decided he wasn't what she wanted.

"Tessa." He moved her onto the bed and rose, bothered by the disappointment in her eyes. "You have way too much to offer someone to not look around before settling on a guy you hardly know."

Her lashes lowered, shielding any emotion she felt, but he heard it, no matter how modulated her reply. "I thought we understood each other, Jack." She rose and began taking her clothes off. "I said you made me happy, not that you were anyone I'd want to keep around."

Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? She had that same closed expression he'd assumed was her normal look before seeing her heartbreaking smile.

"Do you want me to stay tonight?"

"No, I don't need the distraction."

"From what?" He really was curious about her plans. "Don't try to drive. The streets are still slick."

She rolled her eyes and removed her earrings, tossing the four carat diamonds on the bedside table. "I have a driver."

He wanted to stay, but that wasn't a good idea. They would probably have another argument and he was in no mood for it. He wanted to stay, but it wouldn't be pleasant. He was still worried about her safety. Her chin set in a stubborn line that meant there was no changing her mind.

"I'll be there, Tessa." He paused at the writing desk on the way out of her bedroom to pick up the note pad. "Come down and lock the door, okay?"

She got up to follow him down the stairs. "You don't have to come, you know. Drake said he was flying in tomorrow morning."

Jack took a ragged breath. He was glad Drake was coming home. Maybe he could change her mind about attending the funeral.

"Tessa, you know there will be news crews and more cops than you've ever seen." He turned the doorknob, waiting for her to say

something. “You are still considered a person of interest. Do you want the publicity?”

She moved his hand and opened the door wide. “I’m used to it, Savage.” She pointed to the walkway. “I won’t use your name if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He knew he’d made the right decision. They were as different as salt and pepper. “Lock the door.”

Damn! Why hadn’t he gone on with his life instead of letting her mess him up like a jigsaw puzzle? It would have been so simple, get on that plane and forget her and that dead son of a bitch.

Jack pulled into a fast food place parking lot. He groaned, letting the truth sink in.

It would all be here when you got back, the snow, the job, and you would bust your balls to see Tessa again.

That revelation wasn’t new to him, and Jack had thought about it with regular frequency. No amount of sex would make them breathe the same air or want the same life. She was Tessa, multi-million-dollar heiress, and he was average Joe and liking it.

Get out now, Savage. She flies too high for your simple taste.

* * * *

He thought she was crazy.

And now he’d told her in his smooth attorney style that he was finished being her boyfriend.

Tessa thought about the way she’d fallen for all his rancher boyish charm, even spent insane moments feeling that she’d found Mr. Right. The only thing right about Jack was his expertise in bed.

That’s a lie. He’s strong and kind and all the things you’ve never seen in a man before.

Looking around her apartment, she knew the silence would drive her crazy if she stayed home.

Hell with this.

Grabbing her coat and purse from the chair where she'd dropped it, Tessa hurried out the door to find the comfort of music, laughter, and her unpredictable friends.

Not wanting to risk her driver's habit of spying on her and reporting back to Drake, she backed her red sports car from the garage. The ice on the driveway only briefly concerned her.

She managed to drive away from her complex and head for the loudest bar in Westport. No one there would give a damn about her private life or what she did with it.

Tessa swiped a hand at the tears blurring her vision.

She wasn't a crybaby, but right now, her heart was breaking and she couldn't stop them from streaming down her cheeks.

She saw the red light and hit her brakes, but her car skidded on through the intersection, sliding to a stop after crashing into a mailbox on the sidewalk.

The airbag inflated with mind-boggling speed and force. A few seconds passed before the pain in her nose and cheekbones set in, and she screamed in the aftershock of being jolted forcefully in a blink of an eye.

Too shaken to remove the seatbelt, she wept in frustration.

People rushed to the car and knocked on the window, yelling at her to see if she was all right.

She struggled to open the door and tried to get out.

"Why don't you stay put, lady? Your nose is bleeding."

The earnest words from a skinny kid in a skull cap and fleece jacket sobered Tessa. She lifted her hand to touch her nose, drawing it back when pain shot through her again.

Fresh tears rolled down her numb face when she witnessed the blood on her hand.

Her phone. Where was her phone?

The concerned kid opened her door and reached across her lap to grab her purse and hand it to her. "Want me to dial for you?"

She shook her head and took the cell phone he'd taken out of her handbag. "No...no thanks. I can do it." She tried to smile, but her lips seemed frozen in a grimace.

Tessa punched in the number of the one person she wanted to see. When the phone rang and he said hello, her heart pounded with frantic relief.

"Jack." Fresh tears streamed down her face once again. "I need you."

Chapter Nine

After talking with the kid who had obviously taken over at the scene, Jack tried to calm his heartbeat down to a sane level.

Tessa! He hadn't been surprised, just worried to hell about her. He backed out of the garage and skidded down the sloping driveway, wondering what on earth had possessed Tessa to drive on a night like this.

Jack promised himself he'd choke her if and when he ever got to St. Luke's Hospital.

Thirty white-knuckled minutes later, he hurried into the emergency room where he was directed to a curtained off alcove.

His gut knotted in shock when he saw Tessa propped up against pillows, her nose packed with gauze and both eyes circled in dark blue.

He wondered if the nurses had asked about the older bruise on her cheek.

Damn. She looked pitiful, and all he wanted to do was hold her.

She finally noticed him standing in the doorway and began to cry.

"Tessa." He couldn't believe she was so upset, the girl that had been slapped around by a jerk and fought the world with no help or complaint. He moved to the head of the gurney to lean over her. "How's my girl?"

She sat up to hug him, her slender body quaking with sobs. "I'm so glad you came. Thank you."

For several minutes, he held her, listening to her account of what happened. "I should be mad as hell at you, Tessa, but I'm just grateful you weren't badly hurt."

She covered her nose with her hand. "I must look horrible." Looking at him with a puffy-lipped smile, Tessa waited for his answer.

"You're gorgeous no matter what." He meant that, seeing past the bruises and gauze sticking out of her nose. "I'll take you home and stay with you." He qualified his meaning. "For tonight. That is, if you don't mind. I'd like to make sure you're all right."

"No." She pulled the sheet up to cover her nose and mouth.

"Why not?" Her stubborn, inconsistent personality pissed him off.

"You weren't worried about me earlier. Anyway, I need to be alone." She wiped her eyes with the sheet bunched in her hand. "And if you can't stay more than a few hours, I'd just as soon you didn't come at all. I'll call James to come for me."

That idea irked Jack. "Will James undress you and put you in bed?" He pulled her hands away from her face. "Who the hell is this James character?"

He couldn't believe his ears. She laughed, or more like giggled. She held his hand and relaxed against the pillows.

"My Jack is jealous." Her yawn meant the pain relievers were kicking in. "I love you, Jack."

God help him, he had to say it. "And I love you, Tessa."

He sat by her bed while the nurse checked Tessa's vital signs, and the intern looked her over one final time. Armed with medication and instructions on keeping Tessa warm and quiet, Jack once again took on full responsibility for her care.

In the car, she leaned against him and smiled at everything he said. This night, he would take care of her and try to figure out what came next. Tomorrow, he would put her in the hands of her brother.

Thirty minutes later, Tessa had been tucked into her bed where she promptly fell asleep. Jack turned up the thermostat and crashed on the fancy white couch. Unlike the princess in the bedroom, he couldn't fall asleep. The drone of the television helped some, but the weather report was lousy.

More snow coming tomorrow night and he could have been in sunny Arizona. He turned off the set and lay down on the couch, trying to get comfortable. Arizona would always be there.

* * * *

Her body ached some, but Tessa couldn't be concerned about a little pain, not after she got a look at her swollen lips and the blue circles around both eyes.

Jack. The aroma of coffee brewing meant he'd stayed the night. She got out of bed and hurried into the bathroom. Come hell or high water, she wouldn't let him see her looking like a prize fighter.

She worked quickly, disguising the discoloration framing her eyes with eye shadow, lots of mascara and a double slathering of foundation. Pale pink lipstick wouldn't draw attention to her mouth. She eyed her reflection with a hard grimace of disgust. She looked like hell.

The doorbell rang, her stomach knotting with apprehension. That had to be Drake, and she prayed he'd come alone. She had no desire to see anyone else.

She pulled on a pair of beige slacks and a white sweater, combing her hair into a casual loose style. If she leaned forward a lot, her bruises wouldn't be too noticeable.

Idiot. Just face up to it.

At the top of the stairs, she could hear Drake's commanding voice and Jack's softer drawl. She went downstairs, taking deep breaths, struggling to force a smile on her lips.

Both men stood near the fireplace, having a cup of coffee like two old cronies. They both looked at her, Drake with his usual assessing gaze and Jack with a warm smile on his handsome face.

"Drake, I hope you didn't have any problem getting here." Surprised by her ability to sound calm, Tessa went to him, hugging his waist. "I'm sorry for ruining your holiday."

She wanted to lean on him and cry her eyes out, but she couldn't. Jack didn't comment, but brought the coffee urn to the living room and poured her a cup.

He didn't appear to be ill at ease or worried. She loved him for sticking around and grabbed his hand when he started to leave the room.

Drake sat on the couch, eyeing the folded blanket and pillow. He didn't appear to be too angry, but she knew he had a big spiel to unload on her. He leaned toward her, obviously preparing his speech.

"Tess, how many more scrapes are you planning to get into?" He carefully placed his cup on the coffee table. "Savage filled me in on the situation and we both owe him a great deal." Drake's blue eyes pierced her defensive shield. They always did.

"It just happened, Drake." She shifted in her chair. "I'm not in trouble, and Jack will take me to the funeral."

"What?" Drake glared at her, meaning he hadn't finished raking her over the coals. "Of all the asinine ideas, that takes the prize." He pointed his finger at her. "You are not going. That's out."

"Yes, I am." Tessa conjured up the will to stand her ground. "You have no right to come here and throw your weight around." She liked his expression of disgust. Just like always, he tried to think of something to threaten her with.

"Tessa." Drake used his best calm, parental tone. "Think of your name, your family. Not only is this Link person an unsavory type, but he has been murdered. This isn't a normal funeral. You can't do this. I won't allow it."

He'd thrown the gauntlet down and she picked it up. "You can go home, Drake. I'll go because he would show me the same respect." She went to the door and waited for him to follow her.

Jack stepped in, putting on his coat. "I'll take her. It's important to Tessa, and I can't see the harm in it."

Drake shook his head, capitulating to defeat. "We've imposed on you enough, Savage. It's only proper that I take her. I'll take her."

Tessa stopped Jack before he could slip out the door, pulling his coat together while she smiled at him. “Thank you, Jack. For being my friend.”

To her surprise, he kissed her on the lips. He grinned and grazed his finger over her chin. “Hope that didn’t hurt.”

She handed him the gloves he’d dropped on the hall table the night before. “You’d never hurt me.”

Tessa watched him clear the windshield of his car and returned his wave as he drove off down the snow-packed street.

Loneliness swept over her, his leaving reinforcing the growing need to be with him concealed deep in her heart.

Chapter Ten

What a perfect day for a funeral. Jack couldn't believe he would be spending the better part of his Wednesday there considering that when the jerk was alive, he'd strutted around, hitting Tessa.

He looked out the bedroom window to see a world transformed into a blast of sunshine. The craziest weather he'd ever seen, but he'd begun to like it.

He dreaded going to the funeral, but he'd told her he'd be there. He felt a twinge of guilt, regretting being the hero, telling Drake he would drive Tessa to the service. The responsibility of seeing that Tessa got there was now his. He sure as hell didn't want her driving anymore until the spring thaw.

What a woman. One minute she was petty and childish, the next warm and all woman. He had tried to convince himself that he didn't give a rat's behind what she did. Lies, all lies. He did care and she'd worked her way into his every thought.

It wouldn't do though. Her world spun in a different orbit. He didn't party with crowds of strangers, didn't throw money around like rice at a wedding. He had plans, to make a success of his law firm, to marry one day and have kids. His plans did not include worrying about the vixen with blonde hair.

He grimaced, seeing that it was time to head for the service being held for Link.

He left the calm sanctuary of his home and drove toward Tessa's townhouse apartment. At least the streets were not icy and the sky had cleared. He glanced at his watch, making a bet with himself that she wouldn't be ready when he got there.

Jack knew he spent far too much time thinking about Tessa. It had been that way from the first time he'd seen her. She had seemed like a lost waif until he'd witnessed the first of several screaming matches between her and Drake.

He'd tried to steer clear of her, but it seemed Ms. Tessa always mysteriously showed up at her brother's office every time he did. Whether it happened by design or just plain bad luck, he didn't know.

Now he found his ass in a trap set by his own stupidity...or his lack of control.

He parked in front of Tessa's townhouse apartment, surprised to see her come out and lock the door. She looked as if she should be going to a photo shoot instead of burying some goofball. Tessa being Tessa, she had dressed in a full-length black mink and a wide-brimmed hat with wispy plumes around the crown. Her large rimmed black sunglasses completed the look.

He opened the door and she climbed in. "Seat belt, Tessa."

"Good morning to you, too."

"Are you feeling up to this?" He didn't comment on the bruises on her face. She'd done a good job of using foundation, but he could see the tint of blue under the makeup.

She checked her appearance in a gold compact and fussed with her hat before acknowledging him. "More than up to it." She crossed her legs and leaned back with a sigh. "I need to talk seriously with you."

Jack had doubts about the seriousness of the conversation. What did they ever talk about? "No time better than the present, Tessa."

"You're planning to never see me again, aren't you?"

"Tessa." He thought about pulling off the road to answer her. "Can't this wait until later?"

"I take that as a yes."

Maybe he should tell her she was right, that he didn't want to be in the middle of her mach-speed life. Jack shook his head, frustration

needling him into being short with her. “Drop it, Tessa. Let’s just get this freak show over with before we tackle your needs.”

Instead of looking hurt or angry, she pulled the collar of her coat closer to her face and stared ahead. Apparently, she had gone back into “Tessa the bitch” mode with no problem.

He sensed her riveting gaze and knew she had something nasty to say. “I have to tell you something before Drake talks you into proposing to me.”

He did a double take. “Say what?”

“Oh yes, I know he likes you. He’s hinted enough times that we would be good for each other.” She snorted in a most unladylike fashion. “He didn’t mean in bed.”

“Hell, Tessa.” Jack swallowed against his dry throat. “What’s that got to do with anything? Say what you’re going to say.”

“Don’t be scared.” She worked her leather gloves off. “I would never marry you. You’re low class and ignorant. Plus, you’re impoverished.”

“Gee, that’s a load off my mind.” If he hadn’t found her words amusing, he’d have been pissed off. “Thanks for letting me off the hook.”

What had she expected? Knowing the woman even as little as he did, she looked damn irritated by his thoughts on the subject.

“Savage, the minute the funeral service is over, you get out of my life.” Tessa clamped her lips tight, but he knew tears when he saw them.

A clump of snow falling from an overhead branch startled her. She leaned against him and shivered.

“You’ll be okay, Tessa. And I’ll miss you.”

* * * *

Why had she said all that to Jack? Tessa wanted to spend every second with him, and yes, she wanted to marry him.

She had to regain her cool way of treating men, especially Jack. That was a dumb thought. After today, he'd do everything possible to stay away from her. Oh God, that hurt.

She slanted a quick glance his way. What if he left for Arizona? The thought of never seeing him again sat like a cold stone on her heart.

No more time to worry about that. The funeral home loomed up like a warning of ugly things to come. Added to the gloomy atmosphere, Drake stood outside, obviously waiting to make sure she didn't do something to embarrass him.

He opened the car door for her and wore his grim "I'm watching you" look.

"Tessa." He nodded to Jack and guided her into the chapel. "Let's get this over with."

She didn't feel like causing a scene. Not today. Her life would be like a never-ending funeral if she never saw Jack again.

Drake put his arm around her, showing support even though she knew he wanted to strangle her. She smiled at him, a rush of happiness warming her at being with her brother. Tessa wanted their relationship to be like this all the time. Maybe if she could stop being herself, it could happen.

Jack waited until she sat down and took the seat beside her. She took off her sunglasses and dropped them in her handbag. Drake glanced her way with a shrug.

Tears welled in her eyes. She'd forgotten her black eyes and swollen nose. Her own brother found her disgusting. "I'm sorry, Drake."

He put his arm across her shoulders. "For what? I'm grateful you're all right."

She dabbed her eyes with a tissue and put the sunglasses back on. "Thank you."

Jack took her hand, his attention on several large men stationed at a side door. She recognized the tallest man. Detective Dresslehouse.

As if sensing her worry, Jack reassured her. "He's just checking the crowd out. It's normal."

"Oh, I didn't know."

"He may want to speak with me later. Don't worry."

"I owe you an apology too, Jack." She loved his lifted brow and half smile. "I ruined your Christmas."

"Listen, Tessa." He leaned close to her, his cologne teasing her memory. "I want to make sure you are going to be okay. If you need me later on, just call me. Let's just get this behind us."

Her heart broke completely in two, the finality of his words cutting deep. He didn't want her, didn't say he wanted to hear from her. Worst thing of all, she knew he used that same line on all his clients.

"I won't bother you, Jack." She'd never been more determined about anything in her life. She would win him heart and soul, no matter what it took. "Help me with my coat, please."

He didn't say a word as her mink slid off her arms, but simply grinned and shook his head. Drake scowled and tapped his finger on her arm.

"Tessa, for God's sake. Had you nothing else to wear?" Her brother had been the poster boy for propriety all his life. "A tomato-red dress?"

She shrugged, straightened the long sleeve of the red knit dress and looked straight ahead. "He would have liked it."

Tessa knew keeping his voice low when he was furious cost Drake a lot emotionally. He tried to pull her coat around her shoulders, growling under his breath.

"Why do you have to be a freaked out rebel every day?" He flushed to his scalp with frustration. "You take great pride in dishonoring your family's name. I'm through trying to tell you anything. Go your way."

Her heart lurched with surprise. Drake had said that same thing to her more than once, but this time he meant it. His normally quiet expression had set in a cold frown.

So far, Jack hadn't reacted to her choice of outfits. He carefully kept his gaze on the proceedings at the front of the chapel. She sighed, secretly wishing she'd dressed in something appropriately dark and drab.

She put on her coat and stared at the line of mourners threading past the coffin. She didn't know any of them. That's all she had in her life—strangers wanting to have a drink and then on their way to be with their real friends.

This wasn't what she wanted. What she wanted sat next to her, and if she had to beg him, Jack would never shut her out of his life.

After the service concluded, Tessa took Jack's arm as they left the building. Drake tucked her under his shoulder and kissed her cheek.

"I'm sorry, Tessa."

She smiled at him, grateful that at least he was still speaking to her. "It's all right, Drake. I'll see you soon."

Drake walked away then to go to his car, leaving her alone with the man she would have to fight for. Jack turned his collar up and tightened his grip on her arm.

She froze as Dresslehouse approached them, his large frame casting a shadow over her. He spoke to Jack and nodded in her direction.

"Just thought you'd both want to know that we have Griffin's killers in custody." He chewed his gum for a second and went on. "It turned out to be a carjacking gone sour. Random thing. Just thought you'd want to know you're both cleared." He grinned. "Want to make a bet this isn't the last time we have a chat?"

Jack grimaced. "We weren't worried. But thanks for making it official." He groaned as a pack of reporters ran toward them. "Let's get out of here."

Being hounded by the press wasn't new to Tessa. From fifteen on, she'd been in the headlines for everything from bungee jumping off the busiest bridge in Kansas City to snowballing the mayor's car.

Tessa leaned against Jack, not for safety, but to make sure they were seen as a couple. "I'm scared, Jack."

"That will be the day." He practically carried her to his car and opened the door, waiting for her to fasten her seatbelt.

She watched him as he walked around to get in the driver's seat and turn the key in the ignition. His gaze never turned to her, his way of telling her they were finished.

That's what you think, my love.

Chapter Eleven

He had the office to himself that Saturday, and Jack rolled his sleeves up, prepared to catch up on the work he'd been putting aside.

The date on the desk calendar reminded him he'd been in a private hell for three months. February and the elm trees outside his windows had sprouted their buds.

He'd tried to go back to being all business and even put off going home until spring. Well, spring lurked just around the corner and he still had no desire to leave town.

The bottle of whiskey his best friend had sent as a Christmas gift caught his attention. Drinking alone brought him no pleasure, but right now he didn't much care.

He poured three fingers in a glass and took a long sip, arching his brows with approval. His friend knew quality. His choice of wife proved that. Not to mention the two kids and custom built mansion he lived in.

He shook off the wandering thoughts and sat down at his desk. His girl Friday could type like a tornado, but her handwriting looked like pure hieroglyphics.

One more reason for him to pack it in and head for his apartment.

He rose and stretched, reaching for his coat, the sudden turning of the door handle startling him. He paused before deciding to see which client showed up on the wrong day. A little pissed, he unlocked the door and swung it open.

"Tessa."

His heart thundered and his belly knotted as he looked into her beautiful dark eyes.

“Jack.” She smiled at him, motioning to the interior of his office.
“Are you alone?”

Tessa being polite? His curiosity piqued.

“Yes,” he answered, feeling clumsy after almost stumbling over his feet to let her inside. “Of course. Come in.”

“Surprised?” She turned to watch him close the door.

“You could say that.” His soft laugh was due to the blast of shock her arrival had sent through him. “Kind of like waking up with your face sewn to the carpet.”

She nodded and went to the window. “I remembered your birthday.”

He thought about the cards from his family, the box of homemade cookies and new shirts his mother had sent. But here in his office stood the one gift he wanted most and felt such confusion about.

He didn’t touch her, stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting.
“What have you been doing these past weeks?”

Her smile when she looked his way could only be described as wistful. “I’m back in school. Making something of myself as Drake said.”

Jack warmed to the idea. “That’s great, Tessa.” He poured two cups of coffee from the urn that he’d filled earlier and held one out to her. “Is it art still?”

“No.” She sipped her coffee and moved toward his desk. “I’m studying for a degree in social services.”

He choked on the hot coffee. “Social services?”

She put her cup on a bookcase and leaned on the desk, looking demure as hell.

“Come here, Jack.” She crooked her dainty finger at him in a beckoning waggle. Her shoulder relaxed and he caught a glimpse of creamy sweet flesh under the collar of her coat. “I want to wish you a proper happy birthday.”

Not go? Don’t be a fool. She’s all you want.

She sat on the edge of the desk, slowly swinging her leg in an enticing circle. His body reacted to the way she opened her legs in invitation. Hard. He'd become mahogany and his blood pounded hot with weeks of denial.

"Tessa, my sexy little fox." Nothing could keep him from her now, not now. She played him like a drum, slow and deep, letting the coat open to fall in rich folds around her bare hips. The rosy warm tone of her neck and shoulders begged for his touch, drawing him in between her thighs.

The seductive glow in her eyes cooled as he pulled the coat up over her shoulders. "I'm not cold." She shrugged the coat off.

"Tess, what are you really doing here?" He tried to step back from her, but she caught his hand, pulling it between her thighs. "I thought you hated me."

"I do, but I love fucking you." Her strong grip on his loosened tie brought his face down to hers. "I want you, Jack. No strings attached."

He didn't hear her last words, his blood whipping through his veins warp speed, pounding in his temples and throbbing in his crotch. No going back now, not with his fingers opening her labial lips and dipping deep inside her hot pussy. No way back with her fingers freeing his belt and zipper. He sucked in a breath as her fingers curled around his erection.

Her full moist lips pouted in a tease, making a small opening to let her tongue slide out, the damn thing flicking at him. She worked his hard dick to and fro, gasping with a laugh when he opened her with three fingers, her hips grinding into his fist.

He braced his weight with one hand, pushing forward to crush her lips in a deep, hungry kiss, forcing her mouth open to accept his tongue. She moaned, biting him playfully, toppling back on the hard oak to open her legs. He gazed at the woman offering her all to him.

"Damn you, Tessa." He pulled her legs apart and up to his waist, expecting to self-implode while she guided his cock to the glistening

entrance of her pussy. From that point on, he lost all reason and desire to be noble. Hell with that. She took all of him, arching her hips and locking her arms around his neck, making those little noises she made just before reaching climax.

Distant sounds of things falling to the floor seemed natural while they worked hard to satisfy each other. She sucked his nipples and scratched his back, a fury to find release came through her nails and teeth. He thrust deep, hard and fast, deprivation and desire for her slapping away all niceties. The pressure of climax forced him to move against her forcefully, burying himself in her. Her back arched and she bucked against him, screaming against his neck, slowly dropping onto the desk. In a final powerful drive, he climaxed, fighting for breath and strength in his legs.

Several minutes passed before he spoke to her. "What now, baby?" He pulled her up to hug her close.

"I'll tell you after I use the powder room." She kissed him with a teasing smile. "Don't look so worried, Jack."

She got off the desk and headed for the washroom, glancing back over her shoulder when he found his voice. "I'm not worried, Tess. Just curious."

Who are you trying to kid, Savage? You hate the fact she leaves you and probably goes to someone else. What would be wrong with having her on those terms?

Everything.

He'd had his share of forgettable women, lied to more than one, but not this time. Something about Tessa filled his senses to the full and without her, he ran on empty.

He should tell her what he felt, not talk to her like a greasy barfly would. Hell no, she'd laugh in his face. Tessa didn't want him for anything other than a quick toss on his desk. Best to keep his mouth shut. Doing that got harder every day.

* * * *

Tessa sat on the chair that Jack's secretary had probably placed in the bathroom. She hated herself for practically raping him. She didn't want him that way.

Liar. You want him any way it takes.

Then why was she so miserable? She knew the answer and it hurt. She wanted him to come to her with all that force and heat. She loved him, wanted him to feel the same about her. She rose, suddenly feeling cheap and dirty. No wonder he screwed her when she tricked him with her naked body.

A light rap on the door interrupted her dark thoughts.

"I'll be right out." She hesitated, then added brightly, "Hand me my coat, Jack. My lipstick's in the pocket."

He stood in the doorway and held the coat out, waiting for her to slide her arms in the sleeves. "You've been in here quite awhile. Everything okay?"

"Of course." Her voice wavered. "You know how women are."

"Do you want me to drive you somewhere, babe? Home maybe to get some clothes?"

"I have clothes in my car." This escapade hadn't ended as she'd dreamed. "Where I'm going, no clothes are required."

"Are you trying to worry me?"

"You asked, Mister."

Why did he have to look at her so intently, his dark eyes delving into her soul as no one else ever had? Could he see she had humiliated herself, and he did nothing to make her feel whole again?

He walked away, leaning over to pick up the pens, files, and his briefcase they had scattered in the heat of passion. "I asked because I care about what happens to you."

"Don't worry, Jack." Desire to slump on the floor gripped her, but she crossed the floor on steady legs. "I'm going home. Sorry to have made a nuisance of myself." She blew him a kiss. "Happy birthday."

He did the thing she'd hoped for, came to her and caught her hand, his smile warm. "Thank you for thinking of me, Tess."

Damn fool. He was all she thought of.

Chapter Twelve

After making the mistake of a lifetime, Tessa vowed never to run after Jack again. She accepted the painfully clear fact that he wasn't ready for her now. Perhaps he never would be. His easy acceptance of her leaving his office the last time had nearly broke her heart.

Four in the morning and she still hadn't closed her eyes, trying to remember every word he'd said. Why do that? He'd made no comment other than suggest she put some clothes on. She groaned, remembering the great sex. It had never been anything but a desire to be close to someone, even for just a little while. But with Jack, she knew she was in his strong arms and sharing the sensuality that only comes with love.

Get over it. You'll find someone else. Forget that. They won't be Jack. It had been weeks and he hadn't made any effort to heat things back up. She was taking her degree and moving on. To where? She'd know when she got there.

Getting her brain into the books had taken some effort, but Tessa had wanted to finish one thing in her life. If not, her newfound self-esteem would flatten like a popped balloon.

She glanced around the gleaming clean kitchen and remembered the chocolate éclairs in the refrigerator. When she opened the door, it occurred to her that she had eaten nothing but junk food for days. She was hungry for real food.

Standing in the open refrigerator door, licking the éclair's creamy filling, Tessa frowned. The pastry could never fill the hunger clawing at her every nerve.

Call him, fool. You are dying to hear his voice.

She grabbed the phone off the counter and tabbed in his home number. It rang three times before he picked up. His hello kissed her ear and the tears started.

No, you can't do this anymore. Hang up, fool.

Cutting off the connection hurt as if she'd burned her hand. The ache in her heart screamed to get out. How could she survive without a reason to live?

She sat in the dark, for the first time unafraid of the shadows and night noises.

The phone rang, but she ignored it. Drake was probably checking to see if she'd turned in all her homework. He'd told her how proud he was of her and they had to have a celebratory dinner soon. She sighed with resignation. Her brother had been right all the time, and she'd fought him every step of the way.

She rose and went to the bedroom, stripping off her clothes to flop nude on the bed.

After tossing and turning for several hours, she gave up and went into the bathroom to shower. Today, she wouldn't be late.

While she dried her body, the memory of the Blue Bird Café drifted into her thoughts. What would it harm if she drove there for an early breakfast?

She felt deep scorn for herself. If he was there, what would she say and do? God, why couldn't she deal with life like an adult?

* * * *

Jack sat on the edge of his bed, his emotions going in crazy directions. Why hadn't she said anything when he answered the phone? Why hadn't he called her back?

The answer was too complicated for a mere mortal like him. Damn, the woman kept him torn up, her idea of a joke tearing his balls out. How long had it been since he'd relaxed, had a date? He couldn't remember.

He lay back down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. *Okay, figure this out or commit yourself to a mental hospital.*

He rationalized every aspect of the fireball relationship he'd had with Tessa. Constant upheaval, cops, car accidents, funerals for assholes, and sex. What else could a guy ask for?

He groaned and pulled a pillow over his head to cover the mournful sound.

What do you have without her? Order, routine, dull evenings alone, and the never-ending yearning to hear her voice. He missed Tessa and all the uproar she brought with her.

Lights from a passing car lit up his bedroom. Five in the morning and he hadn't gotten back to sleep after her call.

This is fucking madness.

He hugged his pillow and closed his eyes before allowing the truth to burst in his mind. He loved Tessa and it mattered little what she brought to the table, as long as she loved him. He had to find out.

With hard resolution, he got up and turned on the bathroom light, but not before he stepped on something. Under his foot was a gold cylinder, winking in the light.

This had to be a good sign. Tessa's lipstick.

Good sign or not, he had to find her and damn quick. His life had become laughable and he needed her with him. He gave thought to the fact that she may not feel the same as he did. Come to think of it, she'd never said how she felt about him.

Yanking some jeans and a shirt from the closet, he grimaced. Didn't make a damn bit of difference. He would say it to her pretty face and wait for the explosion. Didn't all men go through this?

He pulled his clothes on and looked at the clock. Hell, way too early to spring this kind of load on the princess.

Like hell it is.

He locked the door and sprinted to the garage. So this was what love did to a man. He hadn't felt so good in his whole life.

Get ready baby, your life is about to change.

Chapter Thirteen

Still in her bathrobe, Tessa stood at the top of the stairs, trying to see who stood at her front door through the slot windows. Identifying the person was impossible. Maybe they would go away.

Insistent knocking on the door followed several more rounds of the bell.

“Tessa.”

Relief flooded through her when she recognized the voice. Hurrying down the stairs, she opened the door to see Jack on her doorstep.

What should she do, or say? Calm down.

“Jack.” She pulled her robe together and stepped back to let him in. “Is something wrong?”

He stayed where he was for several seconds before answering. “We need to talk, Tessa.”

This was different, not bossy or ringing with warning. Her nerves wound tight with apprehension. “Have you decided to go back to Arizona?”

He laughed and tugged on the belt of her robe. “Are you running me out of town?”

“Never.” She inched closer to him, covering his hand with hers. “Even if you never want to be with me.”

His arms eased around her. “I want one thing, Tessa. You.” He tipped her chin up, his smile warm and sweet. “I love you. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. I’ll do everything in my power to make this work. The question is, what exactly are your intentions toward me?”

She stammered, having always thought the words would flow smooth and sexy. “I feel so passionately about you I can’t describe what’s in my heart.” This was real, he truly had said the words she’d longed to hear, and now she trembled with emotion. “I love you. I just want to make you happy.” She held his face in her hands, gazing into his eyes. “Don’t ever change your mind, Jack. I won’t let you go.”

He squeezed her tight, groaning with obvious pleasure to see his prospective bride’s robe fall to the floor. “Don’t change a thing for me, Tessa.”

THE END

www.bettywomack.net

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I have always loved books. Reading was a passion early in my life. I read everything the famous and not so famous authors wrote. I was a die hard historical romance-only fan until I found contemporary to be just as satisfying to read. I began the rocky journey to publication, blind to all the rules and terribly afraid of rejection. With the help of patient critique partners and surviving more than a few disappointments, my first full-length novel was accepted for publication.

I live in the Midwest, and enjoy being near my two adult children and my wonderful wildflower garden. I will never stop being delighted by the notes sent by a reader commenting on my work. Hearing from readers is important to me. I want to write stories that stay with you for a long while. I do it all for you.

Also by Betty Womack

Palace of the Jaguar

The Stetson

Her Private John

Hot for Nick

Fast and Easy

Available at
BOOKSTRAND.COM



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com