

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Getting It All

Robie Madison

Book 3 in the Heartbreak Anonymous series.

Celeste Holmes might be a feisty survivor, yet seven years after her husband's death, she's still wearing his shirts. But all that's about to change. Take one invitation to a high school reunion. Throw in a full day-spa treatment and a whole new wardrobe. And a sexy, sultry Celeste is ready to show Mr. High School Hottie just what he missed fifteen years ago. That is, until she decides she's the one who missed out and makes a no-strings proposition of her own.

Popular TV sportscaster Ryan McGregor has spent the past fifteen years regretting the loss of his friendship with Celeste and what might have been. Now that he's found her again, he's not interested in a one-weekend stand. Using every seduction technique in his arsenal, he's determined to claim her.

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Getting It All

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Author Note

While there is a real Ramsden Park in Toronto, Ramsden Park Collegiate Institute is purely fictional.

Prologue

*The last week in May
Vancouver, British Columbia*

Why would anyone want to relive their high school days?

Celeste Holmes fingered the tiny, perfect hole where she'd tacked the embossed invitation to the Ramsden Park Collegiate Institute's One Hundredth Anniversary Gala onto the corkboard above the desk and smiled. Without looking in a mirror, she knew Matt would have called it *That Smile*. The one that said, "Watch out, the woman has a plan." A fact the plane ticket laying on her desk confirmed.

A tiny thrill of anticipation shivered through her veins. The sense of excitement had seized her the moment she'd drawn the invitation out of its envelope and realized what it meant. Now in just one week —

The familiar sound of raised voices emanating from the kitchen penetrated her musings, hitting her with a heavy dose of maternal guilt. With a quiet sigh, she dropped the invitation onto the desk and headed to the door of her small, in-home office. Today was her thirty-third birthday and, from the little she could hear, the plans for her secret birthday celebration had hit a snag.

She leaned against the doorjamb and forced herself to wait. Sure enough the argument escalated and Celeste hesitated, consciously suppressing the urge to intervene — she had, after all, been ordered to stay out of the kitchen. Her eight-year-old twin sons, Matt Jr. and Mitchell were now fighting over who was going to carry the bowl of popcorn down to the recreation room. Her new nephew, Billy — who was twelve and had been a member of the family for about six months — finally announced he was going to carry the bowl, since he actually wanted popcorn in it by the time they reached the basement. *Smart kid*. She had a handheld vacuum the twins used regularly to clean up their messes.

The microwave dinged and her brother Zach—the strong, silent type—took over opening the steaming bag, thus ensuring that the popcorn made it into the bowl. The fridge door opened and Uncle Wyatt, Zach’s husband, handed out cans of pop, appeasing the twins by giving them a job. Aware she would be visible to anyone in the hallway, Celeste stepped back into her office as the trio trooped out of the kitchen and down the stairs. Predictably the twins were now engaged in a heated discussion over which movie to watch.

“You can come out, now,” a masculine voice chuckled.

Celeste stepped into the hallway, refusing to look the least bit sheepish, even though Wyatt James had caught her dead to rights. At six-two with sandy blond hair and a California tan that never seemed to fade, several of her female friends had whispered the “what a waste” line to her three seconds after meeting him. Having experienced the whims of fate herself where love was concerned, Celeste knew better. The real waste was that Zach and Wyatt hadn’t gotten together sooner.

“I still have a kitchen, right?” she teased.

“For the moment,” Wyatt drawled.

Zach appeared at Wyatt’s side. They made a striking pair. Where Wyatt was long and lean, Zach, who was two inches shorter, was built like their father—all wide shoulders and bulky muscle. Zach had also inherited the Richards’ genetic marker—his short cropped hair was nearly white. Then he took another step closer to the stairs and Celeste battled the need to ask him where his cane was. Most likely by the front door where he’d left it when he’d arrived.

Five years after being beaten nearly to death by a gang of gay-bashers, he still walked with a noticeable limp. That was as good as his right leg was going to get, a truth that still made Celeste livid with anger. Of course in the same breath she always counted her blessings that Zach had survived the attack. She exchanged a knowing glance with Wyatt who, almost imperceptibly, shook his head.

Beside him, Zach swore—something he rarely did—under his breath. “Cut it out. I’m older than both of you and I don’t need a keeper.”

“Tough,” Wyatt said and brushed the back of his hand against Zach’s.

Celeste looked away, a stark flash of remembrance making her heart burn. Once someone had touched her, looked at her the way Wyatt looked at Zach.

“We love you,” she said, because she’d learned the hard way one could never say those three words enough.

“Yes, well,” Zach said and flashed an awkward smile. “Do you want your birthday present or not?”

“Oh,” she gasped. “I thought...”

Ruefully, she glanced down at her outfit. Her attire, which consisted of a pair of faded jeans and one of Matt’s shirts wasn’t exactly elegant. She fingered the frayed edge of the shirt. It was one of her favorites, though in reality she made that claim about all of Matt’s shirts. The point was they were comfortable, cozy, familiar and—despite the numerous washings—sometimes they still smelled of Matt. Besides, she only wore them around the house.

She caught Wyatt, who was a study of tasteful style in chinos and a T-shirt, eyeing her. He’d been waging a silent campaign for almost two years to persuade her to upgrade her wardrobe. He raised an eyebrow as if he’d read her thoughts—and knew better.

Fine, on very rare occasions she wore Matt’s shirts when she popped out on an errand.

“I was going to change for the—later,” she said, remembering she wasn’t supposed to know about the party.

Wyatt winked at her, a self-satisfied look on his face that immediately made her suspicious. “I didn’t say anything,” he protested. “Besides this is an adults only event.”

Zach growled in mock annoyance. "Geez, James, you're making it sound like we're giving my *baby* sister porn."

Wyatt laughed but allowed himself to be pulled in the direction of the living room.

"Coming?" Zach asked over his shoulder.

She nodded, though he'd turned away before he could see her. Okay, so he was seven years older than she, but at five-ten and a size sixteen on a good day, she was hardly a baby. As for the porn—

She'd been without Matt for seven years now. Whatever moves she'd once known had long since rusted. Not that, as the mother of active twins and holding down a full-time job, she had either the time or the opportunity to find someone to make moves with.

Curious as all get out, she padded down the hallway after her brother and Wyatt. She paused briefly at the head of the stairs, her maternal radar on alert. From the sounds of it, Matt Jr., Mitchell and Billy were engrossed in the latest superhero movie. Satisfied there would be no interruptions from them anytime soon, she walked into the living room.

One of her favorite places in the bungalow, she loved the cool blues and grays that created an oasis of serenity in an otherwise hectic household. Following the men's lead, she sat down in one of the overstuffed easy chairs and glanced from Zach to Wyatt, suddenly keenly aware of the sense of anticipation stirring the air between them.

What are they up to?

It wasn't the first time she'd had that thought. A nagging suspicion had started the minute they'd agreed all too readily to take the boys camping next weekend while she was away.

From behind a cushion, Zach produced a pink, square envelope tied with a lacy pink bow to make it look like a gift and handed it to her. She stared down at it, speechless. She was hardly the pink, frilly feminine type—a fact Zach well knew. She eyed the envelope as though it were an alien object.

What could she say? *This, whatever it is, is very nice, but –*

She glanced from Wyatt to Zach and promptly decided the truth wasn't an option. They looked far too full of expectation. Still, she couldn't resist quirking her eyebrow. Her brother lowered his gaze to that darn pink envelope as if to say, "Open that and then we'll talk." As if Zach ever talked much.

Dutifully, she untied the frilly bow, aware her hands were shaking slightly and her fingers fumbled with the simple task. The envelope wasn't actually sealed. After one last hesitation, she lifted the flap and withdrew an embossed cream-colored card with a flowery border around the edge and some sort of stylized logo in the bottom left hand corner. She blinked because the scripted writing seemed to blur and then she frowned.

"You're sending me for a day at a...a..."

"Day spa," Zach finished for her, as if that would explain everything.

"You want me to..." She peered more closely at the card, which entitled her to a manicure, pedicure and facial. Things she'd never had – never thought of having – in her life. Reflexively, she reached up and skimmed her hand over her braid. "Cut my hair?"

Matt had loved her long hair – "more of Les", he'd whisper, using his nickname for her. Most nights he'd seduced her, and made himself darn hot, unbraiding her hair. She never cut her hair – which probably explained the split ends at the bottom of her braid. All right, so she could use a trim.

"Hey, beautiful."

She looked up into Wyatt's California beach-boy smile. Somehow he'd crossed the room and crouched in front of her without her noticing.

"Except." His eyes strayed toward Zach. "We don't think you realize how much."

She stopped herself asking, "how much what?" just in time. He meant, how beautiful. Which she had been. Once.

She glanced at Zach. Frown lines marred his forehead.

"It's past time," he said. "The boys are growing fast. You don't want to leave them behind."

She fingered the worn edge of her — Matt's — shirt. *Is that what I'm doing?*

Seven years ago she'd gotten herself a job and settled into the task of raising two rambunctious boys on her own. A few years later, Zach had moved into the basement apartment, providing a supportive male influence, but the decisions had still been up to her. A couple of years after that, Wyatt had moved in briefly, until he and her brother had bought a place of their own. Meanwhile, Matt Jr. and Mitchell continued to grow like a couple of weeds, looking more and more like their father every day. Acting like him too at the darndest times and in ways she'd least expected—a gesture here, a mischievous smile there. They embodied Matt's exuberance for life, while she wore his old shirts.

She blinked away the suspicious well of moisture in her eyes and cleared her throat. Given her plans, a trip to a salon wouldn't be a bad idea—minus all the extraneous primping. "Fine. I'll go to the day spa and check it out."

Zach and Wyatt just grinned stupidly at each other. Men.

"But I'm not making any promises," she continued, staring rather pointedly at her brother.

He shook his head. "You aren't going to waste the money we've already spent on all the extras. Packaging is everything and you want to look your best."

Celeste's heart paused mid-beat and then slammed into her chest. Zach was a consultant. Hearing him refer to her in marketing-speak terms gave her a very bad feeling. She set the day spa card on her lap before she scrunched it into a little ball. She made the mistake of glancing at Wyatt since she wasn't about to look at either her brother or the pink gift.

"I was under the impression," he said, as if her plan was common knowledge, "that if you ever got the chance you were going to show a certain television sports commentator what he'd missed." Then he grinned. And winked at her, again.

Damn. Me and my big mouth.

Months and months ago in a moment of weakness—and after a little too much peach Schnapps—she’d incautiously spilled her guts to the former founder of Heartbreak Anonymous. Rule number 4: Confession is good for the soul, had been her downfall, along with Wyatt’s persuasive smile. It was just her dumb luck that the person responsible for the most embarrassing moment of her entire life—AKA the I-thought-this-would-turn-out-differently heartbreak—had become a household name since that Jazztones in June stage crew party fifteen years ago.

“Celeste. Celeste, honey.”

She blinked and in a rush of heat realized where she was and, more importantly, what she planned to do. Despite her resolve, a sudden sense of insecurity gripped her.

“You don’t think I’m being a little crazy?” she asked, eyeing the two men cautiously.

Considering the destination, it wouldn’t take much to persuade her she was making a colossal mistake. Particularly since Emma Kincaid, her best friend in high school was in the middle of a two-year teaching contract in Japan, making it impossible for her to attend the reunion.

Celeste had left—all right, fled—Toronto seven years ago, moving as far away as she could get from her father without actually leaving the country. Except when Zach had been recovering from his injuries, she’d never had any compulsion to return. Until now.

“Absolutely not,” Zach said.

“Especially if you look like a million bucks,” Wyatt added, in case she’d missed the point of the day spa gift card.

“Go to the reunion,” Zach said. “And show Ryan McGregor exactly what he missed.”

Celeste winced at the mention of said sports commentator's name. Yep, Wyatt had definitely told big brother about the Skunk.

"The boys —"

"Will be fine," Zach said before she could finish voicing her concerns.

His calm assurances didn't exactly ease her sense of maternal responsibility. Her weekend away would be the first time she'd ever left the twins. What if something happened —

"And you haven't heard the best part," Wyatt said, once again pulling her back into the moment. He reached out and fingered the frayed edge of Matt's shirt. "My friend Daisy Chadwick is in town this weekend for an art show. She'll help you find the perfect dress."

"Daisy! As in petite, blonde, knockout-in-a-size-four Daisy is going to help *me* find a dress?"

Chapter One

*One week later
Toronto, Ontario*

A statuesque woman appeared in one of the gleaming brass panels that decorated the walls on either side of the entrance to the ballroom. Her head held high, her hips swaying to some inner beat, she looked confident and sassy.

Two steps later, Celeste skidded to a stop. The woman in the panel frowned. With a shock Celeste realized she was staring at herself. Caught off guard, she glanced around.

Behind her, the cool, spacious lobby that had welcomed her when she'd checked in was now overrun by men in dark suits and women wearing everything from full-length ball gowns to barely there versions of the little black dress. Although an open house was scheduled at Ramsden Park Collegiate itself for Saturday morning, the welcome reception tonight and the dinner tomorrow were being held at a swank downtown Toronto hotel.

Certain that no one was paying her the least attention she took another second to study herself in the burnished panel. Despite the distortion, she couldn't get over how fantastic she looked—and how utterly unlike her old self. Sure she'd checked her appearance in the mirror up in the room she'd booked for herself, but somehow she hadn't quite taken in the entire package.

The two-inch peep-toe heels added that extra oomph of height, which was accentuated by her now shoulder-length locks piled on top of her head in a simple twist. Her finger and toe nails were painted a show-stopping red. But it was the dress that pulled the look together. Daisy Chadwick had outdone herself and taken a fashion-challenged Celeste along for the ride. Instead of the predictable black, she wore a rich burgundy with filmy three-quarter sleeves and a pseudo wrap-around bodice that

accentuated exactly what God had given her. Below her breasts, the skirt fell away from her body making her appear...

Well, let's just say she now knew where Wyatt's "va-va-va-voom" had come from along with Billy's wolf whistle, which he'd taught to the twins. But it was Zach's quiet nod of approval that had truly boosted her confidence.

A little smile of pleasure tugging at her mouth, she strolled into the ballroom where the evening's event was already in full swing and almost came face-to-face with her brother. Quickly glancing behind her, she ducked to one side, out of the flow of traffic and glared. Though why she should be surprised that Kevin the Creep was here, she didn't know. He had, after all, gone to RPCI too.

Four years older than her, Kevin had been the bane of her existence until he'd headed off to university, leaving her to muddle through the rest of high school in peace. By the time he'd returned home to join Zach in their father's firm, she'd headed off to university. Thereafter, they hadn't had much to do with each other—hadn't even seen each other in seven years since she'd moved out west. Any vestige of a relationship had ended the instant she'd heard about his visit to Zach in the hospital.

Determined to face the worst and get it over with, she stepped forward. To her surprise, Kevin glanced directly at her and then turned away. As far as she could tell he wasn't being rude, he simply hadn't recognized her. Congratulating herself on the narrow escape, she headed into the crowd.

Ten minutes later, a glass of wine in her hand, she spotted Bryant Young, a popular news anchor who'd graced the halls of RPCI several decades ago. From the crowd gathered around him, his off-screen persona appeared as charismatic as his on-screen one. Then his face lit with that famous megawatt smile that made him look like a poster boy for a Crest Whitestrips ad, the crowd parted and there HE was. Ryan McGregor, the Skunk, being pulled into a good-old-boy's embrace by Bryant Young. Celeste was so busy gawking she failed to pay attention to anyone else around her.

"Well, well, well." The feminine voice was definitely snide and uncomfortably familiar.

Older, wiser, and far surer of her worth than she had been fifteen years before, Celeste turned, but did not offer a smile to either of the two women who stood eyeing her. In high school all three of them had belonged to the so-called Tall Girls' Club. In reality it had been little more than a snobby clique, which is how Celeste had become such fast friends with Emma Kincaid, who at five-foot-eight just qualified for admission. Neither girl had wanted much to do with the ultra-exclusive group.

"Look who we found, Amy? Little Miss Richards all grown up."

Any last hope that Celeste was still circulating incognito vanished with Melissa St. Clair's words. At six-one, Melissa the Meanie had been the undisputed Queen Bee of the Tall Girls' Club. It appeared her caustic personality hadn't improved over time.

"Why thank you, Melissa," Celeste said, forcing her facial muscles into a smile.

Nonplussed, Melissa glared at her, the wheels obviously turning in that vicious brain of hers as she tried to figure out how Celeste had managed to interpret her put-down as a compliment. Not to be outdone, her companion, Amy Arnold piped up.

"Frankly, I'm surprised you came at all," she said. "Kevin has been embarrassed enough by the scandal. He doesn't need you here as a reminder."

Belatedly Celeste remembered that her nickname for Amy had been Abominable and that the woman had dated her brother in high school. Maybe still did, for all Celeste knew. She resisted the urge to toss the remainder of her wine in Amy's face. If there was one thing Matt had taught her, it was that she was made of stronger stuff. Mad as she was at the spiteful comment, there also seemed little point in defending Zach. Amy Arnold had voiced her prejudice, just as Kevin and her father had when Zach had come out of the closet. And, since she had indeed grown up, the mature thing to do would be to simply walk away.

Pivoting on her heels to do just that, she came eye-to-eye with Ryan McGregor, the Skunk. He stood in front of her, looking far too handsome for his own good in a dark

gray pinstriped suit that complemented the steel-gray of his eyes. Stunned, she stood rooted to the spot totally unprepared.

What is he doing here?

Unbidden, unasked for, unwanted, heat surged through her turning her face, she was certain, the color of a ripe tomato. It didn't matter that fifteen years had passed. That they were in a large ballroom surrounded by hundreds of people, instead of a dimly lit, slightly messy bedroom. That bedroom had been the last place she'd seen Ryan McGregor and the first place she remembered upon seeing him so up close and personal again.

Grade Thirteen. The Jazztones in June stage crew party and she'd found herself in Ryan's arms. It had been thrilling, exciting and ultimately exceedingly embarrassing when they'd been caught "in the act" so to speak. The fact that Ryan had been implicated in setting up the "prank" had only made matters even more humiliating, but she didn't want to think about that right now.

You came to the reunion expecting him to be here, she reminded her befuddled brain.

All right, so she knew *why* he was at the gala. What she meant was *why* was he standing in front of her when only moments before she'd seen him with Bryant Young? This was not at all how she'd imagined meeting him.

"Good evening, ladies. I see the Tall Girls' Club is having an impromptu reunion. I didn't have time to dig my yearbook out of the box in the basement, but I recognize the tallest girl in the school. Melinda..." The pause while he apparently searched for the right surname was a touch overdramatic.

"Melissa. Melissa St. Clair-Smith," she said, deliberately flashing the large diamond ring on her left hand.

"Of course," Ryan said. "And you —"

"Amy Arnold. I'm a huge fan. I can't believe I'm finally meeting Ryan McGregor in person."

“Thank you, but I’m sure we met in high school.”

Maybe it was Ryan’s slightly sardonic tone or the appreciative once-over he gave her after thanking Amy. Whatever the reason, Celeste snapped out of her stupor. Fate might have thrown her into Melissa and Amy’s path, but it had also handed her Ryan McGregor on a silver platter.

“And the beautiful woman on my right?” He held out his hand toward Celeste. The sarcasm was gone, an authentic smile and a touch of curiosity in its place.

Celeste almost gasped, but caught herself just in time and licked her lips instead to hide her surprise. He tracked the quick movement of her tongue with his eyes, the steel-gray heating to molten temperatures.

He doesn’t recognize me.

The startling revelation flashed through Celeste’s brain so quickly she almost didn’t compute the full implication. In the split second that followed, she examined and discarded the notion of telling him exactly who she was. Unbidden she conjured the image she’d seen in the brass panels of the smart, stylish woman she’d become. A total transformation from the gawky adolescent he’d once known. If his interest in her was genuine—and it appeared to be—this truly was her chance to show Ryan what he’d missed.

“Les Holmes,” she finally said, resorting to a truth of sorts. “And I’d love to dance.”

Handing her wineglass to an astonished Amy, she allowed Ryan—who responded on cue—to lead her out onto the dance floor. And into his arms.

The move was adroit. One moment she was hand-in-hand beside him, the next, he spun her in a half-circle, catching her around the waist with his free arm. His large hand spanned the small of her back with an intimacy she’d long forgotten and held her securely next to his body. She breathed deeply, her hand clutching the sleeve of his jacket to steady her wobbly legs. He smelled of some wicked spice and man—a dangerous scent that threatened to engulf her in all sorts of seductive fantasies.

“Did you really forget Melissa’s name back there?” she asked. “Or—”

"You looked like you needed —"

"I sincerely hope you aren't about to say rescuing."

He chuckled softly. "Okay, forget the whole knight-in-shining-armor bit."

"It could tarnish your image," she said.

"Ouch. How about I wanted to dance and I saw you —"

"Across a crowded room?"

"Highly unlikely," he agreed, clearly suppressing a grin.

"Not to mention a cliché." Despite her attempts to keep her features serious, she smiled at their easy banter. It reminded her of old times. From the first day they'd been assigned to the same riser on the stage crew, they'd hit it off. Talking with Ryan had never been a problem.

For a brief instant his hand slid up her spine before settling once more along her lower back. Heat spiraled along her backbone and a long dormant spark deep inside her flared to life. She swore she could feel his handprint against her skin.

"Thank you anyway," she said softly.

Her immediate and intense reaction to him wasn't the only thing she was aware of. If the tension along his jawline was any indication, he was just as conscious of how close their bodies were. How close his face was to hers. How easy it would be to close the gap and kiss her. And for her to kiss him.

"You're welcome. Are you up for this?" he asked.

The band had jumped from the forties to the fifties and was now playing a Buddy Holly tune. Her lips curved upward and she nodded her assent. Taking a step back into a fun, fast-paced dance number was probably just the right antidote for what ailed them. Besides, she was having way too good a time to quit now.

"It's been a while," she confessed as he swung her out and pulled her back toward him.

"It's like riding a bike, you never forget," he said and spun her under his arm.

Her full skirt swirled around her legs and then skimmed against his and Celeste gave herself up to the music and the moment. Only, unlike other couples she glimpsed on the dance floor, Ryan never let her go. No matter how fast they moved, he kept her firmly in his orbit. Safe from the other dancers, true, but his touch was unmistakably possessive.

Either her hand was in his or his fingers were splayed across her back or fleetingly brushed against her side. His touch was light—barely there—and yet her body was very aware of each caress. Anticipated it. Reacted to it. Wanted more. Like foreplay, only they kept their clothes on.

The music shifted from the fifties to the sixties and Celeste found herself back in Ryan's arms.

"Since we've established you are definitely *not* a woman in need of saving, what do you do out in the real world?" Ryan asked.

"Save it," she said, referring to the world. "I'm an engineer and I work for a small company designing solar panels."

His eyes flared with respect at her revelation. Only the immediate sense of victory she expected to feel never materialized. If anything the joke was on her. At the thought of seeing Ryan again, she'd lapsed all too easily into old, bad habits. She didn't need Ryan McGregor's—or anyone else's—validation to know she did good. She'd faced and jumped the inner hurdle that told her she needed approval for her actions when she'd thwarted her father's plans for her future.

As if sensing her distance, Ryan pulled her a little closer and her breasts grazed the cloth of his jacket, causing her entire body to hum in tune with his. It was as though fifteen years hadn't passed since they'd last been together.

Where he led, she followed without a misstep. The uncanny way they fit together was a side effect she hadn't anticipated when she'd received the invitation to the reunion and realized what it meant—a chance to show this man who'd once been the object of her adolescent fantasies just who she'd become.

Instead she was filled with desires she hadn't experienced in a long, long time. The heat sliding through her veins straight to her womb could only mean one thing. Fifteen years after the fact, she still lusted after Ryan McGregor.

What's more, she discovered she still liked him. A lot. He was funny, self-deprecating and genuine—the same qualities that had drawn her to him in the first place all those years ago. That did not mean she was going to cave in to her cravings—at least not without some good-natured payback.

"What about you, Mr. McGregor?" she asked, because she couldn't resist. "Whatever it is you do, you apparently have at least one fan out there."

He winced. "Double ouch. It's a good thing I haven't let the fame get to my head, lady."

"Just the fortune," she teased because she could tell from his tone that he was more amused than hurt by her comment.

His eyes lost some of their twinkle and he suddenly looked very serious. "Definitely not the fortune. The money isn't worth crap, even if it is damn good."

Taken aback by the sure, sharp vehemence in his tone, she wondered what had happened to shape his philosophy. But she didn't ask, instinctively realizing it must have been something very personal. Too personal for a stranger to inquire about.

Yet three dances later she was still in Ryan's arms and he showed no signs of wanting to let her go. If anything with each song he pulled her a little closer and his hold on her grew more and more possessive. After their abortive discussion about careers, they'd barely spoken and yet the ease with which he whirled her around the dance floor only continued to serve as a forceful reminder of why they'd become such good friends all those years ago. She deeply regretted that he was a Skunk because his proprietorial streak most definitely made her feel coveted.

"You're glaring again," she said.

Since it had taken a while for her to notice what was happening, she couldn't be sure if this was the fourth or fifth time he'd given someone behind them the evil eye. She would be amused if she wasn't so confused by what was happening between them.

His gaze abruptly shifted back to her face—her mouth more precisely. "Sorry."

"No you're not."

He arched one eyebrow. "Fine, I'm not. I don't like sharing."

The slightly rough tone of his bold words sent yet another shiver of awareness through her body. He responded immediately, rubbing his thumb up and down her spine as if to calm her. Even through the thin material of her dress, she sensed the control he exerted over himself to keep his touch light, friendly.

"Sharing what with whom?" She probably should, more precisely, have asked "sharing who with whom". She just didn't quite believe it.

"You with any of the other men in the room."

"I didn't realize you were." She wanted to laugh at the absurdity of his confession. She might be all dressed up, but she was the same old Celeste on the inside. Sure she'd had her share of male interest, but a whole dance floor full?

This time he exerted his control over her, pulling her flush against the hard planes of his body. His erection pressed firmly against her stomach, staking an undeniable claim on her body. If she had any lingering doubts about the matter, his blatant move banished them.

"You haven't seen the way they look at you in that dress."

His voice was low and seductive, making her want to believe what he said. What she was experiencing—the unmistakable way her nipples tightened to hard points the longer he watched her. As if he knew what was happening to her. And enjoyed the idea.

Of its own volition, her hand slid up his arm to the collar of his suit jacket. And she swore she felt his pulse beating rapidly against his skin through the layers of cloth. Or maybe it was her pulse point. She couldn't be sure — of anything anymore.

She ran her tongue along her bottom lip. "You like the dress, then?"

"Damn right," he said. "One of the first things I noticed."

"Probably because it isn't black," she said and then realized she was — had been — outright flirting with a man for the last hour. Something else she hadn't done in a long while.

He chuckled. "The color was one of the last things I noticed. I'm colorblind so I actually have no idea what color it is."

"Burgundy," she said, taken aback by his confession. He'd kept his "affliction" a secret back in high school, though to be fair they'd both usually been wearing black stage crew T-shirts and jeans whenever they'd been together back then.

"I'll take your word for it."

"Is that what you're asking me to do?"

She wasn't quite sure where the urge to challenge him came from. Maybe it was the old Celeste deep inside her, because there'd been a time when she'd been the sort of woman who took risks. Who wouldn't have tolerated sitting in the safety of her house wearing her dead husband's shirts.

He tipped his head forward until his forehead rested against hers. "If you're asking if I want you, the answer is a definite yes. But I won't press for more, tonight."

She blew out a little breath of air. He made it sound as though — But that was impossible. She was here for one weekend to prove a point. That was all, except she couldn't stop from asking herself, "More what?"

"Does that mean you aren't happy to see me?" she finally asked, rephrasing Mae West's famous line.

He laughed outright, but on the next turn, he neatly separated their bodies by an inch or two. “Just so you know, I don’t make a habit of seducing women I’ve just met at high school reunions – or anywhere else for that matter.”

“That’s good to know,” she whispered as a wickedly delicious idea stormed her thoughts. She’d come to this reunion with the intention of showing this man what he’d missed. But what about what she’d missed all those years ago when they’d been interrupted? So he was a Skunk. A hunky skunk who still had a hot body and, apparently, the hots for her.

So why shouldn’t she discover just what would have happened between them? No harm, no foul. Call it unrequited lust. And at the end of the weekend, she’d fly home her curiosity satisfied and get on with her life.

“I don’t make a habit of seducing men I’ve just met either,” she said. “But I’ve decided to make an exception in your case.”

Chapter Two

Celeste may have propositioned him, but Ryan seemed to be the one with the plan.

A split second after she'd made her intentions known they'd stopped dancing, stopped talking and headed straight for the nearest exit. No one and nothing came between Ryan and his objective, which appeared to be the front doors of the hotel. Despite his popularity, he waved hello or shook a hand and kept walking, straight through the lobby and right past the reception desk and the bank of elevators.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Stargazing," he said, which was news to her. "See how many we can name."

That touch of irony was back in his voice, causing Celeste to glance at him suspiciously. While there were undoubtedly other well-known, even famous RPCI grads at this function, Ryan McGregor and Bryant Young were by far the most visible "stars" here tonight. Sure enough, Ryan winked at her. The Skunk.

"I suppose you think you're being funny," she said, faking the exasperated tone in her voice before her curiosity took over. "I'm also going to guess from the way you greeted Bryant Young earlier, he was something of a mentor to you when you were breaking into television."

Ryan raised one eyebrow.

Men. They were so sensitive.

She shrugged. "Even non-sports fans like me have seen Ryan McGregor's face on their television screens every four years during the Olympics."

"Glad to hear I have such a wide fan base," he said with a wry smile. "And yes, Bryant is my mentor."

Then, ever so casually, he set his hand on the middle of her back and escorted her through the hotel's glass double doors where they stood at the top of a wide staircase that led to the street. On their way out he asked the concierge to flag down a taxi for them.

She liked his matter-of-fact decisiveness about Bryant Young's place in his life. She was less sure of his reason for coming outside. A fling with an old flame in a hotel was one thing, leaving the hotel with Ryan McGregor seemed to suggest something else entirely.

While she'd absently admired the view of the CN Tower from her room, the lure of the lights and the traffic at street level were at once familiar and foreign, like an old memory. She experienced a vague sense of nostalgia, but absolutely no regret about moving away and creating a whole new life for herself. One that left her past in the dust far behind her.

A shiver skittered across her skin. While the day had been warm, now that the sun had set, the breeze off the lake was cool. The wind tugged a few tendrils of her hair loose and the strands whipped around her face. Despite her reservations, she felt oddly alive and, looking down at the street, daring.

And very aware of the masculine presence standing beside her. Instinctively she edged closer to Ryan's warmth. He immediately shrugged out of his jacket and draped it around her shoulders. But, instead of letting go of the lapels, he used them as leverage to twist her around until she faced him.

Caught off balance, she braced her hands against Ryan's chest and was almost singed from the warmth of his body burning through the light fabric of his shirt. For a second she wasn't sure if she wanted to push him away or hang on. This evening wasn't turning out at all as she'd imagined it would. It held a promise she hadn't expected at all.

That expectation was there in his eyes, which assessed her with an intensity that almost made her squirm. What did he hope to see? Find? Learn? Want? The thought

scampered through her brain. He wanted her *and* he wanted something from her. His lips parted and the muscles along his jawline twitched and in that moment she knew exactly what he wanted.

“Are you married?” he asked at last.

She shook her head as if to clear it. Her brain had trouble computing what he’d just said—asked. “What?” she said, certain she was looking at him like he’d sprouted two heads. She’d been thinking kiss not Q&A. And unless she’d misread the signals entirely, he’d wanted that kiss as much as she’d anticipated it.

He looked down at her ring finger, which was ringless. “I don’t mean to insult you or suggest— Hell.” He tightened his grip on the lapels of his jacket. “I simply don’t want to make any assumptions here. I’m single. Not currently attached. Never been married.”

Celeste swallowed. He was certainly being careful. And why shouldn’t he be? For all intents and purposes they were strangers.

“Widowed,” she said. “Not currently attached.” Nor had she been since— But she didn’t want to go there right now and, fortunately, he didn’t seem inclined to ask for details.

“And you’re sure you want to—”

“Yes,” she said before he changed his mind—and hers.

* * * * *

Celeste set her black beaded bag on the table in the dining room and glanced around. Although Ryan’s older brother had gone to RPCI too, he and his wife were currently in Europe on a combination business holiday, leaving Ryan with a set of keys and a free place to crash during the reunion weekend. This latter piece of information was news to Celeste because she’d always imagined Ryan still living in Toronto. But, since she’d already teased him once this evening about his celebrity status, she opted to keep her ignorance to herself.

The condo was tastefully decorated in brown and gold with splashes of color here and there and Celeste disliked it—intensely. The pristine living room looked ready for a photo shoot, not people. She turned, wondering if it was too soon to suggest they head to the bedroom where she could at least muss up the sheets.

Ryan, apparently, had no such dilemma over the décor. Standing mere inches away from her, he once again grabbed hold of his jacket, which was still around her shoulders and pulled her a little closer, an unmistakable hunger blazing in his eyes. And just like that the heat was back, sizzling between them like an egg frying on a scorching sidewalk.

She licked her lower lip, her mouth suddenly dry. He tracked the movement with his eyes and the chiseled features of his face hardened on a harsh exhalation. The sound vibrated between them in the silence with a potency that shocked her. She still wasn't sure what she'd been expecting. Only that she'd been relying on adolescent memories of the attraction that had once stirred between them.

A huge mistake because this Ryan was no teenage boy. And she was most definitely not the awkward, uncertain girl she'd been fifteen years before.

With stunning casualness the edge of one thumb caressed the skin at her collarbone. Once. Twice. And then one blunt finger traced the edge of her bodice down over the curve of her breast.

"Sweet," he murmured, almost to himself.

In no time at all three fingers dipped beneath the edge of the lightweight fabric. Her pulse went wild with expectation and she couldn't look away. Could barely breathe.

"Lacy. Soft." His voice was low and rough. His touch lazy and hypnotic.

Now. He's going to kiss me now.

Her hands slid up his shirt and around his neck. A compulsion she hadn't known existed driving a need deep inside her. The suit jacket slipped from her shoulders and Ryan tossed it over the back of a nearby chair before wrapping his arm around her waist.

“You.” His rough whisper of desire tickled the shell of her ear. “This dress.” His fingers traced a seductive path in the valley between her breasts. “Driving me crazy.”

Yes. Well. *He* was driving her crazy. Teasing her with promises when all she wanted—all she’d thought about during the short taxi ride here—was his mouth on hers. Was that too much to ask for?

“Ry.”

That single, pleading word seemed to be all he needed to hear because the next thing she knew his hand slid south to cup her buttocks and he hauled her body flush against his. The hand that had been roaming across her skin now firmly gripped her neck. Presumably in case she had any silly ideas about trying to get away from him. She definitely did not.

Ryan wasn’t just a sportscaster. Assuming he hadn’t changed that much since high school, he also played sports. Regularly if the hard, honed muscles she’d crashed into were any indication. She gasped as the thick ridge of his erection pressed against her belly. The thin material of her dress was almost no barrier at all to the shallow, urgent thrusts of his cock. And then his mouth crashed down on hers and sparks flew.

All right, maybe not literally, but Celeste was absolutely positive she saw stars because this was no tame kiss.

His teeth nipped her lower lip and then his tongue darted out to soothe the sting. She twisted her head, trying to catch his mouth, but he moved too fast and she was forced to close her eyes against the assault of kisses he rained down on her face. Wherever he touched her, her skin tingled. A tiny sound of frustration escaped her questing lips. And then his mouth slanted across hers and his tongue ventured deeper to trace the rough edges of her teeth.

His pace was urgent and yet he continued to be very thorough, leaving no question of his intention. He meant to claim her. When she didn’t resist—did, in fact, open for him, his tongue plunged inside her mouth, stealing her breath. She hung on, afraid if

she let go her legs would give out and she'd slide to the floor in a puddle of lustful need.

Apparently secure in the knowledge that she wasn't going anywhere, his hands skimmed across her back instead of holding her fast. He couldn't seem to get enough and his hands left her warm and wanting more. And then they settled possessively along the curves of her breasts. He quickly swallowed her whimper of need as his thumbs flicked against her already taut nipples.

Her fingers tangled with the short, sleek strands of his hair. A growl of frustration rumbled up from his chest and he broke the kiss.

"I need to see them." The hint of pleading in his tone was quickly erased with his next command. "Now."

She suppressed the urge to laugh for one simple reason. He was right. Their clothing was fast becoming an inconvenient barrier—particularly since hardly any of his skin was bared for her pleasure. Releasing her hold on his hair, she set to work loosening his tie. He wasn't quite so patient. With a swift yank, he tore the expensive length of silk from his neck and threw it toward the same chair where he'd tossed his jacket a little earlier.

"Satisfied?" he asked in a voice that made it clear he wasn't.

She shook her head and began to unbutton his shirt. She soon discovered that his apparent acquiescence this time was born of an ulterior motive. By the time she pulled the shirt from his pants and unbuttoned it to his navel, her arms were low enough he simply peeled the sleeves of her dress and the straps of her bra down her arms. The move effectively trapped her arms at her side while, at the same time, threatening to expose her breasts for his personal perusal.

It wasn't the least bit fair, especially now that a significant section of his torso was bared. Not that he seemed to care in the least that he'd halted her plans to do some exploring of her own. Careful not to tear the dress and yet determined to assert her rights, she eased her arms out of the stretchy fabric. But Ryan was having none of it.

Before she could free her second arm, one of his arms snaked around her waist while the other made short work of the front closure of her bra. Within seconds a generous mound of flesh spilled into his hand.

She barely had time to clutch the sleeve of his shirt before he bent her back over his arm and dipped his head. His tongue flicked out and licked her distended bud sending a pulse of heat straight to her womb. He laved the nipple again, his tongue at once rough and yet impossibly gentle before he sucked the nub into his mouth. She cried out, unable to stop the sound or the emotions from surging through her. It had been so long. Impossibly long since anyone had held her like this. Tasted her the way Ryan was tasting her—as if he couldn't get enough.

"Sweet. Soft." He whispered the words across her skin. "So damn good."

His lips roamed across her skin, tasting—testing for a reaction. An easy task since everything he did made her burn for more. Climbing higher, he sucked the pulse point at her neck hard enough to leave his mark.

"Ry." Her grip on his shirtsleeve tightened.

At the sound of her voice, he lifted his head. Her face was now inches from his chest and a tempting expanse of sun-bronzed flesh. Unable to resist—and why should she?—she lifted her head and ran her tongue along his collarbone. He tasted of spice and man and the impulse to indulge—just this once, just this weekend—nearly overwhelmed her.

Without warning he reached down and grabbed a handful of material, crushing the soft fabric. A sound that could have been a protest or a plea caught in her throat. Within seconds his hand delved beneath the silky barrier of her dress, claiming her thigh.

"Sweet Jesus," he growled and she knew exactly why.

His hand had found the lacy edge of her thigh-high stocking.

Chapter Three

At the look of masculine fascination on Ryan's face, Celeste's first instinct was to back up. Unfortunately it was the wrong instinct. She landed on her ass, so to speak, when said posterior hit the back of a couch—a forceful reminder that they were still in the spotless living room.

“Ry, couldn't we—”

He shook his head before she could voice her suggestion. “I've waited too long to enact this fantasy. I'm not stopping now.”

Dazed by the declaration that a simple pair of thigh-high stockings featured in Ryan McGregor's sensual fantasies, Celeste's speechless surprise quickly morphed into wicked delight. Caught up in the day-to-day struggles of her life, she'd forgotten the sheer power—and fun—of weaving a little feminine magic of her own. What's more, Ryan was right. It was like riding a bicycle—she hadn't forgotten.

Shrugging her arm out of the other sleeve of her dress, she resumed unbuttoning his shirt. “In my fantasies,” she said, “you are not wearing a shirt.”

Or much else for that matter.

His low chuckle washed over her, bathing her with an unexpected warmth that reminded her that she wasn't the only one casting a spell of sorts. Ryan's single-minded interest in her—and her dress—wasn't just wreaking havoc with her body temperature. She was discovering just how badly she needed to be seduced.

“Hey, beautiful.”

Startled from her musings, she glanced up in time to see a shirtless Ryan drop to his knees in front of her. In the light cast from the hallway behind him, he was the one who looked beautiful. At this new angle the lines and planes of his face, which played so

well to a television camera, took on a carnal intensity that sent a shiver of answering awareness through her.

Slowly, oh so slowly, he curled his hand around her right ankle. Her leg jerked involuntarily at the subtle display of strength despite the gentleness of his grip. Then he lifted her foot off the floor. His movements were again slow and deliberate, giving her enough time to brace herself against the back of the couch for support. Without looking at what he was doing because he kept his gaze on her face, he removed her shoe and set it on the floor beside him.

She bit her lip at the pure eroticism of the moment. And the sure knowledge of what was to come. That was the secret behind this man's seductive powers. He might be playing out his private fantasies, but it was her desires he tapped into. Anticipated and then drew out.

Hence the hot and greedy start. The acute sense of urgency she'd experienced at his touch. The almost desperate need she had to feel his mouth on her flesh. And now – Now she closed her eyes against the slow build of heat as his hands skimmed up her leg.

The tips of his fingers found and caressed the sensitive underside of her knee. Ticklish, she wanted to laugh, but then he dipped his head and kissed her leg with a reverence that left her panting. He wasn't even touching bare skin and yet his lips brushing against her silk-clad joint had the impact of a solar flare.

Heat suffused her body and settled in her womb. Instinctively she clenched her muscles in a vain effort to keep the cream from seeping onto her thigh. His head snapped up and she swore he sniffed the air. A feral smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and then was gone. So was the deliberate investigation of her leg.

Bit by bit he rolled the sheer stocking down her leg. The combination of calloused hands and soft silk tormented her already overloaded senses. Unbidden, her hands clutched her dress, forcing the flimsy material to ride higher up her legs.

Ryan chuckled softly as he divested her of her other shoe. "Don't worry, beautiful. I'll get to what you're offering all in good time."

NOW!

She wanted to scream the word. Grab his head and shove it between her legs. Drive that self-satisfied look off his pretty-boy face. Handful by handful she gathered more and more of the red cloth.

"Ry." Her voice was little more than a whisper on the air.

He stopped mid-roll and looked up at her.

"Um, you may have noticed I'm not wearing much under this dress."

He swallowed. Hard. His lips parted and he shuddered. An instant later he removed the stocking from her left leg and tossed it aside. Then he sat back on his heels and, ever so carefully, placed her bare sole on his bulging erection. She deeply regretted that she'd allowed him to keep his pants on.

"I noticed," he said, gruffly, "that you're not wearing much of that dress, either."

She bit her lower lip and applied a judicious amount of pressure on the steel-hard shaft beneath her foot. The grip on her ankle tightened and he groaned.

Shifting her position slightly, she spread her legs wide. "For instance, my butt is bare," she announced. "And so is my —"

His hips jerked upward. "Sweet Jesus, tell me you're wearing something under there."

Sheer bravado had all but revealed her sinful secret. Despite her initial aversion to the whole concept of a makeover, once at the day spa she'd succumbed to the girly pleasure of being pampered — and taken it a step further.

She stared down at the polish adorning her nails. The bold idea had come to her when the manicurist had persuaded her to use the flamboyant red called *The Thrill of Brazil*.

"I am," she said, "wearing something. Want to see?"

Instead of nodding, he released his hold on her ankle and stumbled to his feet. With a certain lack of finesse, no doubt caused by his sense of urgency, he thrust a hand under her dress. Invading what was left of her modesty.

"Sweet Jesus," he muttered when his fingers encountered the thong's triangle of lace and delved beneath it. "Beautiful and wicked and very wet."

His harsh breath fanned her face and he kissed her forehead. She paid no attention to his mouth. Resting her head against his chest, she drew in a stuttered breath of air. Her entire focus was on his fingers, the backs of which were caressing her naked pussy.

"Please," she whispered. Heat coiled inside of her, overpowering her senses. The need to reach that fine point of ecstasy and then release was nearly unbearable.

An instant later two fingers slid between the folds of her labia. She trembled uncontrollably, crying out when a finger brushed against her clit. An arm encircled her shoulders at once sheltering and trapping her in the exquisite tension that vibrated through her body.

"Easy, beautiful."

The whispered endearment only tightened the need inside her—a need that spiraled straight to her womb. His fingers delved deeper within the slick folds until he dipped the tip of one inside her channel. She jerked against him, her vaginal muscles contracting sharply. Not to shove him out, but to hold him fast inside her. Except she needed more—much more.

"Please." She clutched his arm, knowing her nails would leave crescent-shaped marks across his skin, yet not caring.

"Easy, I'll give you what you want," Ryan said.

Not one but two thick fingers rammed into her. She screamed what could have been his name, but she wasn't sure. Her words, even her thoughts, were swallowed by a tsunami of sensation. And it was all she could do to hang on.

Instead she felt a strong hand grip her neck and pull her away from the strength of his hot male body. She mewled in protest – the sound cut short when his mouth crashed down on hers. His tongue thrust in time with his fingers.

Each plunge claimed possession.

Each withdrawal built the wave cresting deep within her.

Needing more of him, she slid her hand up his arm until her fingers tangled with the short hair at the nape of his neck. The movement caused her body to arch beneath him and her breasts brushed against the smooth skin of his bared chest, abrading her already sensitive nipples. The skin-on-skin contact was enough to push her over the edge.

Their kiss broke and she bowed her head and sobbed as the tidal wave consumed her. He held on despite the violent tremble of her body against his sturdier one. Harsh breaths and the violent pounding of her heart were the only sounds that filled the silence after the storm.

She bit her lip to stifle a moan when he pulled his fingers out of her. His other hand made lazy circles across her back, lulling her into a boneless puddle of satisfaction.

“Sweet God, that was beautiful,” he said.

She nodded against his chest, not trusting herself to speak. Still, she savored his touch and the beat of his heart hammering next to her ear.

“Have dinner with me next week. And wear that dress so you can drive me crazy and we can do this all over again.”

His dead-serious tone immediately set alarm bells clanging in her head and she pushed away from Ryan’s warmth. Invitations to dinner or anywhere else were not part of her plan. She’d given herself one weekend away from her hectic life. One weekend to indulge in a perfectly good “what if” fantasy that didn’t include Ryan McGregor’s strings-attached personal agenda.

“No, thank you,” she said, forcing a politeness she didn’t feel.

Thankfully he dropped his arm, releasing his hold on her. But the physical separation also stole the warmth and the intimate awareness that had zinged between them. She scrambled off her precarious perch on the couch with as much dignity as she could muster considering she was practically naked.

"Why not?" he asked in a conversational tone that did little to hide the fact that he expected an answer.

Her back to him, she closed her eyes and wondered why she hadn't remembered how stubborn Ryan McGregor could be. Despite her growing panic—and lack of a bra, which was somewhere on the couch—she eased her arms into the bodice of her dress.

"I'm busy," she said, which sounded lame even if it was more or less the truth.

He didn't respond, but she was keenly aware of him watching her every move. Unfortunately he hadn't moved away from the couch, forcing her to either leave the rest of her belongings scattered around it—or not. She retrieved her shoes and stockings from the floor, caught sight of a bra strap and grabbed it before marching briskly toward the front door. Not that she planned to walk out it, especially not looking the way she did. It was the sense of acute anxiety propelling her away from HIM until she could regain her equilibrium.

"Leaving so soon?" This time Ryan made no attempt to hide the heavy dose of sarcasm in his tone.

Celeste stiffened, but refused to stop walking. "I need to—"

"Head back to the hotel. Think you'll be safe from me there?"

His voice definitely sounded closer, more mocking. Stealing herself, she turned. The bare-chested man standing beside the dining room table scowling at her did nothing to help her composure.

"Don't do this," she pleaded.

"Do what?" he snapped. "You're the one walking out on me, lady."

She shook her head. She wasn't leaving, just trying to make a strategic retreat to the powder room only a few feet behind her.

"Bullshit."

Before she knew what was happening, he stalked across the room and grabbed her by the arms as if he'd like nothing better than to give her a good shake. Instead he backed her up against the wall. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of the powder room that only moments before had held the promise of safety. Without her shoes on he had a small height advantage, which forced her to look up to meet his glare.

"You're running away from me, lady, and I want to know why."

All she could do was shake her head again. This was too much. *He* was too much.

"What do you want from me?" she finally sobbed.

"I told you," he said. His voice was surprisingly gentle given his anger only moments before. Only she wasn't fooled. He hadn't let go of her. "I want to take you out to dinner."

"That's not possible."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, I live in Vancouver."

"So?"

"So, you don't."

He completely ignored that complication. And this time he did give her a shake. "So, what are you trying to say?" Frustration and anger laced every word. "That you flew halfway across the country to pick up a quick fuck. But wait. I only finger-fucked you. My dick didn't get the privilege."

If he was trying to turn her off with his crude language, he was in for a surprise. Working construction sites every summer through university had inured her to male-speak however crude or rude. And since walking away hadn't worked and neither had reason, he'd left her with only one way to defend herself.

“And whose fault is that?” she challenged. “You’re the idiot who wanted to keep his pants zipped.”

His arms dropped to his side so fast, Celeste sagged against the wall. His gray eyes turned diamond-hard. Good. Her dare had distracted him. She lifted her chin a notch, a thrill of anticipation racing through her veins.

He stepped back a pace. His eyes never leaving her face, he toed off his shoes. Steady as the Rock of Gibraltar, he balanced on first one and then the other foot, removing his socks. Finally his hand settled on his belt buckle.

She deliberately dropped her gaze to his groin and then back up to his face. His features tightened as he unbuckled his belt and then unzipped his pants. One shove and the pants and briefs pooled at his ankles. Her shoes fell with a clatter onto the wood floor. Her bra slipped from her fingers as did her stockings, which skimmed her legs as they floated downward.

My God, he was impressively endowed. Sure she’d felt his erection pressing against her. She just hadn’t translated the dimensions into this magnificent specimen. Fully aroused, his penis jutted upward from a patch of brown hair. The shaft was long and thick, the mushroom-shaped head slick with precum.

If he was aware of her distracted gaze, Ryan didn’t show it. Two steps and he was inside the powder room. One flick of his wrist and the cabinet above the sink opened. A second later he stood in front of her a foil packet in his hand. He ripped it open with his teeth and silently handed it to her – offering a dare of his own.

“This is awfully convenient,” she said because she didn’t for a moment believe his brother kept condoms in a washroom intended for visitors.

“Under the circumstances,” he said glancing down at his erection, “it’s safe and smart.”

Despite the fact that her hands were trembling, she accepted the packet. He braced one hand on the wall beside her head, but closed his eyes on a groan when she began rolling the latex over his length—satin on steel. Her hands cupped the heavy, downy

balls and she bit her lip to keep from sinking to her knees and offering him a totally different proposition. When she was done, she settled her hands on his chest. His eyes opened – hot and intense.

“Ry.” Her fingers caressed his heated flesh, reestablishing at least to some degree the powerful physical connection they’d shared earlier.

Without a word, he hiked her skirt up to her waist, his gaze boring into her. She bit her lip, but didn’t break eye contact. Releasing his hold on the wall, he reached down and trailed his hand along the slim waistband of her thong making her next breath catch in her throat. He curled his hand around her thigh and lifted her leg to his waist, opening her to him. Then in one swift move he tore the patch of lace from her body.

She gasped and arched toward him. Giving him all the invitation he needed. The head of his cock nudged her entrance and then slid slowly, deliciously inside her. One deliberate inch at a time. Her muscles contracted and she canted her hips, adjusting to the invasion. He hissed, his head falling forward to rest against the wall beside her.

“So tight. So wet. So sweet,” he said, his voice little more than a guttural rasp.

With one final thrust of his hips, he seated himself deep inside her. Filling an emptiness she hadn’t known existed. She moaned and nuzzled his neck, licking the sweat from his skin.

He kept his thrusts short and shallow, teasing her with the promise of more. Surrounded by him. Filled with him, her senses and her thoughts narrowed until he became the center of her pleasure. Nothing else mattered but the more he could give her.

And then he lifted his head. The lust in his eyes leached to a fierce determination. “Why,” he asked, rocking against her, “won’t you have dinner with me?”

Well and truly trapped, she had nowhere to go and no more defenses left except the truth.

“Because you’re a Skunk,” she cried, banging her fist impotently against his chest. “A dirty rotten Skunk.”

He caught her hand, pinning it to the wall beside her.

“Is that really what you think of me, Celeste Richards?”

Chapter Four

“What did you say?” Even to her own ears, Celeste sounded as though she’d been hit by a Mack truck. Or one hell of a cosmic joke.

She shut her eyes, blocking out as much of Ryan as she could. Given their position against the wall with him inside her, it was an exercise in futility. Just as her efforts to avoid the inevitable had been.

He pushed his body impossibly closer. “You heard me.”

Yes, she had heard. He’d called her Celeste Richards which meant— He’d known exactly who she was from the beginning, making this moment the second most embarrassing of her entire life.

She forced her eyes open. It wasn’t easy with his bare body surrounding her. Filling her. His face only inches from her own. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she whispered.

He rotated his hips, driving his shaft deeper inside her. “Why didn’t *you* tell me? Christ, it’s not as if I haven’t given you every opportunity. Instead I get some bullshit nickname and—” He took a deep breath, visibly making the effort to calm himself. “I assume Holmes is your dead husband’s surname.”

Mutely she nodded. And if she’d been smart instead of dumb, she’d have realized what was going on. Because not once had he called her by the name she’d given him.

“Besides,” he continued, his cock sliding in and out of her, driving her mad and making it virtually impossible to concentrate. “You’ve been calling me Ry all evening.”

A nickname she’d given him and one only she’d ever used. Even if he really hadn’t known who she was when they’d first met, she’d given herself away at the first opportunity. Proving just how obtuse she’d been and how obsessed she was— with him.

She caressed his pec with her free hand, her fingers brushing against a hard, dusky nipple. A growl rumbled up from his chest and he rested his cheek against hers, his hot breath fanning her ear.

"I've waited too long to have you," he said. "I can't stop."

"I don't want you to," she admitted.

He pulled back, grunting with the effort to control the movement. He didn't stop until the tip of his shaft rested just inside her pussy. Her muscles contracted. He chuckled, as if to say she wouldn't be getting rid of him that easily and slammed back inside her.

She didn't need to beg him for more of the same. His pace was all wild passion. An elemental force that locked them together—in the past they'd barely experienced and the fantasy they'd invented in the years following. Only, when she shouted his name she was all too aware of reality. And the man—his powerful body brushing against her flesh and his cock driving into her. The semi-coherent words he murmured in her ear.

The smell of him made her just as wild.

And then the energy building between them exploded. Sparks flew, blinding her but by that point she didn't care. Too caught up in the exquisite turmoil of her own orgasm, she barely registered Ryan's shout as he tipped over the edge.

It took several minutes for awareness to return. The cool wall behind her grounded her in the moment. In the reality of what had happened.

Ryan's body rested against hers. His eyes closed, his forehead touching the wall. His skin was slicked with sweat and his chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath. She caressed his collarbone and cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry," she said. Because really, what else could she say? From the moment they'd met, she'd been playing some stupid game.

His head snapped up and he stared at her for a good long minute. He looked worn out. Beaten. He reached down between them and eased out of her, his hand holding the condom in place.

"That's my line," he said and then released his hold on her and walked into the powder room.

Confused, she wiped away the suspicious well of moisture that threatened to leak from the corner of her eyes. She tried, with little success, to straighten her dress while she waited for him to reappear.

"What do you mean?" she asked, making a concerted effort to ignore his naked body. She was the one who'd messed up. What did he need to apologize for?

He glanced over at her. "Five seconds. That's all I needed. But you did such a neat job of avoiding me the last few weeks of term, I never got five minutes to explain, let alone five seconds to apologize.

"That's what I mean, Celeste Richards. I've been waiting fifteen years for the five-second chance to say I'm sorry for what happened the night of the party."

Celeste wasn't sure she could breathe. She *had* avoided him. Like the plague, because she'd been so humiliated. Back then all she'd wanted to do was to finish exams, graduate and leave town. She'd been so busy plotting an escape route she hadn't looked for or expected an apology —

"You have five minutes," she said.

Instead of talking right away he grabbed his briefs from where they lay with his pants on the floor and put them on. "Do you remember my friend Doug Young?"

"Young?" she said. "As in —"

"Bryant Young's nephew," Ryan said with a nod.

Well, that got her attention.

"He was about my height, glasses, good with computers, right?"

Ryan nodded, again. "The afternoon of the last Jazztones performance and the stage crew party, Doug told me his leukemia had come back."

This so does not sound good. And she was very glad she was leaning against a wall for support. Because there was something else she suddenly remembered about Doug Young, aside from the fact that he and Ryan had been pretty tight back in high school.

"In the yearbook," she said. "Under ambitions, he wrote he wanted to obtain his Bachelor's degree."

Ryan stared at the floor. "He got a lot of ribbing for that. But then, I was the only one who knew why."

"Did he..."

Ryan kept his eyes down and shook his head. "He died just before the end of second year."

"Ry." She reached out but dropped her hand when he refused to look at her.

"I'm not trying to change the subject, get morbid, or offer an excuse for my behavior. I just want to explain what was happening to me back then."

"Go on," she said, offering her encouragement.

From what she remembered of the events that night at the party leading up to the embarrassing incident, Ryan had been moody. Kidding around most of the time and then suddenly not. She'd attributed his temperament to the adrenaline crash they were all experiencing once the performances and the often manic set changes were over.

Finally, his cool gray eyes met hers. "Back then I wanted you very badly, Celeste Richards. Still do, which I guess is pretty obvious. But you weren't the kind of girl who—" He shook his head. "I thought I was playing it cool not making any moves. Being your friend. Taking cold showers after every damn performance."

Cold showers? She clearly remembered the joking around and the casual flirting that had gone on between them. But she did not remember any evidence that suggested he was dowsing his lust.

He stepped closer, caging her between his hands, which he braced against the wall. "Don't look so prissy."

"I'm not," she said, indignant. She couldn't be. Not after what they'd just done. What she still wanted to do.

"You're shocked, which is exactly why I made sure you didn't find out how I really felt."

"Until the night of the party."

"Yeah, until the night of the party." He thrust himself away from the wall. Away from her. "You were in the living room chatting with some friends. Do you remember?"

"I remember you came up and put your arm around me."

He shrugged all too casually. "Pretty smooth move, huh?"

She recalled something else about that moment. "Actually, I remember thinking it was about darn time."

His eyes widened in surprise. "Damn, I was stupid. Because right then and there, my dick decided it would be a brilliant idea to get into your pants. I'd only had one beer, but my brain seconded the motion. What can I say? I was a horny teenager and my best friend had just told me there was a damn good chance he was going to die. I was determined to prove that I was very much alive. So instead of being considerate, instead of thinking my asinine plan through, I took you to some bedroom, didn't bother to lock the door and...I swear to God, Celeste, I had no idea those three idiots —"

"Rat bastards."

"What?"

"You were a Skunk. Your friends are Rat Bastards."

Ryan gave her a ghost of a grin, which quickly turned to a frown. "Any friendship I might have had with Larry, Curly and Moe ended that night. I swear to God, Celeste, I had no idea those rat bastards were going to crash my colossally inept seduction."

"That's not what they said." The accusation was out before she could reconsider.

He pivoted on his heels and glowered at her. His obvious incredulity immediately put her on the defensive.

“You didn’t dispute it. And I was the one caught totally naked from the waist up.”

“And I wasn’t?” He shook his head, realizing what he’d said and that a man caught with his shirt off wasn’t exactly a bad thing. “Sweet Jesus, Celeste. I’m willing to admit I was an imbecile, but I assure you, if I were stupid enough to plan such a prank, I’d make damn sure I wasn’t caught with my pants around my ankles and my dick practically sticking out of my boxers. Didn’t you have some clue when I risked my modesty to shield you from their view?”

Celeste shoved herself away from the wall. No, quite frankly she’d missed that part. She’d been too busy being mortified. Too caught up in her version of events to stop and consider his.

“Ry, I need time to—”

Heat engulfed her as he pulled her against him and his mouth possessed hers. Taking. Demanding. And giving, which shouldn’t have been a surprise because he’d been a generous lover. He was hard again. His cock thrust rhythmically against her abdomen and she moaned.

“I can smell your arousal, Celeste Richards,” he whispered and nipped her lower lip.

She closed her eyes, but it did no good trying to deny the truth. Her body acted as if it hadn’t touched a man in years instead of five minutes ago. Her nipples were hard and aching in the confines of her dress and her pussy creamed in desperate need for a hot, hard length to fill it. She reached out for him, but he caught her wrists and pinned them at her side.

“Time,” he growled. “Fine, the bathroom’s down the hall. You have fifteen minutes to get cleaned up then I’m coming after you fair and square. No lies. No secret identities. No misunderstanding. No pretense of any kind.”

Secure behind the bathroom door, Celeste rested against the doorjamb, shaken by the turbulent emotions Ryan's version of their past had dredged up. Memories flashed through her brain in a series of stills documenting the good, the bad and the ugly. And the inescapable truth.

Ryan was right. He'd risked his dignity in a gallant, if belated, attempt to protect hers. While he'd blocked the Rat Bastards' view, she'd been able to put on her bra and T-shirt and pull herself together.

And then what had she done?

She'd run out of the bedroom, leaving Ryan standing in his boxers and not much else. Including, apparently, her trust in him.

So much for adolescent infatuation, puppy love—call it what you will. Their two-month-old friendship hadn't withstood its first serious test. And what did that say about her, even if she cut herself some slack for her lack of experience? Caught up in her own humiliation, she'd listened and believed when she should have known better. If she'd truly been Ryan's friend wouldn't she at least have asked for—heck, demanded—an explanation? And saved herself a lot of hurt and grief.

Celeste closed her eyes and ordered the part of her brain that was in charge of self-recrimination to kindly shut up. She'd messed up. Big-time. Finally forced to face Ryan and really listen to some truths about that evening, she freely admitted her mistakes. But the past, however fallible, was, well, in the past. It was the present she needed to think about.

Ryan hadn't given her much time to pull her act together. In point of fact he hadn't really given her any time at all. His declaration of intent made it clear that he hadn't been waiting fifteen years simply to apologize. Incredibly, he apparently wanted a second chance at a relationship with her.

The question was—what did she want?

Pushing herself away from the door, she dumped her bra and stockings on the counter. God knew where the remains of her thong were. She'd left her shoes in the

hallway and her purse on the dining room table. Checking herself in the mirror, she let out a dejected sigh. Neither of those items was going to help her repair her stylish image. Her single piece of clothing was wrinkled, her hair in disarray.

Simply put, she was in dire need of an overhaul.

Spying a clothes hanger and a bathrobe hanging from a hook on the back of the door, she quickly stripped. After hanging up the dress that had cost her a small but very worthwhile fortune given the reaction it had elicited from Ryan, she slipped on the soft, cotton robe. It was a man's robe and she smiled at the thought that it probably, hopefully belonged to Ryan not his brother.

Which brought her right back to that question of what she wanted. Because her plan had been to show Ryan McGregor what he missed and then walk away, back to her life on the west coast. But Celeste knew better than anyone how unpredictable life was, especially when you had plans for it.

Her hand slid inside the lapel of the bathrobe and traced the curve of one breast and then the other. Her nipples were still peaked from pleasure. Her simple caress only increased the ache. She suspected that even if she showered, her skin would retain the memory of Ryan's touch. She trailed her hand down her torso to her scandalously nude mons and then pulled her hand free in annoyance and tied the robe closed.

Her body was not going to settle for her gentler, softer touch when it had so recently been expertly manhandled, so to speak. Particularly when said manhandler had promised more.

She glanced at her watch. Time was almost up and she still wasn't sure how to respond to Ryan's proposition.

Despite wearing his shirts, she'd accepted long ago that Matt was dead. That he'd never be coming home to her and the boys. She'd just never seriously considered taking that next step of looking for someone else. Except her brother Zach was right—a part of her had stagnated. While she'd made a successful career for herself and was the best

darn mother she could be, she'd ignored her own needs. Denied that part of herself that reveled in sensuality.

Until Ryan McGregor had shown her exactly what she'd been missing. A fact confirmed by the image staring back at her in the mirror. Pleasantly mussed, she looked like a woman who'd had incredibly hot, wild sex. It was a view of herself she hadn't seen in a good long while. One she quite possibly wanted to see again—soon.

Her gaze dropped to her fingers—or, more precisely, the deep, rich shade of her nails. No pretense of any kind, Ryan had said.

While the red polish complemented her coloring, the manicure and pedicure looked, if not quite pretentious then certainly out of character. Even if she were willing to admit that it was past time that she replaced Matt's shirts with more stylish clothing, Celeste Richards Holmes was and always would be the sporty, get-down-and-dirty type. She was a hands-on engineer and a hands-on mom, which made nail polish anything but practical.

The gawky teen of fifteen years ago might be gone—thank God. But while she could dress the part—and enjoy it once in a while—neither was she the super sophisticate she'd eyed in the brass panel on the way to the welcome reception earlier this evening.

A quick search of the cupboards under the sink produced a clean towel and facecloth. She found soap and a generic moisturizer on the counter and set about washing up. After drying her face, she took the pins out of her hair. Her locks tumbled down to sweep her shoulders. She swished her head experimentally, still not used to the shorter style.

Setting the towel on the counter beside the sink, Celeste studied herself in the mirror at last satisfied with her appearance. This weekend had gone way past showing some guy what he'd missed and reminiscing about the good—or not so good—old days. She felt a little bit like a butterfly who'd come out of her cocoon to discover a

whole different view of the world—a world that could, possibly, include of all people Ryan McGregor.

If she had the courage to risk inviting him into her life.

Chapter Five

Moments after the bathroom door closed behind Celeste, Ryan stalked into the tiny two-piece washroom and set his hands on the counter. The cool ceramic did nothing to bank the fire in his veins or the trembling in his hands.

She hadn't walked out.

Quite possibly had never intended leaving the condo.

It was his damn insecurities reading more into the situation than was there. Because, now that he had her, there was no way he planned to let Celeste Richards slip through his fingers again.

His lips curled at the irony and he looked down at his hands. His fingers had fucked the woman into a mind-blowing orgasm and then he'd pinned her against the wall and shoved his dick up her —

Fifteen years later and he still had all the finesse of a tomcat where this woman was concerned. About the only thing he'd done right was to lock and chain the front door. That and finally discover the answer to the question that had plagued him ever since that night so long ago.

What if they hadn't been interrupted?

He'd barely touched her voluptuous curves, barely tasted her sweetness and hunger before those morons had crashed in on them. Leaving him with what some would call an unhealthy obsession. One that wasn't likely to be cured any time soon. If anything this evening's wild ride had stoked, not quenched, his thirst for her.

Particularly since, in the aftermath of the disaster he'd come to realize that he'd not only lost a potential lover that night. He'd also lost a good friend. Celeste had always been her own person with her own opinions—a trait he'd admired even back then. Doubly so now that his "celebrity" status made him a prime cut of bachelor beef.

He stripped out of his briefs and cleaned up as best he could given the inadequate facilities and the fact that thoughts of Celeste had made him hard again. And all the while he contemplated his options.

For the first time in forever a woman had turned down a date with him. Her prompt “no” left him wondering if he’d unconsciously counted too much on his fame to give him that second chance he wanted with Celeste Richards. Except that wasn’t her name anymore. The selfish and yes, damn it, jealous part of him did not want to know about her dead husband. Ryan had found her first.

And promptly lost her, he reminded himself.

In disgust, he grabbed his shorts and wandered around the condo collecting his miscellaneous pieces of clothing. A scrap of black lace caught his eye and he picked up the scanty remains of the barely there thong she’d been wearing. He glanced down the hallway at the still tightly shut bathroom door.

She’d turned him down when she still thought he didn’t know who she was. He shook his head. Even if he believed she was still embarrassed after all these years – and that would certainly explain her lame attempt to hide her identity – he couldn’t believe that Celeste had changed so much that her goal had been some sort of revenge fuck. Not when she’d been so responsive, demanding, teasing – so damn sexy he’d nearly had heart failure just looking at her.

So, had she turned down the dinner date because she still loved her dead husband?

Idiot. Of course she still loved her husband. Probably always would. But *she* had propositioned him. And there was no way he’d misread the cues when he’d held her in his arms. Celeste had wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

So all he needed was an angle. And the rest of the night to work his charm.

He stalked down the hallway to the bathroom door, raised his hand and rested it lightly against the frame.

No pretense of any kind, he’d told her.

Fine, the only angle he'd go with was the truth—starting with the fact that he wasn't trying to relive the past. He was finished being reckless—with his life, which was why he'd given up extreme sports several years ago, and with opportunities. He'd waited fifteen years for the chance to apologize to Celeste. Despite accomplishing his mission, he'd known from the moment he'd set eyes on her at the reception tonight that an apology wouldn't be enough.

He wanted that dinner date. A night out at the movies. A walk in the park. A chance to find out if his gut had been lying or telling the truth and that there was something there between them worth pursuing.

Ryan had barely pulled on a pair of jeans and zipped them when he heard a small sound behind him. Turning, he spotted Celeste leaning against the doorjamb of the guest bedroom—minus the curve-hugging dress and the makeup and the fancy hairdo. She looked stunning and he decided right then and there that he was just going to give her his bathrobe—permanently.

"Hi there," he said.

Instead of smiling, Celeste straightened and self-consciously adjusted the robe's lapels, moderating the view from outstanding to merely fantastic.

"This isn't really me," she finally said wiggling her fingers at him.

It took him a second to realize she meant the nail polish. "The toes are awfully cute," he said not quite understanding where this conversation was going but willing to play along.

She hastily glanced down at her feet and then back at him, a ghost of a smile playing across her mouth. "You think so?"

"Absolutely. One of the first things I noticed."

A definite smile teased her lips and she stepped into the room. "After the dress, you mean."

“Right, after the dress.”

Quite ridiculously, considering what they’d so recently done and where they now were and her lack of attire—because he knew damn good and well she was naked under that robe—she held out her hand.

“Hi there,” she said taking another step forward. “I’m Celeste Richards Holmes.”

And finally he fit the pieces together. This was the real Celeste, with no pretense of any kind—as long as he discounted the nail polish that is.

He took her hand and tugged her a little closer. “Ryan McGregor. But then, you already knew that because you like to watch the Olympics every four years.”

“It’s been a while, Mr. McGregor.”

“Seventeen minutes and twenty-six seconds,” he said even though he knew she probably meant since the last Olympics. Or maybe she meant since they’d last met fifteen years ago. Quite frankly he didn’t care, especially when her free hand traced a path all the way down his torso to the unsnapped top of his jeans.

“And it seems,” she said, her voice so cool it sent shivers down his spine. “You still haven’t learned your lesson. You’re wearing pants.”

Barely—his erection was pressing painfully against the zipper of his jeans. It was damn uncomfortable. He snagged the belt that was doing a questionable job of keeping her modesty intact and pulled her flush against his body. “And you’re wearing my robe.”

She bit her lower lip and raised her chin a notch in mock defiance. “What are you going to do about it?”

Strip it off her.

Throw her on the bed.

Fuck her until they were both senseless.

Then her fingers dipped centimeters below the waistband of his jeans and circled the fat head of his cock. The pad of her thumb found his slit and a bead of precum

instantly leaked out. She painted his knob with it, driving all thoughts, sane or otherwise from his brain.

He needed to drop his pants, NOW.

Before he could orchestrate the complex maneuver, she leaned closer and brushed her lips against his cheek. "Gotcha," she whispered and pushed.

He hadn't let go of the bathrobe's belt. Caught off balance, she crashed into him and they tumbled onto the bed together. His arms wrapped around her, drawing her body close as they fell in an insane effort to cushion her fall. Their limbs tangled and he felt the sting of her nails digging into his back where she hung on. They bounced on the hard mattress and she laughed.

Crazy woman.

A mini-wrestling match ensued. The sensation of hot, slick skin against skin contact left him fighting to put air in his lungs. His blood had long since zoomed south making him lightheaded. *Shit.* To his surprise, he discovered he needed to exert himself to maintain his upper hand. Using their momentum to his advantage he rolled, quickly pinning her.

Her luscious body squirmed beneath his, wreaking havoc on his already overactive libido. It didn't help that her hands were all over him, caressing every sensitive spot they could find. His skin was on fire and if he didn't find a way to control her, his cock was going to explode. Using just enough brute force to get the job done, within seconds he restrained her hands above her head.

An instant later he eased back. In truth giving them both room to catch their breath. But the sight of her beneath him made that damn difficult. In the ensuing struggle the bathrobe's lapels had fallen away leaving her naked body on glorious display.

He grinned down at her.

"Skunk," she said, only this time she didn't sound angry at all. If anything her tone was affectionate.

Sweet Jesus, she was so damn sexy with her dark hair spread across the gold comforter and her silky smooth skin just begging to be touched. Unable to stop himself, he slid one hand down her sleek torso to the sweet curve of her hip. He wanted to taste her skin and her cream so bad his hand shook.

“Ry,” she said in that husky way she had of saying his name and he knew he was a goner.

He bent his head and bumped his nose against hers. “What is it, beautiful?”

“It doesn’t work with your pants on,” she said, a mischievous sparkle in her big blue eyes.

He snorted and shook his head. “Fine, beautiful. You asked for it.”

Flipping onto his back, he eased down the zipper on his jeans and then shoved the denim down his legs. By the time the pants hit the floor, she was kneeling beside him. A move he would have applauded if his bathrobe wasn’t once again, however loosely, concealing her from neck to knee. Despite the display of modesty, she was actively scanning his naked, extremely aroused body. What’s more, she looked anything but disinterested.

He lay still. Hoped to hell he wasn’t blushing under her intense scrutiny. And waited for her gaze to meet his. When it did, what little he could see of her skin turned an attractive shade of pink.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said, propping himself up on one elbow, though the rest of his body remained in a reclining position.

“Do you really think so?” she asked and then the most amazing thing happened. The bathrobe—his bathrobe—slipped off her shoulders and down her arms exposing every last inch of her mouthwatering body.

He reached out and brushed his hand across her thigh. Sweet God, he wanted a taste of her bare cunt.

"Absolutely," he said before his circuits totally fried and left him speechless. "First thing I noticed."

Her lips twitched. "After the dress and the cute toes, you mean."

Sitting up, he shook his head. He enjoyed this playful side of her and definitely wanted to see more of it. "Nope. Beautiful *was* the first thing I noticed."

She blew out a little breath of warm air that fanned his face. "You're good for my ego."

He nipped her lower lip, eliciting a tiny moan from her. "You're damn good for mine too, beautiful."

Right on cue her gaze dropped to his groin and then scooted back up to his face. She licked her lips again, driving him stark raving crazy.

"Ry." She leaned forward ever so slightly and her lips grazed his cheek and jawline.

"Umm." He turned his head to capture her mouth again, but somehow she evaded him.

"You need to lie down again."

Even as he shook his head, she ever so gently pushed him back onto the comforter. He growled in frustration. He had to taste her. Touch her.

Totally ignorant of the erotic fantasies he had going on inside his brain, she leaned over his body. Her heavy breasts swung forward, offering him a tempting feast, but before he could partake, she dipped her head and fastened her teeth around his nipple.

Sweet, sweet Jesus. An electrical current sizzled through his body, heating him to the core. He hissed and his balls tightened in response. Blindly he reached out. The back of his hand bumped against the swell of her breast and instinct took over. Catching her already taut nipple between thumb and forefinger, he squeezed.

She released her hold instantly on a whimper of pleasure-pain. Her entire body arched when his knuckles circled the areola to ease the stinging sensation. Her reaction only inflamed his need to claim her.

Made him ready to beg for more of her touch.

He didn't have to. Her mouth bestowed tiny kisses down his skin leaving a trail of fire in their wake. Then her tongue darted out and licked the head of his cock.

His heart damn near had an attack.

And he must have made a noise because she stopped what she was doing to look back at him.

"Liked that, did you?" she asked.

Yes, damn it, more! his dick screamed.

Fortunately, his brain hadn't ceded total control. It sent the correct signal to his hand and then his fingers, which quickly found the velvety soft folds of her pretty, pink pussy and delved inside. Within seconds his fingers were soaked with her cream.

Her eyes flared at his boldness—especially when he lifted his fingers to his mouth and tasted her essence. In the stillness that followed, it was easy to read her reaction. An exquisite tension vibrated through her lush frame radiating waves of sensual heat like a call to mate. It took every ounce of self-restraint he had not to pounce and stake his claim.

The muscles beneath his thigh jumped when her hand brushed against his leg. And his stone-hard cock jerked in anticipation of that hot, wet mouth closing over his shaft. Sweet Jesus he was in misery—and loving every minute of it.

He stretched his hand out toward her, but an instant later she wiggled her delectable derrière out of his reach.

"No touching," she said. "It's my turn to play."

Hallelujah! The teenage Celeste he'd known fifteen years ago would never have made such a demand. But, as he'd been discovering all evening, the woman Celeste had become wasn't afraid to ask for what she wanted. He liked that about her too. And he could only pray that by the end of the weekend he'd convince her that what she wanted was him.

For the moment she certainly seemed to – want him that is.

Her hand curled tight around the base of his shaft and, after one more glance in his direction, she slid her mouth over the head of his cock.

Chapter Six

Celeste was drowning in sensation. The scent of arousal—his and hers—lay heavy in the air. It permeated her skin, coating her in a fine sheen of sweat.

The tip of her tongue swiped across the slit at the top of his penis, greedy for another taste of the tangy liquid that seeped out drop by drop. Beneath her hands, his hips lifted—a series of almost imperceptible and yet undeniably urgent movements up and down. A silent plea for more that made her smile.

Definitely not a passive male, the second her mouth had closed over the mushroom-shaped head, he'd reared up, propping himself on his forearms so he could watch her. Ryan's eyes might be gray, but the passion pouring from them was hot enough to incinerate her.

Further evidence of her feminine power, should she require it.

Not that she did.

She lifted her head, fascinated by his reaction.

Beneath her hands, the taut, smooth skin shifted over the steel-hard core of his shaft. She massaged it slowly, memorizing the unique texture. Learning what he liked and how hard he liked it. With each long stroke a tiny bead of cum appeared like an offering. One she didn't hesitate to lap up.

But she *was* greedy. She wanted to experience as much of him—of this—as possible. She wanted to feel the masculine power pulsing between her hands on her skin.

Canting her torso forward, she bent low enough to paint her distended nipples with his precum. He hissed and threw his head back and muttered unintelligible words every time his sensitive glans came into contact with her equally delicate areola.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out against the silky skin on silky skin contact. The cascade of sensation left her unable to distinguish her reactions from his.

“Touch my balls,” he commanded, his voice harsh with the effort speaking cost him.

He was riding on the edge, just as she was.

Not wanting to break physical contact, she slipped one hand between his legs while keeping the other firmly wrapped around his shaft. He spread his legs wider, gratefully granting her access if the noises of pleasure emanating from above her head were any indication. His testicles were downy soft and pliant. And when she bent her head to kiss them, he shouted her name.

She lifted her head, startled as much by the desperation in his voice as she was by the fact that this was the first time he’d called her something other than beautiful since the argument in the hallway.

“Ride me.”

She could practically hear the word NOW written in big capital letters from his tone. Her pussy clenched, responding automatically to his sense of urgency. A fresh flood of liquid heat dribbled down her inner thigh.

“Where are the —”

“In the drawer.”

She found a box in the drawer of the bedside table. Unable to resist, she tossed it on the bed.

“You’re optimistic,” she teased, even as she selected a foil packet and ripped it open.

“I have plans.” The arrogant masculine tenor of his voice suggested he could live up to them too.

And yet he held out his hand, clearly forfeiting the knowledge that his fingers shook with need than risk her touching him again. She complied, her own hands none too steady.

“Come here, beautiful. I want to sink myself in your sweet heat.”

She crawled toward him, very aware that this time he wasn’t going to lie back and let her take over. The hunger was there in his eyes, in his touch as he guided her over his length. She braced her hands on his shoulders. His hands cupped her buttocks then slid to her waist.

“Easy, beautiful. Take it nice and slow.”

She wanted no such thing. After the slow tease and touch, she wanted him inside her in the worst way. But he controlled her descent, forcing a cry from her lips as his cock breached her pussy. The friction of his hard shaft against the sensitive walls of her vagina was exquisite. She bowed her head, her breath short and sharp when she’d seated herself on his length. Her nostrils flared with the heady scent of him and she wrapped her arms more tightly around his neck.

“Don’t worry, beautiful. I’m not going anywhere.”

He couldn’t anyway. His arms surrounded her—enclosed her within the heat of their bodies. Filled her so full he was all she could think about. That and the steady build of heat between them.

The rhythm was there too. Intense and yet she knew there was more—sensed it just beyond her reach. She turned her head, intent on the search and he claimed her mouth. The kiss only increased the need to fly beyond the plateau.

Her fingers tangled in the short strands of hair at the nape of his neck and she tore her mouth from his.

“Now, Ry. Please, now.”

One short nod was the only warning she got. In one continuous movement, he fell backward and rolled, taking her with him until he'd pinned her beneath him. One hand cradled her head, the other her bottom, lifting it so he could deepen his strokes.

Stroke, really, because he shattered in her arms, carrying her along as the force of nature overtook them. And this time she swore she really did see sparks fly.

She must have dozed, though she had no recollection of falling asleep. And yet surely she would have remembered putting her head on Ryan's shoulder. And she definitely would have remembered tangling her legs with his or the fact that his arm was draped around her, holding her fast against him, while hers was lying possessively across his chest.

But, what amazed her the most was the lucid knowledge that she was with Ryan McGregor, the ex-Skunk. Not Matt.

She'd been faithful to her husband's memory all these years. At first the acute pain of the sudden loss had made it impossible for her to imagine ever being with anyone else. She'd dreamed of Matt frequently, waking to a wet pillowcase and an empty place beside her in bed, her body yearning for his touch. Just even to be held, as she was now, would have been enough of a miracle for her, despite the sure realization each and every morning that that wasn't going to happen. Ever.

Those dreams had faded, visiting her only rarely now. And yet she'd allowed herself to be held hostage by them. Intellectually she might have let Matt go, but she'd continued to cling to him emotionally – hence her wearing his shirts. She'd never even tried to move on with that part of her life. Had never accepted a date with another man. Had in fact actively discouraged being asked on one.

She chuckled to herself. She had the distinct impression that Ryan McGregor didn't discourage very easily.

"What's so funny?"

She lifted her head to discover Ryan watching her. Her heart did a little flip at the sight of him. Anticipation shivered down her spine at the unmistakable glint in his eye.

No, Ryan was anything but discouraged. The thought was strangely comforting.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking something. I could hear you."

She laughed outright at that then sobered because he spoke the truth. She scrambled rather inelegantly onto her knees pulling the sheet with her.

"It's complicated," she said, shoving a few strands of hair out of her face while keeping a firm grip on the sheet.

He sighed and sat up, scooting back until he could lean against the wooden headboard. Unlike her, he had no qualms over his modesty or the fact that he was half hard.

"Because of your dead husband?"

"Matt?"

"Was that his name, Matt Holmes?"

She nodded and wondered if Ryan was in fact psychic since she had just been thinking about Matt.

"What happened?" Ryan asked his tone soft, yet clearly curious.

"Construction accident," she said. "We'd only been married for a couple of years. He's been dead for seven."

Ryan reached out and his fingers grazed hers. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Thank you, but he's not the complication," she said and knew she meant it.

She'd thought she'd come to Toronto to find closure with Ryan and that embarrassing incident fifteen years ago. Instead, if tonight had taught her anything, it was that she was more than ready to move on. She loved Matt—would always savor her memories of him. He'd always be a part of her, even if she didn't have the twins to remind her of him on a daily basis.

"Then it's not complicated," Ryan said.

She blew out a little breath of air and shook her head. Spoken like a typical bachelor without any responsibilities in the world except to himself.

Tonight—this weekend, because she definitely wanted to glut herself on an erotic diet of Ryan McGregor for the next day and a half—had reawakened her sensual side. She wasn't about to deny that fact or the unexpected window of opportunity she'd discovered in Ryan's arms. Her body had known and responded to Ryan without hesitation, leaving her brain and her emotions to play catch-up.

But the desires and the feelings her time with Ryan had triggered were still new and largely unexplored. And the reality was she couldn't indulge with abandon. She did have responsibilities back in Vancouver.

She didn't realize she'd spoken this last fact aloud until he leaned forward.

"I get it," he said. "You feel responsible for your brother."

"Kevin the Creep?" A shudder of distaste swept through her at the thought of having any responsibility for that bigot. Bad enough they were related.

Ryan laughed. "Graham's name for him wasn't half so polite," he said, reminding her that his older brother had been in the same year at school as Kevin. "I always wondered how you ended up so normal." He mimed quote signs in the air when he said the word normal.

She rolled her eyes and shrugged. "I was the youngest. I was a girl. And I got out." It was a mantra that had seen her through a lot of tough times.

He arched one eyebrow. It was clear he didn't for a moment believe that it had been that simple, but he had the good grace not to contradict her.

"I meant your other brother. The one who's married."

Well, that certainly got her attention, especially since Zach and Wyatt hadn't exactly advertised their nuptials on the society page of the local newspaper.

"What do you know about Zach? About my responsibilities?"

He shifted slightly under her intense stare. "Only what I read in the papers and nothing," he finally admitted. "I'm a fan of Wyatt James. When I heard who he'd married I recognized the name and I— Damn it, I thought about calling you."

"In Vancouver?" she asked. The idea that Ryan McGregor had almost called her a couple of years ago seemed incredible.

He shrugged. "It's where I live when I'm not traveling. The Olympics, remember?"

It was difficult not to remember that Vancouver had recently hosted the games given all the hype. Only she didn't give two hoots about the Olympics. The games hadn't changed her life the way this man was about to.

He lives in the same city I do. He likes the same kind of music. He's smart and funny and sexy. He thinks I'm gorgeous. And he's going to ask me out on a date, again.

She was as certain of that last fact as she was about all the others. Instead of being discouraged by all her roadblocks, he was actively refuting each and every one of them. Heck, he hadn't even waited for her list. He'd thought them up all on his own.

"Why Vancouver?" she asked, suddenly curious to learn more about this man.

He tipped his head back until it rested against the headboard. "The summer before Doug died we did a road trip out west. Maybe he guessed he didn't have much longer." Ryan turned his head slightly so he could look at her. "We had a great time. Both of us liked Vancouver. Doug said he'd live there if he—lived long enough. He didn't. The idea nagged at my subconscious though and I finally made the move a few years ago. What about you?"

It was her turn to shrug. "After Matt died it was either move out west or let my father take over my life. The choice was a pretty easy one to make."

In the silence that followed her brief explanation, he reached out and tugged playfully at the bed sheet. She wasn't fooled. She'd seen that look in his eye. The one that said he wanted her. And he wasn't above risking her modesty to get what he wanted.

She fell against him, slipping her hand around his neck to draw his mouth closer to hers. He wrapped his arms around her body and dipped his head.

"You." His rough whisper of desire tickled the shell of her ear. "This sheet." His fingers traced a seductive path along one bare shoulder. "Driving me crazy."

She laughed. "Shut up and kiss me or I may be forced to call you a Skunk."

Rather than risk her wrath, he kissed her. She closed her eyes and savored the sensation of being held, touched. Of being wanted as much as wanting.

All too soon he lifted his head. "Have dinner with me next week. And wear this sheet so you can drive me crazy."

Despite the humor in his words, she knew he was very serious. Knew he didn't see any problem with mixing what they'd started this weekend with their regular lives.

Bottom line, he was willing to take a risk on her.

The real question was, was she willing to take a risk on him?

"Ry, I –"

He didn't give her a chance to finish. With a soft growl of frustration, he rolled, somehow managing to untangle the sheet around her so she lay beneath him totally bare. His hand skimmed down her torso, molding itself to each curve with exquisite precision until it settled on her hip.

"I do understand, Celeste. You need time." There was gruff note of tenderness in his voice, which made her want to explain.

"Ry –"

Only he didn't seem interested in listening to what she had to say.

"You have until the end of the weekend. But then I want a proper answer. No excuses. No explanations. No complications."

She fought the urge to close her eyes in a dismally silly attempt to conceal her jumbled emotions. He wasn't about to give up until he heard a yes. She knew it—perhaps better than he did himself. The man Ryan McGregor had become was nothing

like the youth who'd let her hide behind her embarrassment and avoid him. Fortunately, she'd grown up too. She slid her left foot up his bare leg and circled her left hand around the back of his head.

"Persuade me," she said, even though she strongly suspected coercion was no longer necessary.

Chapter Seven

Ryan squinted with undisguised disgust at the window. Sunbeams slid between the slats in the blinds, brightening the bedroom with intricate patterns of light and shadow. Much as he wanted to deny the fact, Saturday morning had arrived sooner than he would have liked, reminding him of his obligations. Commitments he resented because he'd like nothing more than to remain in the condo, in bed with a certain irresistible woman.

A woman currently absent from the bed. And the bedroom.

He lay still, his body pleasantly boneless from a night spent sating his appetite for Celeste's soft curves, and listened. Hearing nothing, he threw off the sheet, got out of bed and stalked across the room naked. Not giving a damn if he met Celeste in the hallway sporting his morning woody. In fact, his being naked would save time.

Only she wasn't in the hallway or in either the bathroom or the powder room. The kitchen was empty as was the rest of the apartment. He stood stupidly staring at the empty living area when he realized an envelope sat on the dining room table where her purse had been. The rectangle, stark white against the dark brown wood, mocked him.

Shit. He'd been greedy and he'd pushed too hard. He'd known it that last time he'd asked her for a dinner date, but he'd been unable to slow down. Talking about Doug had been a bleak reminder that second chances were rare.

So what had he done? Demanded she give him an answer by the end of the weekend. Instead, she'd left one for him a day and a half earlier than he'd expected.

Idiot. If he'd kept his mouth shut, he could have simply shown up at her front door. And continued his persuasive tactics —

Before he unloaded his entire arsenal of insecurities, he ordered himself to shut up. He had faith in Celeste. In what they'd started last night. He merely resented the cold

hard intrusion of reality into his fantasy. He'd expected to have the weekend together, more or less insulated from the outside world.

And wasn't that a big fat lie, considering what he'd planned to put Celeste through today? Because, despite dismissing potential difficulties each time she'd tried to put up a roadblock, the truth was, they weren't carefree high school teens anymore. She had a life. He sure as hell had one—a fairly public one at that.

Resigned to his fate, he walked over to the dining room table and picked up the envelope. The message on the single sheet of lined paper was brief and to the point.

I'm free for dinner tonight. Explanation enclosed.

The explanation was a picture. A candid shot of Celeste with two young boys—twins who looked to be about seven or eight. Obviously her sons, though he guessed they had a lot of their father in them. The boys were each holding a trophy, though for what he couldn't tell.

He pulled out a chair and sat down, ignoring the cold wood against his bare butt. Entranced, he studied the picture, fascinated by the idea of Celeste as a mother. He didn't doubt she was a good one. She looked equal parts smitten and proud. It was equally obvious, despite the mischievous glint in the twins' eyes, that her sons adored her.

He turned the picture over and discovered the twins' names and that the trophies were for a swim meet. Almost reverently, he set the picture on the table and picked up the note again.

Celeste had signed her name and then added her address underneath. The first part of the message was fairly easy to interpret. She was undoubtedly on the next flight to Vancouver. All he had to do was follow her and he'd have that dinner date he so desperately wanted.

The explanation was less easy to decipher. Clearly the twins were the complication she'd spoken of last night. She wasn't simply responsible for herself and her job, but her

sons as well. Anyone who wanted her had to accept the fact that she came with a ready-made family.

Ryan fingers grazed the faces on the picture. He wished Celeste were sitting here with him so he could tell her there wasn't a hesitant bone in his body. He wanted her in his life and her sons represented an opportunity, not a complication.

Unfortunately, she'd skipped town before he'd had a chance to explain the complexities of his own life.

* * * * *

Celeste was halfway between the bathroom and her bedroom when someone started pounding on the front door. The sudden noise stopped her in her tracks and she clutched the lapels of her cotton bathrobe a little tighter. By ten o'clock on a Sunday morning she was usually dressed. Then it hit her.

Something has happened to Matt Jr. and Mitchell!

The instant the panicked thought entered her brain, she knew it was wrong. If something had happened to one or both of the twins, her brother would have called her cell phone. Besides, both Zach and Wyatt had keys to the house. Furthermore, no one knew she was home.

The second that thought entered her brain, she realized it was wrong too. One person did know she'd returned to Vancouver early.

With a rueful glance at her scanty attire, she rounded the corner of the hallway and headed toward the front door. Sure enough, she easily identified Ryan McGregor peering back at her through the gauzy curtain that covered the window. He pulled away when he saw her approach. Ordering her hand to stop shaking, she twisted the handle of the deadbolt and opened the door.

For a moment they simply stared at each other. Despite having recently spent an evening with him—in his arms and his bed. Despite now knowing that he lived in Vancouver, it was a little unreal to see Ryan McGregor on her doorstep.

"Your boys —"

"My brother took them camping. Come in." She cut him off with a quick clarification, greedy to steal every last minute she could alone with this man.

Before she could step back, he stepped over the threshold, dropped his carryon and kicked the door shut. Somehow he managed to look both irate and irresistible at the same time. He braced one large hand on the wall beside her. His other hand immediately appeared on the wall on the other side of her head, effectively trapping her. Surrounded by his body and his scent, all she could think about was that he'd come. Not that he'd taken so long to get here.

"Ry."

"Don't Ry me."

Now he sounded a tad irascible, which wasn't fair. She'd given him an answer. He was the one who'd stood her up. Who'd left her to sit for hours last night curled on the couch in the living room willing him to appear on her doorstep. Or telephone.

Around midnight, she'd called herself an idiot for leaving him a note and that picture, rather than spending the rest of the weekend with him. She'd gone to bed, but she'd lain awake for a long time, certain she couldn't have misread him completely. Like her, he'd learned how fragile life was. How rare second chances were. And now he was here, looking decidedly ruffled and sleep-deprived.

She reached up and grazed her fingers across the surprisingly smooth skin on his face. Somehow he'd found time to shave. "Early morning, was it?"

He bowed his head on a groan and brushed his lips across her forehead. "Sweet Jesus, beautiful. I got here as soon as I could."

"There were several flights leaving Toronto for Vancouver yesterday."

"I'm sure there were, but —"

"You had complications." She felt no triumph essentially telling him, "I told you so."

Instead of admitting defeat, he glared at her. "Still trying to put up barriers."

She shook her head. "Not really. But it proves a point."

"Hell, yes it does. For starters, I'll have my assistant fax you a copy of my schedule."

"Your work schedule?" Her tone suggested she was bewildered, but as soon as she uttered the question, she got it.

Okay, Ryan wasn't a movie star and the paparazzi weren't trailing his every move. But just the other night she'd had a glimpse of his popularity. And, despite teasing him about his fame, she had silently admitted that he was one of the more visible RPCI "celebrity" graduates.

So, she wasn't really surprised when he slipped a hand inside his jacket and pulled out a piece of paper. She recognized it immediately as a program for RPCI's Anniversary Gala. Even though she could guess what was coming, she couldn't let go.

She tapped the brochure with her index finger. "Is this the explanation?"

A low growl rumbled up from his chest and he flung the piece of paper onto the floor. "Don't push your luck, Celeste. If you'd read your program you would have known I had a couple of guest spots scheduled during the Open House and the dinner last night. Appearances I'd agreed to months ago and that I couldn't walk away from. I intended to have you by my side. Instead you —"

"Said yes."

His eyes widened in surprise and then a stupid grin lit his face when he realized what she'd just said. Men.

Only his masculine satisfaction wasn't what caught her attention. It was his throwaway line, "I intended to have you by my side". Maybe not quite in the limelight, but her presence beside him would definitely have put her in far more of the public eye than she was used to.

Talk about complications.

“You could have just called,” she told him. “Made your excuses.”

Only she knew Ryan wouldn’t consider his obligations to the Gala committee an excuse for standing her up last night. He’d meant it when he’d said he wanted her at his side. While it would probably take some adjustments on both their parts, he was willing to include her in his life—complications and all.

He leaned closer, crowding her personal space. His voice, when he spoke, was little more than a rough whisper. “You’re determined to take your pound of flesh, aren’t you? Fine, but now that I’ve found you—had you—you won’t drive me away. That’s why I didn’t call. Why I came here instead. I may have missed dinner and breakfast, but we’re going on that date. I’m taking you out to brunch.”

His determination renewed her confidence that she’d done the right thing by leaving that note and the picture. By coming home early in the hope that he would follow. In taking a risk to include him in her life.

“But—”

“Not another word, Celeste.”

Left with no other recourse, she kissed him. Playfully nipped his lower lip and when he groaned, she slipped her tongue inside. The taste of him made her moan with pleasure. Or maybe it was his tongue dueling with hers.

Steam heat invaded her pores, melting her into a delicious puddle of sensuality. Afraid she really would collapse in an undignified heap at his feet she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and hung on. Nothing else mattered except getting closer to his warmth. A moment later, he enveloped her in his arms. His hands roamed across her back. One dipped down to the curve of her butt, while the other traced a path to her shoulder blades. The world tilted—literally, and they fell against the wall. Only his hand cradling her head saved her from a nasty bump.

“You okay?” he asked.

She nodded, too intent on undoing his shirt buttons to give him a proper answer. “As usual, you have too many clothes on.”

His forehead hit the wall. His breath, when it came, was harsh. Beneath her palm, she felt the erratic beat of his heart.

"Sweet Jesus, beautiful. Your touch." He palmed her ass. "This bathrobe. Driving me crazy."

"Probably," she said her lips grazing his jawline, "because I'm not wearing much of this bathrobe."

When he raised his head, his grin was decidedly predatory. "Works for me."

Before she could guess his next move, he shrugged out of his shirt and dropped to his knees.

"Ry, what are you —"

His glare silenced her. "I've been waiting since Friday night to enact this fantasy. I'm not stopping now."

His words sent a shiver of expectation down her spine. Her belly quivered when he leaned in and nuzzled. His tongue darted out and licked her bellybutton. She whimpered and pressed her back against the wall to steady herself. As if sensing her lack of stability, he slid a hand under her left thigh, lifted her leg, and draped it over his shoulder. The move exposed her to his perusal and his mouth.

Her eyes fluttered closed when he turned his head and pressed a kiss on the bare flesh of her inner thigh. He was killing her. Slowly. Seductively. One touch at a time. Drawing her under his spell until all she wanted was him.

His hands.

One of them brushed across her nude mons. Her hips jerked in a silent command and he chuckled.

"I'll get there, beautiful."

She as good as heard his unspoken, "in my own sweet time". Why was it, whenever she was with this man the word NOW blazed across her brain in extra large capital

letters? Her palms grew damp with anticipation. She flattened them against the wall in a futile attempt to steady herself.

He was lazy and took his time exploring every inch of her skin—down there. He touched. Kissed. But ruthlessly kept shy of the good bits. The important parts—like her aching clit and her dripping pussy. If she wasn't so damn preoccupied keeping herself adhered to the wall, she'd consider strangling the man.

At long last, two fingers parted the folds of her labia. Afraid to move, she held her breath, suspended in the moment. And then his mouth descended and he kissed her clitoris. Her entire body shuddered at the unbelievable intimacy of the act. Her eyes fluttered closed and she lost herself in sensation.

After sensation, when his tongue flicked lightly back and forth across the small nub. Her pussy clenched as ripples of heat cascaded over her skin. He lapped up her cream, his murmurs of pleasure vibrating against her skin in tiny successive shock waves.

And then his tongue darted out and the exquisitely torturous assault on her clit began all over again. She lost track of everything except his mouth. On her. In the end she screamed, her cry echoing in the otherwise empty house, when he gently sucked the tip into his mouth.

He eased her leg off his shoulder and stood. Somehow she ended up securely tucked under his right arm when all she wanted to do was to slide down the wall in a boneless puddle of satisfaction. Turning her head, she nuzzled his neck and felt his light kiss on her head.

"That was quite a hello, Mr. McGregor."

The fingers of his free hand traced the lapel of her bathrobe. "You. This thing we have. It's driving me crazy. In a really, really good way."

She laughed and looked up into his face. "Ditto," she said and kissed him. "In fact, I'd like to finish—"

Ryan shook his head. "Brunch. I'm taking you to brunch."

He sounded determined, but she could see the muscles jump along his jawline. A sure sign he was battling with his willpower. She brushed her fingers across the dusting of hair on his chest, straight down to his belt buckle. Dipping a finger inside the waistband of his pants, she brushed the head of his erection. He groaned. Confident she'd made her point, she leaned closer.

"You. A house we have to ourselves for at least another three hours. A queen-sized bed. The possibilities are driving me crazy."

His laugh was husky with a desire he couldn't deny. But that didn't stop his stubborn streak from asserting itself.

"I want that date, Celeste."

"Any day next week. I promise." She tugged him toward her and this time he didn't resist. "But tonight, how about having dinner at my place? You can meet my family."

The smile that lit his face was like a promise for the future.

"Works for me," he said and followed her down the hallway without another word.

About the Author

Award-winning author Robie Madison loves visiting mystical places and learning about other cultures and peoples. She's spent several years living abroad, allowing her to study human nature in a variety of settings and circumstances. These years also included a few wild exploits of her own. Multi-published, Robie uses her knowledge to enhance her stories. When not traveling or planning her next trip, Robie creates characters who can do the adventuring for her. She can also be found teaching writing courses online.

Robie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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