

eBooks are ***not*** transferable.

They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520

Macon GA 31201

Fantasy Girl

Copyright © 2008 by Candice Gilmer

ISBN: 978-1-60504-201-5

Edited by Bethany Morgan

Cover by Natalie Winters

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

FirstSamhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: September 2008

www.samhainpublishing.com

Fantasy Girl

Candice Gilmer

Dedication

For Bob.

There aren't enough words to express my love and appreciation. Without your support, I wouldn't have made it here. I don't know a braver man on earth who could put up with a neurotic writer.

I thank you.

Acknowledgement

I always must acknowledge my muses and guardians, without their blessings I wouldn't be able to do this.

Ann, Diana and Kim: This wouldn't be possible without your help, support and love. Thank you all so much, all my love.

Earlene: When you read this, in its infancy, you read it in less than twenty-four hours and praised me when I needed it most. I can't thank you enough for all the support. I love you.

And Tomisha: What would I have done without my own personal Buffy encyclopedia? I couldn't have known those little details without you.

Finally, Bethany: Thanks for reminding me that my words are powerful enough, and that I do not need those pesky exclamation points.

Glossary

ABH/Anywhere But Here: Fan fiction written in second person, present tense, i.e. "You walk into the crowded room and see your boyfriend getting a drink." ABH puts the reader directly in the middle of the action. Usually this type of fiction is rated NC-17, and tends to be sexually explicit.

Canon: The original source material. In this case, episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the original *Buffy* movie or episodes of *Angel*.

Disclaimer: A note posted at the beginning of a fan fiction story acknowledging the true owners of the copyrighted material. In this case, a disclaimer would acknowledge Joss Whedon as the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *Firefly*.

Fan fic/Fan Fiction: Unauthorized, not-for-profit stories written about characters in predetermined worlds, such as soap operas, television shows, movies and books. These stories are published online either at websites or through fan-based magazines.

Fandom: People who share interests in certain television/books/movies. Also a term referring to a genre of fan fiction, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fan fiction. Some authors write in different fandoms, such as *Buffy*, *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*.

Genre: A particular type of story, such as romance, horror, paranormal, etc. In fan fiction, it also refers to the movie or television show the story is related to, like *Star Wars*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Harry Potter*. It can also refer to the specific couples in a story, i.e. Buffy and Angel, Han and Leia, Harry and Ginny.

Goddess fic: A specific type of fan fiction told in a series of short stories, where eventually the heroine falls in love with the hero, and he saves her, treating her better than any previous boyfriend had ever treated her, and they live happily ever after.

LOL: IM shorthand, meaning “Laugh Out Loud”.

Mr. Pointy: From *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It is Buffy’s personal stake from the show that she used to kill the vampires she fought. Buffy regarded Mr. Pointy as her favorite stake of choice.

Original Character/OC: A character created by the fan fic author that was not in the show’s storyline, usually paired with a major character. This is done when the author would like to imagine a character (usually similar to themselves) dating or falling in love with a character in the show.

Ratings: Fan fiction ratings are based on the American Motion Picture Association codes: G, PG, PG-13, R and NC-17.

ROTFLMAO: IM shorthand, meaning “Rolling On The Floor, Laughing My Ass Off”.

Slayerdomain: The website of fan fiction that Lynn runs to archive *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* fan fiction. As of this writing, this website does not exist.

Smut: Fan fiction stories that include explicit romantic scenes.

Prologue

June

The computer screen made the room's light flicker, like a motel sign blinking in the dark room. No one looking in would have thought anything about the sight. Nothing was out of place—a small, sparse room in an old ranch-style home, with only a computer desk on one wall. A man faced it, one hand on his mouse, clicking away.

Benne didn't notice the shifts in light and dark as he prowled through the Internet.

He was hunting.

Hunting for the perfect story.

And somewhere, out there in the abyss of HTML, Java and CSS coding, the story was there. The place was there. He only had to find it.

Cruising through archive after archive, Benne was no closer to finding that one story. Images of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* flashed before his eyes—fan art designed by would-be graphic artists, manipulated to showcase stories, highlight new attractions and illustrate websites.

Nothing jumped out at him. It was all hackneyed stories, written by kids who had no concept of how to tell a story without words such as “like”, “ya know”, “dude” and “as if”. He had faith, though, that she was out there somewhere; that she was waiting for him to find her.

Someone who would understand him, someone to connect with. Writing was a window to the soul, and he knew if he looked hard enough, and devoted himself long enough, he would find her.

Other searches through different genres of fan fiction had led to dead ends. No one had the potential, the true spirit he hunted for. This Buffy/Angel genre, though, was different. Unlike movie based fan fiction, where the story was only told in a two-hour burst, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* had been a television series that lasted seven seasons, and had spun off the series *Angel*, which had a tenure of five seasons. This created more nuance, more details for fan fiction writers to tap into.

If the writer was any good.

And this led to more places for Benne to find that perfect one—that woman who would understand him in a way that no other could.

His perfect fantasy girl.

Now, though, he had to keep digging. He continued clicking and searching through the night, looking for something, anything, to find her.

As he scanned the groupings, a link stood out—slayerdomain.com.

Clicking over, surprise met him as he was greeted on the site with a clean, smooth intro image, showing three of the main *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* characters. Everything was sage green and the images hung on the page.

Already Benne was impressed.

The clean sage design moved through every page. Graphics were simple and clean, keeping the focus on the stories. Story pages only had text on them, but unlike a lot of sites, the story title was highlighted and centered over the text, rather than bundled in a header, listing title, rating, characters, disclaimers and the usual notes.

All-in-all he liked the site.

So he started to explore.

Maybe he would find what he hunted for here.

Chapter One

December

“Come on, Lynn,” Bella said, rolling her eyes.

I sat in my bedroom, staring at my computer. “Look, I just need a few more minutes, then we can go.” I clicked away, adding the new holiday graphics I’d made for the website and the four new stories I had, including the latest in my own series, the Rennati/Angel stories.

A Christmas present for the minions.

Bella let out a huff and headed for my closet. “You still haven’t even dressed. Come on, Stuart and Bill will be waiting for us.” The hangers slid across the rod in the closet as she selected something suitable for the evening’s festivities.

Another blind date.

Gag.

Bella had been on this kick over the last month or so to hook me up with someone. Needless to say, no one’s called for that elusive second date.

“So where is this at again?” I asked as I clicked on slayerdomain to make sure all the updates posted like they should. Coding HTML wasn’t difficult, but even a single letter or colon in the wrong place could spell disaster.

I clicked the links, trying not to let the revulsion of having to dress up for some guy that I don’t know and who was probably not going to be interested in me anyway show.

Unfortunately, stalling to check the links proved fruitless—everything was coded right.

Bella grumbled. Bella was my best friend in the world, but she was also the matchmaker from hell. And I was her eternal experiment.

’Course, if she were really good at this, I wouldn’t still be single.

I wasn't enthused.

Bing.

An IM box popped up on my computer screen.

Willowrocks:*Hey chicky—wassup?*

I rolled my eyes. I was not a "chicky".

Hush:*On my way out the door. Got a date.*

Willowrocks:*That rocks. Have fun, wear a condom.*

I smirked at the screen.

"What are you doing? You need to get dressed," Bella said, stalking over to the computer.

I put my hands on the keyboard and started typing a reply to Will.

Hush:*Don't think that'll be a problem...*

I faced Bella. "Did you find something for me to wear?"

"Yes I did," she said. "Now turn that contraption off and let's go."

I signed off with Will then turned off the computer.

"You spend too much time on that thing," Bella said. "You need to get out more, have some fun!"

"And what makes you think this isn't fun for me?" I grabbed the clothes she thrust toward me. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at her because she chose such a provocative outfit.

Bella was desperate to get me laid.

I was not, but she wanted to see me get some joy in life.

"It's not natural to spend that much time on the computer. I mean, how do you even know who you're talking to?" Bella shook her head as I dressed in the skirt and halter-top type blouse.

“Does it matter?” I asked. “It’s not like I’m saying ‘Hi, here’s my home address, come visit me’ to every person I talk to.”

Bella raised one sandy blond eyebrow. “Yeah, but what if you think you’re talking to a girl, and it’s a guy? Or vice versa?”

“So what? What does it matter, really? We all love Buffy. Buffy doesn’t discriminate.” It’s not like I hadn’t heard this line before. Bella grumbled about weird people on the Internet, but I only half-listened.

‘Course, no one gets the whole fan fiction connection thing. I can’t seem to get anyone to understand that the Internet is an incredible way to meet people, to share loves of things that, well, aren’t necessarily broadcast-able, like loving *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*.

I mean, people love the shows, they do, but can you just walk up to someone and say, “Hi, I love *Buffy* and *Angel*, do you?”

The Internet allows me to connect with other people who are as out there as I am, and who love the shows like I do—just because I do—and that creates a bond with everyone, a relationship that brings people together who feel weird in their own lives, but when they get together on the Internet, they find they’re not so weird after all.

And to know I’m not totally screwed up is a good thing. Partially screwed up, I can live with.

Bella let out a sigh. “Come on, let’s go fix your hair.” She dragged me into the bathroom to do something with my mousy brown locks.

Four hours later, I marched into my apartment on West Central and Ridge, stripped off my clothes and growled.

Yes. I growled.

Not a growl of happiness or pure sexual excitement, it was a growl of rage and hatred at all men.

God, they were such asses.

I walked into my bedroom, slipped into my pajamas and flipped on the computer. I waited as the machine booted up, wondering why I’d ever let Bella ambush me into another blind date.

The whole time, Bill pretty much had hung on every word Bella said, and I was pretty much ignored. Stuart, Bella’s boyfriend, had spent a lot of time focused on his palm-blackberry-phone-with-every-gadget-in-the-free-world-on-it. Unfortunately, that was typical Stuart. When I had tried to interject something witty into the conversation, at least Bella laughed.

Most of the time, though, it had been the Bella Show. Don’t get me wrong, she’s my shining starlet sister of a best friend. She’s been there whenever a bad relationship exploded in my face, and together we have plotted methods of maiming ex’s cars/apartments/clothes/what have you. Always fun, even if we never actually did it.

'Course, I am the Furby to Bella's swan, and I have no qualms about my lot in life, but sometimes...

My computer came on and I logged into Messenger. The screen popped up and several authors were on, but I didn't IM them. I checked my email first.

In my mailbox was the usual junk—jokes, chain letters, the Spiritual Daily Wisdom bulletin I get and spam.

Today's spiritual message was "Release your love into the world, even when you feel alone".

Gah, what a crock.

One email caught me off guard though. It was from Willowrocks.

Hey Hush,

Quick note here.

Just wanted 2 say sorry if I offended. Didn't mean 2 question UR bed habits.

Still friends?

Will

Offend? How could he have offended me? Then I thought about it—the condom comment from before. This gave me my first sincere laugh of the night. Quickly I replied to his note.

Will,

No worries, you didn't offend...

Yes, still friends,

Hush

I trudged into the slayerdomain chat room to see what was going on, but found no one there, so I clicked over to the forums, reading the daily posts and all that jazz, seeing nothing of particular interest.

There was a bit of buzz about the new fic that I'd posted earlier by Lodan, as well as some girly drooling over pictures that Tiara had made for icons and signature banners, available to the fastest bidder. And from the looks of it, several of the signature banners had already been snagged for use at the forum.

I particularly liked the black and white banner with a profile of an ever angsty Angel on it, and a woman

in the distance, her back to him, and the wind fluttering around her. It possibly was Buffy, but from the angle, it was hard to tell. In a caption between the two people, it said “never attainable”.

“Ain’t that the truth,” I muttered as I typed in my request for the signature banner.

Bing.

Rugby:*Hello.*

I smiled as I saw who it was—Rugby, one of my newest authors. He’d been around since this past summer and had started contributing stories to the site for the last few months.

He seemed decent enough.

Hush:*Hey yourself. How are you tonight?*

Rugby:*Not too bad, and yourself?*

Hush:*Well, I just had a miserable blind date, but other than that I’m good.*

My fingers pounded the keyboard while I typed—a sign that I really needed to vent.

Rugby:*I am sorry to hear that.*

I stifled another yawn. I was tired, I was pissed off and I didn’t want to frighten off a new contributor—especially one who was as talented as Rugby.

Hush:*Dude, I got stuff to wallow in, so I’m gonna go.*

Rugby:*??? Wallow?*

I rolled my eyes at the screen. God, he may be able to write, but doesn’t know what wallow means?

Hush:*Wallow: To pout, to mope, to roll about in the mud.*

Rugby:*I know what it means. What is wrong?*

The cursor waited patiently for me to say something. I took a sip of lemonade trying to decide if I should vent.

Rugby:*I can listen.*

I blinked and a tiny crack in my heart opened up. It wasn't like I would ever see him. He was simply a bunch of text on the screen, and there's no way he would know who I knew.

Hush:*My life just sucks.*

Rugby:*Why? You are a talented writer, and you are Hush. How could anything be bad for you?*

Hush:*Writing fan fiction isn't exactly real life.*

Rugby:*Real life is overrated.*

Hush:*Touché.*

Rugby:*So when do you feel your best?*

Like that was a hard question to answer...

Hush:*Online.*

Rugby:*I know what you mean. Most people do not understand me either. Do you feel like Rennati? An ancient mystic?*

I shrugged as I typed, thinking about my Original Character that I dropped into many of my fan fiction stories. Rennati, in essence was me, if I lived in the *Buffy* universe, or who I would have liked to be. 'Course, Rennati had ancient mystical powers, I had the Internet.

Hush:*I do, sometimes. She's a wallflower, kinda like me.*

Rugby:*Remember, no one fits in society's molds. You have got to know that you are important. And you will find your mate. He is out there.*

His words touched me in a very strong way. A tear crept into my eye, and I brushed it away before typing any more.

Hush::*blushing*:: *You flatter me.*

Rugby:*You are important. Remember. You are Hush! Webmistress extraordinaire.*

That made me giggle a little. Anything pairing me with the word “extraordinaire” was just too funny for words.

Hush:*You make me laugh.*

Rugby:*Who knows, maybe I am your Angel, and you are my Rennati.*

Hush:*You never know.*

Rugby:*No, you do not.*

I signed off from Rugby, and in the back of my mind, feeling a bit better from the bad date. Wouldn't it be cool if I could meet the man of my dreams online? I mean, I knew there were dating websites out there, but I just couldn't justify the expense of joining one.

No, if I met my dream guy online, it would have to be an accident, some cosmic coincidence that brought us together through the pixels.

And as an added bonus, he would have to like *Buffy*. That would totally rock.

A yawn slipped out, and the day began winding down for me. My bed started calling, and I had a busy day planned for Sunday, including Sunday dinner with my parents—joy, rapture...I got out of dinner tonight because of my date, but Sunday is mandatory family togetherness. Saturdays remain optional. Usually when my cupboards are bare.

I crawled into bed and pulled the covers over my head. The dinner conversation would probably be close to the same conversation I had the week before Thanksgiving: whether I was bringing someone to the formal family dinner—although formal is taken in the loosest of terms at my family dinners. It's more of a “fill your plate and cobble-squat somewhere” type thing.

The holidays always brought out the crazy family nuttiness that only comes once a year, starting the

week before Thanksgiving until sometime in early January. The next few weeks would be hell on Earth, being I'm the "single gal", and I knew I'd be the one who was asked the "So, who are you dating?" question enough times to make me insane.

My brother lived five hours away, and wasn't pestered nearly as much as I was, so he'd merely get drilled over the actual holiday.

Lucky brat.

Cathy Donaldson carried two Starbuck's coffee cups in one hand and a large file in the other. She pushed the door open to her small office with her hip. Planted at the desk opposite hers was her partner, and he had his face buried in the computer.

"Hey," she said, holding out the coffee. "Coffee black."

Her partner said nothing, grabbing the top cup off the stack she carried.

"Spiked with fruity creamer," Cathy muttered as she flipped through the file she'd brought in.

Her partner paused, the cup a millimeter from his lips, and glanced at her. "Ass." He sniffed the coffee just to be sure.

Cathy just smirked. "Well, acknowledgement would be nice, big boy."

"Don't screw with my coffee."

Cathy set down the files and glanced at his screen. "How's it going?"

"I could make a career out of pretending to be a fan fiction writer," he said. "I swear, these people never work or sleep."

"Well, the FBI is paying you to pretend. Any leads?" They'd been combing the Internet for the last two months. Benne had given them one hint, one idea, of where he would strike next.

A Buffy fan fiction writer.

They'd dropped the ball on Benne's last two victims, finding them after he'd moved on, after he'd destroyed them—and destroy was the correct word, because Benne didn't just kidnap and kill his victims. He destroyed them. Physically.

What those women had to endure emotionally, Cathy wasn't positive, but as a forensic psychologist, she was pretty sure she had a good idea.

"Couple," her partner said. "This one though." He pointed at his monitor, his fingers grazing the LCD screen, making it ripple. Cathy leaned down to look at it. The profile was simple. The user talked about how much she loved *Buffy* and *Angel*, and it had a link to a fan fiction website.

"What about her?"

He shook his head. "Not sure. Gut instinct. I've talked to her a few times. Outspoken. Writes that adult smut stuff, like the others, and she's older."

"How old?"

"Late twenties, early thirties."

Right up Benne's alley, Cathy thought. "What's her handle?"

"Hush."

Chapter Two

February

The first thing I check at work on Monday morning is my email. I have to, there's a law or something.

Or there should be.

Just in case any new memos have come out that need my immediate attention.

'Course, that's what I tell myself. The real reason is because I'm an email addict. I check all my emails first thing—my work account, my home account, my fan fiction account and my submissions account. Yeah, okay, I have a lot of email accounts.

I have my reasons, I like to make sure everything is sorted in its proper place. Having all my submission emails go to one address keeps me organized, then I don't lose stuff.

Scanning through my email, I see an icon for one from Sunshine, one of the few people who have my work email account. Sunshine never sends me emails, and if she does, she never uses this address unless it's urgent.

This had to be urgent. 'Course, what I warrant as urgent, and what another fan girl warrants as urgent usually has a great deal of variance.

Lynn, Hi, it's Sonya/Sunshine.

You need to check this out. It's important. Don't know if it's a hoax or not, but I thought you might like to pass it on. Looks pretty real to me.

Notice from the Federal Bureau of Investigation

Warning

There is a new serial kidnapper on the loose in the United States. He targets young female fan fiction writers on the Internet and kidnaps them.

Be on the lookout for this man.

If a new person enters your circle of Internet friends, be wary, and give out no personal information to anyone you know through the internet.

The Fan Fiction Killer's mode of operation includes working his way into a fan fiction circle and persuading them to give him their contact information. Afterwards he makes physical contact.

Please forward this letter to all your friends who write fan fiction. It may save their life.

If you think you have any information regarding the Fan Fiction Killer, please contact the FBI.

Thank you,

Darius Osborne, FBI.

I read the notice over a couple of times, and shook my head. There were some links in the bottom, and I clicked on them, which took me to an official-looking FBI page with the same warnings on it.

Something didn't ring true about it, so I went to the FBI homepage. After searching for at least fifteen minutes through the site, I could find no connection to the page link in the letter.

I rolled my eyes and popped off an email back to Sonya.

Sonya,

Looks like a fake to me, I can't find anything on the FBI homepage that hooks up to this.

Thanks for the tip, though, it's all common sense, really...

I'll mention it in the forum, though, just to remind everyone to be safe.

Lynn/Hush

I closed the email and shook my head in disgust. The things people would do to get email addresses. It baffled the mind. I headed to my website's forum, and posted a quick reminder to everyone to be safe on the Internet, and not give out personal information.

My phone rang, and it was my supervisor, Douglas Wilmont. He barked an order for me to come straight to his office, and I packed up my stuff and headed that way.

Only a few minutes later, and I was standing in the doorway, his assistant Leslie showing me in, and then going back to whatever it was she was doing. Probably her nails.

"You wanted to see me, Mister Wilmont?"

Wilmont looked me up and down. His fuzzy brown mustache even from the doorway looked like it needed a trim and it shook as he let out a sigh while gesturing for me to come in.

“Lynn, come in. Have a seat,” he said, pointing at the vacant chair across from his desk.

Wilmont loved to wave his meaty hands about.

The other chair, as non-decrepit as a chair could be, already held a man, his broad frame making the chair look tiny and uncomfortable, like it should have seated a kindergartener.

I sat down, glancing at the man next to me, and my arm slipped off the armrest.

This man was that gorgeous.

Thick blond hair, deep blue eyes and a wisp of a smile on his face topped off the broad shoulders and dark gray suit.

“Lynn Broadmore, this is Jack Edwards, he’s new to the accounting department.”

I held out my hand to shake his, and was met with a firm grip, a broad grin on his face.

“Nice to meet you,” he said in a voice that could have belonged to a phone-sex line.

I had to restrain my drool. “Nice, uh, to, uh, meet you too,” I said, my cheeks firing red at the stumbling words. I closed my eyes to chastise myself at my stupidity. Still, his appearance stunned me. My knees already felt weak at his intent gaze, a gaze that sent a shiver of female response down to my toes, and then back up to other too-long-dormant places.

“Jack will be working in the cubicle next to yours, and you’ll be helping him get acclimated,” Wilmont said.

I jerked my head around, my eyes popping open.

This Adonis would be working next to me?

Me?

My palms started to sweat.

“Okay,” I said to Wilmont. I faced Jack and smiled my biggest, most perky smile. “Whatever I can do, I’ll be glad to help.”

Jack nodded, a strange twinkle in his eyes as he looked me up and down. I crossed my arms over my chest, covering my stomach and black T-shirt, hoping that my jeans didn’t look as bad as they usually looked.

I never left my cubicle, and my apparel had never been a big deal, at least not until this second. I truly was a jeans and T-shirt girl, although today, the black T-shirt had some detailing around the neckline, so it wasn’t completely plain. Still, I was seriously rethinking my work-wear choices. I think Bella and I will need to go shopping with some of those Christmas gift cards I got.

“So take him and get him settled in,” Wilmont said.

I stared at Wilmont for a second. Why on earth was he asking me, of all people, to take care of this? Surely there were other people in the office to train him. I wasn't a supervisor or anything, why me?

Jack's wrists dangled off the edge of the armrests, and those attentive eyes sent my heart into palpitations of the female-who-hasn't-gotten-any-recently variety. I could almost hear Bella in my head. *Who wouldn't want this Adonis hanging around?* 'Course, what I was going to do with him, I just didn't know.

Well, I could think of things, but let's face it, some of them were illegal in several states.

Wilmont quickly ran through what I needed to do for Jack, and I made a mental list. Nothing terribly hard to remember, just basic stuff. I stored the list in my brain.

I nodded my head when he finished and stood.

Jack held out his hand for me to lead the way, and I walked out the door. Jack stayed right on my heels, and the strangest feeling of being checked out ran over me. I resisted the urge to sway my hips.

Hush would have swayed her hips. 'Course, Hush was a virtual part of myself, only created in pixels, the part that only exists in the Internet. She wasn't real. I was, and I wasn't about to even think about swaying my hips for this guy. I'd probably wind up knocking something off a shelf if I did.

Besides, he probably had women all over him wherever he was. And I would simply be another minion to flatter his ego.

No thanks. He was just too darn pretty. Good eye candy, but that was all that I wanted to even think about with him.

Could he be gay? A guy that attractive, that well groomed, I had to wonder...could he be?

“So how long have you worked here?” Jack asked as we walked.

Not with a voice like that, I thought. I shrugged, keeping my mind focused on the moment, and not lost in Lynn-land. “Eternity.”

Jack chuckled and raised a very lick-able eyebrow at me. *Oh God, did I just think that? A lick-able eyebrow? Since when were eyebrows lick-able?*

Since they were artfully formed on the Adonis Jack Edwards, that's when.

The gossip spread quickly through the cubicles as we headed toward my small space, heads popping up like a ripple to check out the new man meat.

One woman in particular came around a corner, and didn't even have the etiquette to stare first. She walked right up to Jack.

“Hello, you must be new,” Tina Smith said holding out her red devil claws for him to shake, stopping him mid-stride. “I'm Tina.” She twisted her head, as if trying to toss the bleached-out blond hair around, but

not look like she was trying to do that.

I stopped too, only because I didn't have a choice.

Jack took her hand, shook it with one firm thrust and tried to let go. "Jack."

She grinned at him, but the smile didn't fill her face because of too much Botox. "Nice to meet you..." she paused for a second, leaning a bit more forward and thrusting her fake double D's at him, "...Jack." She kept hold of his hand just a few seconds too long, her red fingernails trailing over his palm.

Jack didn't seem to mind. Well, he didn't pull his hand back and wipe it off or anything, like I would have done. But I like to remove any evidence of contact with Tina Smith if I can.

I rolled my eyes, and crossed my arms over my chest.

Tina glanced at me. "Lynn, and how are you today?" She asked with too fake a smile, and keeping her gaze pretty much glued to Jack.

I really wished I could speak Spanish or French or something, because then I could tell Tina that I hated her guts and she never would have known. "Fine."

"How lucky you are to get to show this new fellow around!" She put her arm on Jack again. "And if you need anything at all," Tina said, "my office is right over there. I'd be happy to help." She pointed toward her office door.

I didn't want to speculate on how she got that office.

"Thanks," Jack said smiling.

I dropped my crossed arms. "If you don't mind, Tina, I need to get Jack set up, so if you'll excuse us," I used that charm my mother had taught me back when I was a kid, even though it went against my better judgment.

"Of course. See you around Jack," she said with a wave of her fingers.

As we walked away, Jack let out a sigh. "What was that?"

I found myself on rocky ground. I didn't want to come out and actually say she was the office floozy, but I also didn't want Jack to be even remotely interested, so I chose my words very carefully. "That was Tina Smith. She is one of a kind."

Jack nodded his head. "She can't be that original, she looked like she purchased everything on her."

A broad grin filled my face. If I had the balls, I would have reached up and kissed Jack for that comment.

A few other people smiled at us as we walked. Well, they smiled at Jack, and a couple of guys who stood at a water cooler stopped us long enough to make introductions.

Gah, how cliché was that? Hanging out at the water cooler? Do they have no imagination whatsoever? I shook my head at the thought.

If Jack noticed the living cliché, he didn't say anything.

We finally reached my cubicle, and I brought him inside.

"This is my space," I said, showing him the small cubicle, or what we had that passed as cubicles. Regular cubicles had walls with desks built into them. We didn't have that here, we had walls made of a funny hard fabric stuff that acted as a giant push-pin board, and we could arrange our spaces however we wanted. My desk faced out, so I could see people coming and going. Next to the entryway, I had placed my large plastic cabinet/locker thing.

Jack scanned through his surroundings. "Why is your locker there?" he asked as he squeezed past the thing into the cubicle and stood in the open corner. Most people kept their lockers where Jack stood, because it was out of the way. I had a coat rack there.

"Because of this." I pulled the far locker door open, which effectively acted as a "closed door" to my cubicle.

The inside of the locker had a huge poster from the *Angel* television series, one with Spike and Angel on it, which I completely had forgotten about as I showed him my "door".

My eyes went wide, realizing I'd inadvertently shown off my somewhat private locker decoration. In my head, I could practically hear Jack's thoughts of what a nerd I must be. I started to step toward the door, to quickly close it, block the poster or something.

Instead of calling me a dork, Jack smiled at me. "Angel and Spike? You leave your locker there for Angel and Spike?"

Wow, he knows Buffy! How cool is that? "Not really," I said repressing my grin. "Well, Angel and Spike are always good inspiration, but that's not the reason." I pushed on the door a bit more, and it closed the gap even more. "See, it shuts me in."

Jack smiled. "Interesting."

I shrugged. "Helps me work."

Jack nodded. "So if that door is open, or closed..."

"Whatever."

"Then I should knock?"

"Yeah," I said. Not that it happened too often, most people didn't bother me at work.

Jack glanced about. "So my cubicle will be?"

"Next door." I shut my locker door and led him to his work space. His was even more bland than mine, empty and all sorts of boring. I got him to his computer, helped him get his accounts set up with passwords and all that fun stuff. I called back up to Wilmont's office, telling Leslie that Jack was set up, and Leslie said she'd run some things down to him to get him started.

I rolled my eyes, knowing full well why she wanted to “run down” the files...’course I would have done the same thing.

Maybe.

Jack Edwards ran his fingers through his hair as he sat at his new computer at his new job. The smell of Lynn Broadmore’s cologne or body wash, or whatever it was, wafted over the cubicle wall, and he could hear her fingers typing like mad on her PC.

Part of him couldn’t help wondering if she was working, or if she was playing online. Having worked next to her for the last few days, he wondered how much work she actually accomplished, and how much of it was her own personal agenda.

Jack glanced at the stacks of paperwork, sighing at the simplicity of the stuff.

He could do it in his sleep.

He had other things he needed to do here.

He had to admit, Lynn Broadmore was more attractive than he’d assumed. A bit on the natural side, but he liked that in women.

And her eyes. Lynn had great hazel eyes. Jack couldn’t help noticing how Lynn stared at him.

Gaining her trust would be easier than he had thought.

As he worked his way through the computer programs that networked all the computers together, he found Lynn’s computer with relative ease.

A quick search showed that she indeed worked on her fan fiction at work. Jack was able to copy a few files and access some of her Internet exploring.

A website came up as a main listing, but he knew that it would. He tapped on the keys, bringing up the website. Currently done in red, her Valentine’s theme was charming.

He smiled at the pretty graphics.

It was unfortunate that she was wasting her time doing accounting for this mediocre firm.

She had such potential.

And he was determined to make certain she attained that potential.

After months of talking to her, he knew her better than she knew herself. He knew what she was capable of. Reading her fan fiction revealed so much about her.

Intriguing and witty, she wore her personality out for anyone to see. She didn’t shy away from her desires, and spoke her heart. And she also sent waves of desire through him. He had no idea when he had met her that she would be as lovely as she was.

Not beautiful, not a model.

She hid that under her frumpy clothes. Her eyes though—they showed him everything he needed to know.

She was the perfect fantasy girl.

Chapter Three

“You have got to be kidding me.” I cried out as I kicked my rear driver’s-side tire. The thing was flatter than a pancake. A slew of cuss words slipped out of my mouth, rivaling the best sailors.

“Lynn?” came a voice from behind me.

I spun around. “What?” I spun around to glare at the one and only Jack Edwards.

Damn my luck. And didn’t it beat all, that a week after meeting him, I was still getting all gooey inside just looking at him.

I seriously needed some help. Professional help.

“Uh, need some help?” he asked with a brow raised, framing his rather amused expression.

“No, thank you,” I snapped, glaring down at the terrible tire. Anything to keep from looking at Jack. “I am perfectly capable of changing my own tire.” I opened the trunk, and tried to pull my tire out. Which really, it wasn’t that heavy. It was a spare...

And it landed with a thud, flat as well.

“Shit.”

Jack hid a smirk behind his hand. “Sure you don’t need anything?”

“I’m fine,” I said a bit too loudly.

“Sure you are.” He sashayed up next to me, and yes, it was a sashay, he was far too damn smug for his good looks. Damn me for getting all girly inside at the sight of him coming over to rescue my damsel in distress.

Then he became the ultimate man.

He picked up the flat spare, looked at it, and said “Yep, it’s flat.”

“What are you, a rocket scientist in your spare time?”

“Only on the weekends.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. Yep, I’m mature. Really.

Then Jack started rooting around in my trunk, pulling out the jack.

“What are you doing? I can’t put that flat spare on.” I put my hands on my hips and glared at him.

Jack positioned the lift under my car, and started raising the poor old Mazda that I drove. “But I can take you to get this tire fixed.” He popped off the hubcap and started on the bolts.

What an arrogant ass! What am I? Incapable of taking care of myself? I mean I can very easily change a tire. It’s not like it’s hard. ‘Course, truth be told, I would call my dad, and have him come do it for me, because, well, he’s my dad, and he lives for this stuff.

“What if I don’t want you to? I’m perfectly capable,” I started to argue, but with amazing pit crew speed, Jack had the flat tire off my car before I could finish my sentence. I threw my arms up in the air in frustration.

“What?” Jack asked. “You know where there’s a place that can fix this?”

“There’s a Pep Boys or something like that around the corner,” I said letting out a sigh.

‘Course, I really couldn’t help the part of me that was excited that the new guy was helping me get my tire fixed. He led me to a huge black Chevy Tahoe, immaculate inside and out. I couldn’t help whistling at the perfection of it and feeling like crap that Jack had to see my Mazda that seriously needed to be traded in for something else.

The stars must have aligned just right, because as Jack and I were climbing in, Tina Smith and several of her minions were leaving the building. Instantly her gaze locked on mine, and she shot daggers at me.

It took all my strength not to stick my tongue out at her.

Pep Boys wasn’t horribly busy, and they managed to get me right in to fix my tire. While I was waiting, Jack and I roamed the aisles to see if there was anything that we couldn’t live without.

‘Course, they don’t sell whole new cars at Pep Boys, so I was out of luck there.

I stared at some of the racks of cleaning wipes for the dashboard. And sprays. And rags. My God, did people really need all this stuff to keep their car clean?

“It’s no wonder my car’s a mess,” I muttered.

“Why?” Jack asked.

“If I knew I had to buy all this stuff,” I gestured to the shelves, “I might have given up on buying a car in the first place.”

Jack grinned, flashing a bright mouth full of pearly white teeth at me.

Be still my beating heart.

I spied one of my favorite car accessories. “Oh, look, air fresheners.” I darted down the aisle.

Nope, not one single one with Buffy on it. Darn it.

Jack smirked and came after me. “So who do you want to be when you grow up, Lynn?” he asked as we sniffed the different fresheners. He grimaced at a fruity one and hung it back up.

“I am grown up. I just don’t have to act like it. Who do you want to be?”

“I want to save the world.”

I raised my eyebrow. “Like a superhero or something?”

“Sure.” He hung up another one, straightening the row out as he did. “Why not?”

“Because you’re going to have to be better on the computer to be Super Jack—the Accountant.”

Jack laughed.

They called my name over the intercom and Jack and I headed up to the front. The guy behind the counter, smelling of grease rags and motor oil, stood there waiting for us. A smear of black goo covered part of his name patch, concealing the “J” in John.

“We got it fixed,” John said. “Looks almost like your tire got stabbed.”

“Stabbed?” I stared at him. “You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“Well, usually, if something’s been driven over, there’s a nail or what have you stuck in the tire. You didn’t have anything like that.”

“Has that been going on lately?”

The guy shrugged. “Sometimes kids do it. You live somewhere around here?”

“I work down the way.” I pointed over my shoulder toward the office.

“Probably just kids. I wouldn’t worry about it much,” said John. He handed me the bill, and Jack promptly yanked it from my hand.

“Hey,” I said, “I was going to pay for that.”

Jack shrugged. “I’ll pay, and you can buy dinner.”

I crossed my hands over my chest. “Oh, so you just assume that I’ll buy you dinner now?” Presumptuous ass.

“I’m fixing your tire, you should.”

John couldn’t help adding his thoughts. “Sounds only fair to me,” he replied.

I gritted my teeth. Great, now I have to buy dinner for Jack.

Then my brain kicked in. Whoa, this would kinda count as a date, wouldn’t it? Dinner with Jack? Even if

I just get Burger King?

Oh the possibilities.

Jack took me back to work, put on my tire and then insisted on following me home, especially since he was convinced that I owed him dinner.

I mentally catalogued what I had at the house... There was a bunch of stuff in the freezer, but all that would take at least an hour, and did I really want to expose Jack to my house for that long a period of time? It had taken me months to let Bella in my apartment.

I yanked up my cell phone and called him on his, telling him I was whipping into Dillons to pick up a few things real fast. We'd exchanged numbers yesterday at work since Jack ran to Subway down on Broadway to pick up some lunch. He claimed it was in case he got lost on the way back to the office. I just blew it off at the time, but now I was glad I had the number.

Jack waited patiently as I ran into the grocery store to get... Oh Lord, what was I going to get? The first thing I saw was an already cooked fried chicken. Perfect. I snagged some ready-made mashed potatoes and a bag of steam-in-the-bag vegetables. I was in and out in eight minutes.

A feat in itself.

We arrived at my apartment not long after, though Jack got caught at the gate. I had forgotten to mention the passcode to get into the complex.

As we walked inside, Jack grinned at me. "Just wanted to keep me out, eh?" he asked.

"Well, no, not really," I said. "I just didn't think about it." And I didn't. Since so few people came to my apartment, it wasn't like I gave my passcode to everyone I knew.

"Sure," he said with a grin. He glanced around the complex. "This is a nice place, rent expensive?" Jack reached over and took the plastic bag from me. Normally I would object to such old fashioned thinking, but really, when did men use such manners with me?

Never. So I let it slide.

"I can carry your sack," he said.

"Uh, it's a bag, and you don't have to," I replied. I know he's being all polite and stuff, but I am capable of carrying a plastic bag with a chicken in it. 'Course, I didn't take it back out of his hand either.

"There's a difference?" he asked.

I just rolled my eyes and decided to let it go. He obviously wasn't from Kansas, and had yet to be explained the vernacular. "So, do you live very close?" I couldn't help wondering if I had put him out of his way.

"Actually, not that far from here. I found an older house over on Mount Carmel and I've been fixing it up."

He's a homeowner? I felt myself getting all gooey again. When you live in an apartment with square-dancers for neighbors upstairs and people practicing to be on Jerry Springer across the hall, the thought of owning your own home is a wonder.

To have a garage... Not having to scrape car windows in the winter.

To have a house where the neighbors weren't connected... Peace and quiet...

A washer and dryer in your home that doesn't require quarters... Oh the luxury.

Even to have to do renovations...to be able to actually *paint* your house... I dream of owning a house that I can paint the walls in all the cool ways they do on *Trading Spaces*, and change the floors or the fixtures, or the door knob handles in the kitchen...

I saw a great set in Lowe's once that were brass—little leaves on the ends, and the middle zigzagged. They were so cool. One day, they will be in my house.

I snapped my mind back to the present. "So, uh, what all did you have to do to it?" We reached the entrance to my hallway, and I opened the door for him. The stairs veered off, a set going down to the garden level apartments and another set going up to the second floor. I took the steps going up to the second floor.

"Well," he said, following me. "I had to replace the kitchen floor with hardwood, and I liked that so I replaced the living room carpet with hardwood as well."

"Nice," I said, opening my door. My apartment was at the top of the stairs, in fact a few times I've almost backed off the landing and fallen. 'Course, I was drunk at the time, so we don't have to go there.

"Yeah, I replaced all the cabinets and the countertops," he said as we entered. "The kitchen was awful. Incredibly out-dated," he said as he set the bag of groceries on the counter. "A lot like this stuff," he said gesturing to my old, nasty-looking cabinet doors.

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I know they're horrid. Right out of the seventies, I think. The complex was remodeling when I moved in, and mine was one of the last on the list, and I got them to give me a discount if I took the place without the remodel."

The doors stayed in place, and opened and shut like they should, but that's all. The finish on them was a super dark almost ebony stain, and the countertop was a plain beige color supposedly resembling marble. I stress the word "supposedly".

Jack nodded his head. "Cosmetics are livable. Not pleasant, but livable."

I smirked at that. "Give me a few minutes to get this together," I said as I started pulling out the food to get it organized and ready to eat. Thank goodness for microwave technology.

"Uh, you're a serious *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fan, aren't you?"

“What makes you say that?” I asked as I shoved the potatoes in the microwave to warm.

Jack stuck his head around the corner and looked at me in the kitchen. “You’re kidding, right?”

“What?”

“Lynn, you have *Buffy* posters and toys on the wall. And if I’m not mistaken, that looks like a shrine of *Buffy* and *Angel* on the entertainment center.”

“It’s not a shrine. There’s no ritualistic candle.”

“Oh,” Jack said grinning. “Point taken.”

The microwave beeped, and I exchanged the potatoes for the veggies. I grabbed some place settings and put them on the kitchen table, glancing at my living room. Okay, so I did have posters on the walls, all from *Buffy*. And I did have toys and statuettes all around the entertainment center.

But I don’t have kids. I don’t have a boyfriend. All I’ve got is me, and it’s fun on occasion to delve into fantasy for a while.

“At least the plates aren’t *Buffy*,” Jack said.

“I save those for your third meal here.” I winked at him when he stared at me like I’d grown a horn.

Dinner came out well, for all of it being quickly bought and thrown together. Jack seemed content with the food. He should have been, he ate four pieces of chicken.

After dinner, he was even gracious enough to help do the dishes. He stuck his head down the hall afterwards, checking things out.

“What are you doing?” I asked seeing him sticking his head in my bedroom door.

“Looking for *Buffy* sheets,” he said, grinning at me.

“Brat,” I muttered.

Chapter Four

Bouncing around the Internet, I searched for new images from *Buffy* and *Angel* that I hadn’t seen before. I was feeling the urge to make some graphics. After finding a few good shots, I got to work.

I started manipulating. Cutting, pasting, making several layers, merging, then undoing it, then back again, relighting, all those things you do to make pretty graphics.

On the surface, it looked like I was really busy.

But truth be told, it was a sign I was stalling on something else.

And I was, really. I was trying not to think about that super sexy new guy from work.

After Jack's visit the other night, I'd become obsessed with him. Any little look he gave me sent my heart a pitter-patter.

It would be worse if anything had happened after the tire incident. But nothing did. Still, I couldn't help playing back every nuance of that night.

Especially the awkward good-bye moment. We'd done the do-we-hug-do-we-shake-hands-goodbye. In the end, we'd just shook hands. This meant I replayed it repeatedly, wondering where I missed the opportunity to have some full-body contact with Jack.

So, I tried to focus on other things.

Fan fiction wasn't doing it either. Instead of the dark-haired Angel in my mind's eye while I wrote, I would see blond-haired blue-eyed Jack.

So I immersed myself in building graphics. Then I had to focus on the right man.

Literally.

Bing!

Rugby:*Good evening.*

I jerked, highlighting too much of the graphic. Oh, it was Rugby. I hadn't talked to him in the last few days.

Hush:*Hey.*

Rugby:*And how are you faring this lovely night?*

Hush:*Making graphics.*

Rugby:*That sounds interesting. What are you making?*

Hush:*Linking banners and stuff.*

Rugby:*I am excited to see them when you are done. I have a question for you.*

Hush:*What would that be?*

Rugby:*I would like to do a fan fiction with Rennati and Evan. Our OC characters—I think an interesting spin-off could be done with the two of them.*

I arched my brow.

Hush: *That's an interesting idea. Rennati, the spiritualist, and Evan, the non-believer? They'd fight all the time.*

Rugby: *We could write it together.*

Hush: *Possibly.*

I considered it seriously though. It would certainly give me something to think about that wasn't Jack Edwards.

We discussed a basic story line, and the story idea intrigued me.

He wrote so differently than I did. It would certainly be an adventure to see what we could come up with.

I couldn't help the little girly giddy part of me that thought it was kinda exciting as well. Working with another creative person is always fun, but with someone of the opposite sex? Even more intriguing.

Working with Rugby would certainly be an experience.

"Hey," Jack said, sticking his head over the top of the partition between our cubicles.

I jerked, accidentally highlighting an entire column I had been working on in a spreadsheet, screwing up the formula I'd been making for it. "What?" 'Course it didn't help I'd been up most of the night playing with my graphics programs either.

"Are you busy?"

I sighed. The Adonis popped his head over the top of the cubicle at least twice a day. As gorgeous as he was, I was almost ready to strangle him. This much attention at work was not the norm for me.

Maybe Tina Smith should have trained him.

What am I thinking? Gah! Perish the thought.

She'd propositioned him twice about drinks after work and he'd only been here two weeks. Jack didn't seem to be taken by her, and for that, he got bonus points.

"I do work over here on occasion," I said trying to figure out my formula for the spreadsheet.

Jack raised his eyebrow at me. "I wonder sometimes." A twinkle gleamed in his cerulean eyes.

"Did you need something?"

“It’s, uh,” Jack brought his arm up to show his watch. “It’s almost twelve, thought you might like some lunch?”

“I was just going to run down to the cafeteria and get something.”

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll go with you.”

There was no way I was going to get out of this. I’d been trying to get him to leave me alone. Sorta, anyway. ’Course, since I was training him, I didn’t get to go a day without his head popping up over the cubicle wall. Or showing up in my area.

I mean, the man was handsome, and yes, my heartbeat got a bit erratic around him, but there was only so much a person could take being forced to talk to him day after day. And he wasn’t stupid by any means. He did his work, and usually did it well.

Jack came around the corner, stepping into the doorway of my cubicle. He’d certainly become a rather sought-after commodity on the accounting floor.

A couple of gals walked by and both of them smiled and greeted Jack. He nodded at them, a hint of a smile on his face, and then he returned his attention back to me at my desk.

I should have been used to his strong stares, but I wasn’t. I felt like a lab rat when he gazed at me like that.

“You know, you don’t have to eat lunch with me every day.” I saved my program and set the computer to stand-by mode.

“Why not? Got your eye on someone downstairs?” Jack asked, that twinkle in his eyes I’d learned meant he was being a shithead.

I rolled my eyes at him. “Yeah, okay, I’m gonna pretend you didn’t say that.”

“Why?” Jack asked as we stepped out of my cubicle. “Do you?”

“No.”

“I bet you do. That guy from Human Resources? What’s his name? Derrick?”

“Derrick?” I stammered at him, “The guy who acts like he still sniffs glue? Are you nuts?” I didn’t dare say that no one in the office sent my heart a tapping like he did. The man had just enough ego that I didn’t want to risk sending him into orbit.

“Well, you don’t talk about your personal life much, I just wondered.”

“I don’t have much of one.” At least not offline, anyway. “I mean, I have friends and stuff I go out with, but nothing major.”

“What do you do?”

“Sing karaoke, hang out, that’s about it.” God, I made my life sound like such a boring thing. ’Course, it

probably was. None of us did the rip-roaring drunk, total party thing anymore, we were all too old, but we did like to go out on occasion.

Some of the group met several times a week, but that was their thing. Not mine.

“Karaoke? Sounds interesting.”

“Only if you like to sing.”

“The bar I used to hang out at back home, they did karaoke, and I got a kick out of watching my drunk friends act like they could sing.”

“Where’s home?”

“Pennsylvania.”

I nodded my head. “And what on God’s green earth made you want to come to Kansas?”

“Time for a change.”

“So you came here?” I knew why I was here, my family was here, my friends were here and I’d been born over at St. Joe’s Hospital over on Harry Street. Why someone would up and move here was beyond me.

“Better job, better pay, lower cost of living.”

I shrugged. That was pretty true, Kansas did have a better cost of living than other places. ’Course, that was just a ruse to get people to come live here. Once they were here, we kept them with low sales tax. Then we slapped them with personal property tax. Ha ha ha! Kansas Legislature strikes again.

“So do you like it so far?”

“It’s not bad. Still getting used to everything.”

We reached the small cafeteria. Done in warm tones, it wasn’t too bad. I had always wondered if the company had wanted to make it a “cozy” place, because the room looked like it could have been a supply closet. A small kitchenette sat in one corner, microwave, fridge, toaster oven and a couple of coffee pots. Next to that was a wall that had a few vending machines, couple of pops and a couple of candy/chip dispensers. One other section had a small counter, where food that was actually cooked could be ordered.

I headed for the little counter, planning on ordering just a plain tuna sandwich because that was cheapest. Jack was right behind me, and as I reached into my pocket for some cash, I found my pocket sadly empty.

Nuts.

There was enough in my pocket for a bag of chips and a pop. I stepped to the side, allowing Jack to go first.

“What are you getting?”

“Probably just a bag of chips and a pop,” I said, trying to play off my lack of money. “I’m not very hungry.”

‘Course, at that moment, my stomach decided to growl. Damn conspirator, that stomach.

“You not have much cash?”

I shook my head. “I just haven’t been to the ATM lately.”

Jack nodded his head, pulling out his wallet. I saw him flip through some green inside, and he let out a huff. “Order something, and I’ll get it.”

“No thanks.” The girly side of me started to scream—*What is wrong with you? Jack Edwards wants to buy your lunch!*—but that side lost out to my pride. “Really, I’m just not that hungry.”

“Suit yourself,” he said and ordered a club sandwich and a drink. He took his ticket and headed for a table, while I went to the vending machines to see if anything looked even a little appealing.

The best I could find was a bag of Fritos and a Diet Coke.

“Nice nutritious lunch,” came a voice behind me. I spun around to see Tricia standing there, a grin on her face. Her no-nonsense haircut hung to her shoulders, and I could see a hint of gray at her temples where the color had grown out.

I smiled at her. “Funds a bit tight.”

Tricia glanced over at Jack sitting alone, watching me. “And I see you are still training Jack.”

I let out a sigh. “He’s a lost puppy, I swear.”

Tricia smirked. “I’d be glad to have that lost puppy following me around. He’s an incredible specimen.”

Jack had that damn stare going on again as he waited for his food. Fortunately, they called his number and he hopped up to get his sandwich. As he did, I checked out his backside, and it truly was spectacular. “I’d love to sink my teeth into that too.”

“What?” Tricia asked.

I blinked. “I said that out loud, didn’t I?”

Tricia laughed. “Yes you did.”

“Hey, I was meaning to ask you,” I said as I popped open my Diet Coke. “Have you or anyone else you know of had any trouble with slashed tires?”

“Slashed? Not flat?”

“I came out the other day and my tire was flat. When I took it to get it fixed, the guy said it had been stabbed with a knife. Though the guy said that kind of thing happens around here sometimes.”

“Where do you park?”

“The back of the lot,” I replied, and understanding hit me. “Maybe I shouldn’t park so far away from surveillance, huh?” The back of the lot was notorious for not being seen well on the surveillance cameras, and most of the stalls were left open, because people didn’t want to leave their cars there.

Though downtown Wichita wasn’t a terrible place, there was a decent crime element that lurked just a block or two away from the firm. It wasn’t a smart thing to be so far from the building.

‘Course, I liked having my pick of stalls.

Maybe I should rethink that logic.

“Probably would help. No one parks back there for that very reason.” Tricia shook her head. “You’ll figure this stuff out on your own.” She glanced back at Jack, who was watching me again. “You should ask him out sometime. Before someone else gets her claws into him.” She nodded her head toward the door of the cafeteria.

Tina Smith walked in, her blond hair flipped around in a twist, and she had a suit on today, albeit a leather one, but a suit nonetheless. She took in the layout of the room, and glanced at Jack, a predatory smile filling her face. The Botox must be wearing off since emotion was actually expressed.

I wanted to be sick. “We can’t have that.” I headed to where Jack was digging into his sandwich. I glanced at Tina, who cruised through the room like a super star.

My chair happened to slide closer to Jack as I sat. I didn’t want Tina Smith thinking it was open season. She shot me a rude look and made sure our table was in her flight path.

“Hello, Jack,” she said, smiling and thrusting her double D buoys at him.

Jack gave her a grin, one even I could tell was not the most sincere. “Hi, Tina.”

“Lynn.” She glanced at me as if I was an ant that needed to be squashed.

“Do you like working here, Jack?” Tina asked, her lips curved up into a venomous smile.

“It’s fine,” he said taking a bite of his sandwich. He chewed slowly, and I couldn’t help gazing at his Adam’s apple as he swallowed the food, my mind wandering to what it would be like to taste that skin...

Stop it, lustful organs.

“Well, I hope Lynn here is showing you the ropes well. She’s never trained anyone before, so I’m sure there are things she missed,” Tina said with a smirk that made me want to slap her. “So feel free to come to me if you need even the slightest thing.”

Jack glanced at me, then back at Tina. “So far, I’m good,” he said, his eyes drifting down to her chest then back up to her face. “If I need anything, I’ll let you know.”

Tina tapped her red claws on the table. “You do that.” She brushed a finger over Jack’s shoulder as she walked away.

Bless him for looking like a spider had crawled up his arm.

After she was out of earshot, Jack glanced at me. "She seems, uh, ambitious."

I nodded my head. "And she's got her eyes on you. 'Course can't blame her though." I shoved a couple of chips in my mouth.

Jack grinned at me, "And why is that?"

I stared at him for a full minute, chewing the chips in my mouth carefully to make sure I didn't choke on them. Is he kidding me? He can't possibly be serious. I grabbed one of the extra napkins off the table, and wiped my mouth off.

"Seriously, Lynn, why?" The shocking part of that question was that he really seemed sincere in asking.

"Have you ever looked in a mirror?"

Jack took a sip of his drink. "I have heard of those devices." His voice hinted at mirth as he spoke.

Letting out a sigh, I resisted the urge to smack him. "I'm not feeding that ego."

Jack laughed.

He asked me about a few work related things, and I explained the problems to him. People around the room glanced at Jack a lot, but he didn't seem to notice. 'Course, they also seemed to be glancing at me, and that made me uncomfortable. As well as Jack's scientific stare that he had to pierce me with. It was a bit unnerving.

"What is with that stare?" I asked him.

"What?"

"You stare at me like I'm a lab rat." I crossed my arms over my chest, leaning back against the chair.

"Sorry."

I waved a hand in the air. "I'm not exactly worth a deep stare like that."

Jack stared at me again, his gaze roaming all over me. "In your eyes." This time, there was no mirth in his voice.

I almost fainted at the heat that I felt from that stare. Suddenly I was no longer hungry, and I desperately needed to make a phone call.

Chapter Five

Friday afternoon, my office phone rang at 5:28. I didn't have to look. It was Bella.

"Did you ask him?" were the first words out of her mouth.

"No." Bella had been on me all week to ask Jack to join all of our friends at the Chalet Saturday night.

We were going shopping tomorrow to make me over, so I was all kinds of sexy hot, or so she said. I had called her after lunch with Jack, telling her all about him, and she insisted it was time for a makeover, that I needed to get my hair done and some new clothes.

Though I wasn't exactly thrilled about it, I relented, because, really, what was the worst that could happen? Bella wanted Jack to lay eyes on me outside of work with my new look. She said the impact would make it all the more intense.

'Course, only Bella knew what in the world that meant, because, frankly, I had no clue. All she would tell me was that she and our hairstylist Sydney had something up their sleeves for me, and I was a bit scared.

"Why not?"

"It hadn't come up." Which it hadn't. I didn't know quite how to ask Jack to join us. I mean, I could talk to him all day about spreadsheets, programs and work related stuff, but I couldn't seem to ask him out on a date.

"Well, make it come up. He's bound to be leaving soon!" Something in the background made a large crunching sound. "I gotta go. Call me later and tell me what happened."

I hung up the phone. And jumped out of my skin.

Jack stood in the doorway of my cubicle.

How did he do that?

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

I shook my head and smiled. "It's okay. Are you all done for the day?"

"Yep. Just thought I'd say thanks, and see you next week."

If this was my chance, I'd better take it. "Uh, about that." My hands started sweating. "Do you have any plans tomorrow night?" My leg bobbed under the table, and I put my clammy hand on it to steady it.

Jack's eyebrow went up, and he crossed his arms over his chest. "Why?"

"Well, a bunch of us are going out to the Chalet tomorrow night, to, well, you know, just kinda hang out, sing a bit, all that, and I was..." I looked down at my desk, suddenly fascinated with the arrangement of pens in my pen cup. "Well, I just kinda wondered, if you know, you might, uh..." I bit my lip, my mouth failing me miserably.

"Want to come?"

"Yeah. It wouldn't be like a date or anything," I said, probably too quickly. "You could, you know, just stop by if you wanted to? We'd be in a big group probably in the center of the room. There's usually like ten of us or so. And it's not all girls, so you wouldn't be overloaded with estrogen or anything."

Jack smirked. "I don't mind estrogen."

“Oh, well, no, of course you don’t.” My leg kept bobbing up and down, and I couldn’t seem to stop it. “Well, if you wanted to. You don’t have to sing if you don’t... Not everyone does, we just, uh, go and hang out.”

“You’re really trying to sell this to me, aren’t you?”

I clenched my hands under the desk. “Kinda, yeah.”

Jack smiled. “Tell me where this place is.”

Security was better for Lynn Broadmore’s apartment than most apartments in the area, but still, it wasn’t hard to break.

Cathy Donaldson and her partner managed to slide in, get past the security and up to her apartment in mere minutes, without drawing any attention to themselves.

“And you’re sure she won’t be here?” Cathy whispered.

“No. She’s shopping.”

Cathy nodded as she popped the lock to the apartment door. She sucked in a breath when she walked inside, marveling at the Buffy posters.

“Good Lord, she’s into this stuff,” Cathy muttered.

“Guess so.”

Cathy took in the furniture, nice stuff, from what she could tell—the pink fabric was a bit outdated, but it was in good condition. Barely looked like it had been used. Scanning around, she looked for the computer.

“Here,” her partner said, sticking his head out of the door to the bedroom.

Cathy followed him in, seeing that he’d already turned on the machine. She pulled out the flash drive from her pocket and sat down, shoving it in the front USB port on the computer.

“Did she make that background?” Cathy stared at the pretty wallpaper Lynn had on her desktop.

“Think so.”

“She seriously is wasting her time at that firm.” Cathy started the program, hiding it in Lynn’s hard drive. The setup wizard ran and soon the program was installed.

“I agree.”

Cathy let out a sigh as she pulled out the flash drive and shut down the computer. “Maybe when this is all over, we can see if Lynn would be interested in a computer degree or something.” Cathy didn’t mention the big “if”, there. Knowing that Benne was on his way, and that Lynn was more than likely his target, they had to time everything just right.

“Maybe.”

Cathy knew, as much as her partner did, that they could be completely wrong, and Benne was not even remotely interested in Lynn, that he had found another target somewhere else in the States.

If he was targeting someone else, they could only hope he was targeting a few of the agents that were stashed all over the country, pretending to be fan fiction writers.

Still, Cathy’s gut said they were in the right place.

She prayed she was right.

Saturday night, Bella and I came through the front door of my apartment, and I collapsed on the couch. We had two bags from Old Navy, they had a great sale going on, and a bag from Penny’s. I had tried on more clothes than I knew what to do with, all the while Bella telling me what worked and didn’t work for me.

We bought skirts, pants and blouses, as well as a couple of bra and panty sets to wear under some of the more sheer stuff.

Sydney couldn’t get me in early for my hair, so she had offered to stay late, and fit me in as her last appointment. I sat in the chair, oblivious to what she and Bella plotted for me, but after a bunch of foil was stuck in my hair and I did my imitation of a television antenna, I had pretty caramel and honey highlights, making my mousy brown hair almost glow.

“All I gotta say is,” Bella said with a deep, exhausted sigh, “if this Jack guy doesn’t notice you now, then he’s either gay or dead.”

“If he’s gay, he really will notice...”

Bella laughed. “But not the right way.”

I laughed at her, but I knew she had to be right. Not only had I blown the gift cards, but I’d spent an extra hundred and fifty dollars. Money I probably should have been using to pay my electric bill, but I didn’t care.

“And you’re sure he’s coming?”

“Pretty sure. He asked for directions, time and all that.”

Bella nodded, and looked me up and down. “Do you need makeup help?”

I shook my head. I could do that part myself.

Bella grabbed one of the Old Navy bags. “Good, then you need to wear,” she pulled out the black V-neck sweater and one of the new jean skirts, “this.” She held the outfit up. “You got knee-high boots, don’t you?” Bella asked.

I nodded, and smiled at Bella's clothing choices.

I was gonna knock Jack's socks off.

Chapter Six

Cathy Donaldson leaned back in the wingback chair overlooking the minimalist skyline Kansas had to offer. Nothing impeded her view of the horizon, and this hotel was one of the few buildings this tall in the area.

Down below, she could see the faintest hint of the Arkansas River, or the "Ar-Kansas" river, as the locals liked to call it.

The sun had set, and the stars had come out, a nice full moon shining through the sky. It was a very peaceful view. She had to admit, even the stars were brighter here than home.

Less smog.

Too bad her conversation wasn't this tranquil.

She shifted the cell phone on her ear. "Listen, I want you near her. She has to be left in the dark about this," she told her partner.

"But..." He'd been arguing with her for the last thirty minutes about this. Standard procedure dictated that they should be going directly to the target. One thing stopped Cathy from doing just that.

They didn't know exactly which one of the target's online friends was Benne.

If, on the off chance, they told her, she could inadvertently tell Benne what was going on, and stop him cold.

And Cathy didn't want Benne having any clue that they had found her. The program was installed, and now all they had to do was wait for the data to roll in.

"No but's. Benne's after her. This gal will not be another one of his victims." With that, she hung up the phone.

Her partner had made a fairly strong argument. There were questions on their procedures, things that might not go over well at the home office, but her boss, Osborne, had given her carte blanche to do what she needed to do.

And this course of action is what Cathy had decided.

After all, they were flying blind on this one. The chance that they were wrong, that Benne had selected another target blinked in the back of her mind, screaming for something else, some kind of sign that he'd picked this particular one, that he'd made his choice.

Yet they'd heard nothing thus far.

Not a thing. All the agents that were running around the Internet pretending to be fan fiction writers were coming up empty-handed. Though they were able to find a couple of child-porn fans thus far, no one was

able to get a concrete lead on Benne.

The man could hide himself online better than anyone she'd ever seen.

It had to be Lynn. After the initial email from Benne, one other came in, one from the episode "Hush" from *Buffy*, and that was what had tipped the scale to pursuing Lynn. She was the only person online who went by that handle, and she fit the bill perfectly.

Even more than perfect—she was a step up from Benne's last victim, who had not been a webmaster. It seemed, every time, Benne went for someone with a higher profile online.

Lynn, a webmaster of a rather well-established fan fiction site, would be the top of the ladder.

His most prized possession.

Lynn Broadmore needed her help.

Serial killers didn't just randomly select their victims. Benne took great pains to select his. He spent weeks, months, collecting and collating his data about potential victims.

Each one of his victims in the past had been chosen for very particular reasons. It wasn't what they wrote, *per se*, but there was something similar in the stories, an underlying current that bound these women together.

Cathy couldn't put her finger on it though.

But Benne still hunted. He still searched for that perfect one.

And this time, he'd found Lynn.

Cathy promised herself, Lynn Broadmore would not wind up another body found in a field with a feather on her chest.

She needed their help.

Whether the girl knew it or not.

The Chalet sat behind the Super Wal-Mart at Thirty-Second Street and Rock Road, the opposite side of Wichita from where I lived. Technically, it was on Penstemmon and Thirty-Second. It looked like an old English pub—white, with brown wood trim. The parking lot, when I arrived at 8:45 p.m., was sprinkled with a few cars, a strange occurrence during a major sporting season. I assumed that none of the local colleges were playing tonight.

Like I kept up with whether Kansas University, Kansas State or Wichita State University was playing. I was doing good to know which one wore which colors.

I walked in, and Door and Man stood on either side of the doorway, checking IDs. Neither one said a word to me as I walked in. I hadn't been there in a while, and I half-expected one of them to stop me but they didn't.

Door nodded his head. "You look good tonight," he said with a smile. Part of me was shocked that he remembered me. It had been so long since I'd actually come here.

"Thanks." I walked past the thin-as-a-rail doorman/bouncer. Only in Kansas would you have a bouncer that looked like a scarecrow.

I headed to the right, the "front end" of the bar where the most seating was. The middle had a huge open horseshoe bar, and the "back end" had a bunch of pool tables. I glanced about, seeing quite a few open tables in the center, and I walked toward them, to check and see if they were reserved.

Sure enough, there was paper taped down on them that said "Reserved".

Shoot.

"Hey," came a voice behind me. It was Jenny, our usual waitress. "Have a seat. Haven't seen you in a while."

I smiled at her. "Where?"

"Here. Soundman called and had me hold a table for you all tonight," she said. It wasn't just one table, but about four, all scooted together, with chairs all around it.

"You do that?"

Jenny winked, "Only for special people."

"Where's Skids?" I asked, looking around for the karaoke deejay.

Jenny shrugged. "I'm sure he's on his..." she glanced at the door. In walked Skids, two big cases in his hands, and he headed straight for the small stage area in the far right corner. People gave him a wide berth as he came in, partially because of the load he was carrying, and partially because Skids needed a wide berth anyway.

He was a big man. And tonight, he wore his Michael Jackson fedora. I sure hoped he wasn't going to do any Michael imitations tonight.

But with Skids, you never could tell.

I waved as he walked by, but he didn't see me.

"Go ahead and sit, I'll bring you a water for now," she said, knowing my usual drink preferences, and she dashed off.

I was shocked at how empty the Chalet was. Even the jukebox, which was loud enough to drown out the big screen, was on, but no game dominated the big screen. Instead, the big screen showed a marathon of the Sopranos.

At the table, I positioned myself so I could see the door, and be able to wave my friends over as they came in.

Or so I told myself. Mostly it was so I could wave Jack in.

Since he was new in town, my offer had an ulterior motive, well, besides seeing him socially. I wanted to introduce him to some people, and I had the best group of friends in the world. They were from all walks of life, some were students, some had careers, some were still trying to figure out what they wanted to be when they grew up.

Granted, not many of them understood the *Buffy* thing, but other than that, they were a pretty cool group. Bella had been the connection, knowing a few of these people from the video store she worked at. And the group just grew from there.

It didn't take long for friends to start trickling in. First came Sara and Michael, who sat across from me, both kind of gothic, both dressed in black. Sara, though, had a bright white streak in the front of her hair, making her resemble Rogue from *X-Men*.

Sara and Michael both pulled cigarettes out of one of their various chain-detailed pockets and dropping them on the table, as well as their cell phones.

Next Soundman arrived, and a few friends of his I didn't know. He had a gal with him, a true goth queen, Lydia was her name? Lots of tattoos on her arms. I smiled and waved at them, and they sat at the far end of the table. Soundman did take a few minutes to come over to say "hi" and give me a bear-hug, but then he returned to the other end. I noticed as he got up, the light flashed on his eyebrow, showing he'd gotten a new eyebrow piercing.

Great, another piece of metal in his face; just exactly what Soundman needed.

Luke soon rolled in with a couple of his buddies, Alex and Trent, whom I'd met on occasion. All of them proceeded with the tradition of dropping cigarettes and cell phones on the table too. By the time everyone arrived, our table would look like a cell phone display shop.

And also, everyone would marvel over whoever had the newest cell phone, and everyone would have to play with it.

Part of some weird tradition.

Luke and company all knew Stuart, Bella's boyfriend, from laser tag, and Luke asked me when Bella and Stuart would get there. I told him I had no clue. They were always late.

Luke sat next to me, and I told him to move out of the way.

"You got a date or something?" Luke asked.

"Or something." I moved my purse into the chair to keep anyone else from sitting there.

"Check it out, Lynn's got a date," Alex said.

I shot him a look.

"I wondered why you were all dolled up tonight," Sara said. "I like your hair, it's really cute."

We all jerked as Skids tested the mics for karaoke, and there was a squelch. Skids's wife, Lora,

walked up and down the tables, passing out books for everyone, and she dropped three on our table, to limit the fighting.

“What the hell was that?” Michael yelled out toward Skids.

Skids glanced his way, and a profanity bird flew right at Michael, which made all of us laugh.

Sara shrugged and took a sip off her diet pop. “You went shopping then?”

“Bella took me shopping for new clothes and we got my hair done,” I told Sara.

“Cool! Any good deals?”

I told her about the killer sale at Old Navy, and Jenny came up and started taking drink orders. So far, no Jack, but I wasn’t worried.

Jack had my cell phone number, just in case he couldn’t find the place, and I glanced at it, looking to see if the little pink light was blinking, telling me I’d missed a call.

No blinking light.

It was still early.

I grabbed a book and started going through it, looking for something to sing. The usual conversation flitted about, Luke wanting to know what I was gonna sing, then he asked all of us what he should sing. We all told him not to sing “Goodnight Saigon”, which made him write it down on his slip.

I found a couple of songs to sing, one by Melissa Etheridge and the other by No Doubt, and I took my slip up to Skids. I wanted to get in the rotation early, so I could get more than three songs in for the night. ’Course, if the bar stayed this empty, it shouldn’t be a problem.

Bella didn’t arrive until about ten, and still there was no sign of Jack.

My spirits dropped, and I started burrowing down deeper in the chair. I figured he’d have come by now. I tried to reassure myself that he’d show, but I couldn’t seem to do it. After all, I was just, well, me, and Jack was...well, Jack was incredible looking.

Bella sat on the other chair next to me and put her hand on my shoulder.

She knew exactly how I felt without my saying a word. Either she was psychic, or I wore my disappointment on my face.

“You never know, he might have gotten lost. He’ll be here.”

“Doesn’t really matter.” I tried to act like it didn’t bother me if he showed or not. Bella knew I was full of it, but no one at the table should know that. I painted a big smile on my face and took a sip of my water.

As soon as Jenny came back by, I was ordering something stronger. Like tequila. ’Course, for me, that means a Tequila Sunrise. I was an alcohol wimp, I needed my hard liquors diluted, and I liked the pretty drinks, preferably ones with little umbrellas in them. Not that the Chalet provided drinks with umbrellas,

but if they did, boy howdy, I'd be all about that.

Skids started up the karaoke, having finally gotten all of us at the table to give him enough slips to get going. He had to have a minimum of five singers to start the karaoke, and he waited impatiently for us early birds to get our slips filled out.

The noise level increased fourfold as Skids started some Elvis for him to sing as he kicked off the show.

I let out a sigh, pleased that the karaoke would be starting. At least something wouldn't be a total bust tonight.

Alex stood, and came over to the chair next to me and sat for a second, setting my purse on the table. "You look really good, Lynn, and if that jerk doesn't show, it's his loss." He put his arm around me, and gave me a side-hug. I patted his arm, and he let go. "Besides, I'll be your date if you want," he said with a grin.

"I ain't that easy, boy."

He made a pouty face, his eyes twinkling with mirth.

"Knock it off." I gave him a shove. "I'm gonna tell Michelle, and then where would you be?"

"Spending the night at your house?"

I rolled my eyes. "You ain't right."

Bella laughed at him, and looked at the door. Her face sobered. "Jesus," she muttered. "Adonis has entered the building." Her voice shifted into a darker, husky, female-in-heat sound.

"What?" I followed her gaze.

There, in the doorway, stood Jack Edwards.

My face lit up, and I sat up, waving my arms in the air.

"Good Lord, Lynn," Bella said. "Is that him?"

I nodded my head. Jack didn't seem to see my frantic arm waves. Everyone else in the bar did, but not him. He was too busy looking over everything else in the bar, like he was taking in the layout while Door and Man checked his ID.

She shoved me. "Well get up and go get him, he looks lost!"

As I walked away, Luke leaned over toward Bella. "Holy shit."

I should have bopped Luke on the head, but I kept my focus on Jack. At first, Jack didn't see me in the dim lighting. Then he did.

And the world stopped turning.

I stopped mid-stride. Jack's gaze roamed up and down me, and I wanted to cover myself with

something, the stare was so intense. In a heartbeat, I knew he knew exactly what I looked like without my clothes on, and that thought frightened the shit out of me.

A couple of people passed between us, but nothing broke the eye contact.

Jack stared at me for just this side of eternity, and I couldn't help taking in the sight of him as well. His blond hair was brushed back away from his face, and he wore a long sleeve sweater, a dark tan color, and a pair of jeans. Incredibly well fitting jeans. I covered my mouth, afraid that drool was going to start coming out of my slacked jaw.

Jack took a few steps forward, and was suddenly right in front of me. A grin spread across his face. "Lynn, hey," he said, that mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"Glad you found the place."

"It is hidden."

"Um, we're sitting over here." I turned toward the table. I smirked when I saw the whole friggin' table looking at us, and as soon as I turned around, they all shifted back so they weren't staring. As I walked to the table, Jack grabbed my hand and laced his fingers through mine.

Shivers of pure electric heat ran through my body. His fingers, which were larger than I had ever noticed, made all the nerves in my body stand on end. We weaved around the scattered tables, and as we arrived to where I was sitting, Alex jumped up.

"Sorry, just visiting." Alex had winked at me as he got up, and my cheeks flamed red when he gave me a "thumbs-up" behind Jack's back.

Jack nodded at Alex, then glanced at me, an inquisitive look on his face as I let go of his hand. I introduced him to everyone at the table, trying to shake off the blush that had crept in my cheeks. The ones closest shook hands, and Soundman and company just waved. Well, Soundman waved.

Jack sat next to me, and Jenny slid next to him to take his drink order. Just before she walked away, she leaned over to me. "God, no wonder you're dressed to kill tonight."

My Tequila Sunrise appeared in front of me, and Jack ordered a beer. I took a long tug off my drink, my heart slamming in my chest.

I still couldn't believe he came.

Jack rested his forearms on the edge of the table, lacing his fingers together. Certain habits, even now, couldn't be controlled. His mother had been determined to make sure he had perfect table manners, and even in a casual bar such as this, he still couldn't rest his elbows on the table.

A thick white three-ring binder sat on the table, on the cover, an upside-down pig, with a pirate patch over the eye, the words "Skid's Karaoke—We pull out all the stops" in an arch around the pig.

Jack arched his eyebrow and pulled the book closer for a better look. Flipping through the plastic covered pages, he scanned the columns of songs by title and numbers, running his fingers over the plastic.

“Beer protection,” Lynn said, leaning over. “You’d be surprised how beer soaked one of these books can get.”

Jack nodded. Lynn’s smile glowed as much as the orange drink in front of her. He couldn’t get over how incredible she looked—her hair, her clothes; she barely looked like the same gal he saw at the office. Her hair flipped about her face, flattering her cheekbones, and he resisted the urge to reach out and run a finger over one of the strands.

He’d almost not come, sitting at home, debating whether he should do this. Glancing at her motley crew of friends, he imagined she would have had a good time without him. The big guy down on the end kept glancing at him, and Jack wondered if he was overprotective or just jealous. Something about him, though, made Jack a bit wary.

The waitress returned with his beer, and he took a sip rather enjoying the flavor as it rolled down his throat. He’d figured out quickly in Kansas that Coors Light and Bud Light were usually the beers of choice.

What he wouldn’t give for some Yuengling Lager. Made in Pennsylvania, the beer was only available on the East Coast.

Jack was going to need some liquid courage to get through this night. The whole work relationship thing bothered him. Not that he and Lynn had a relationship, aside from working together.

He wouldn’t mind an outside relationship. Hell, he’d fantasized about such a thing. She had the best ass, just enough curve to properly cup and pull hard against...

Stop, he ordered himself. He didn’t need to let his mind get clouded with personal need. He wouldn’t be here at all if it weren’t for Lynn, anyway. This Godforsaken state with fifty mile-an-hour wind, flat land and nothing to do—he couldn’t find a thing good to say about Kansas.

Except for Lynn. She looked so incredible. Even smelled good, something soft and floral—jasmine maybe?

He couldn’t lean any closer to know, though. Her hair lay in sexy waves, waves he wanted to tangle his hands in and pull her close to him. The sensations assaulted him so strongly he wanted to drag her out of the bar, caveman style.

Stop! he told himself. Not time yet.

He had an agenda, and he couldn’t let his cravings overwhelm him. There were things that needed to be accomplished yet, before he could entertain such thoughts.

Chapter Seven

“So tell me,” Jack said, “what do you do on the computer all the time?”

“Talk to friends. Visit forums, that kind of thing.” I wasn’t about to tell him how serious my *Buffy /Angel* obsession was. He’d seen the apartment—too much more could frighten him.

“She has a whole, what is it, life, on the Internet.” Bella said.

“Really?” Jack asked, looking me up and down. “Fascinating.”

I glared over at Bella, screaming with my eyes to tell her to shut up.

Bella just smiled at me. “She does, it takes an act of Congress to get her to go out on the weekends.”

“Or on a date,” I muttered.

Jack laughed. “So you’re not a big weekend party girl?”

I shook my head. “Embarrassing as it is to say, I really don’t go out much, except on the occasional blind date.”

“Well, if this is how you look on blind dates, you gotta be beating them off with a stick,” Jack said.

I raised my eyebrow at him, and he leaned a bit closer.

“You look incredible,” he whispered to me.

My breath hitched in my throat, and I had to force the cough down, because I didn’t know if I could swallow his compliment for what it was. My hand slipped up into my hair, and I tucked a strand behind my ear, just to get it out of my face. And I needed to do something to remind myself that this wasn’t a dream. Jack actually thought I looked incredible.

Someone pinch me please. “Thanks. So do you.” I reached for my drink and took a long tug off it.

Jack’s hand dropped off the table, and his fingers grazed my leg. Fire shot through me.

God, over the edge I go. No man should have that kind of effect on anyone. It just wasn’t right. My leg locked, and I shifted in my chair away from him. Had I been so long with a man that I went all gaga over a slight touch?

Evidently.

“Sorry,” Jack said and looked around again.

I let out a sigh. This was a bad idea. I took another sip of my drink, chewing on my straw a bit before setting it down. I was totally out of my league here with Jack. He seemed so, well, polished, compared to me and my laid-back friends. We all were pretty much who we were, not a lot of layers to us.

Glancing at the different people at the table, I wondered what Jack thought of this random clique of friends: Goths, preps, blue collar, white collar, all of us friends and all of us in our late twenties, early thirties. Just a big bunch of friends.

I bit my lip to force down the grimace that crept up when I remembered the last guy I had introduced to this circle of people. Dickwad, aka Lester Johansson, had fit right into the group, buddied up to everyone. Well, he did until he hit me.

Then Dickwad learned the true meaning of friends.

There wasn't much that my circle could do for me because of the financial problems, those were my own dumb mistakes. Just what I got for letting some guy who swore he loved me have a credit card in my name.

It's taken four years, but I've managed to pay off most of it. Dickwad took off for parts unknown after I pressed charges against him for domestic violence, and the last I'd heard there was a warrant out for him, but I still doubted I'd ever see a dime of that money.

That was my last boyfriend, or rather my last boyfriend of significance that I bothered to introduce to this group. Since then, there'd been a few guys, but not any with significant staying power.

And none that I had wanted to introduce to this group.

So why was I introducing Jack Edwards to this group, a guy I'd known, what a couple of weeks?

Something must be seriously wrong with me.

A hand brushed my shoulder, and I jerked around, seeing Soundman kneeling next to my chair.

"Hey, Soundman," I said, marveling at his icy green eyes. The smooth lines of his Native American heritage gave him an exotic look, especially with the facial piercings. A black stud with points on the ends was in his eyebrow, a spike in his lebrae, and I wasn't sure how many were in his ears, I never bothered to count. All the metal combined with the jet-black hair that was always pulled back in a tight ponytail, made the man resemble an alley thug—a sexy alley thug. I always wondered who the lucky girl would be who managed to bring Soundman out of his "girl of the week" phase, and possibly even get him to remove some of the metal in his face.

Jack's attention riveted to Soundman, the male testosterone flying between the two. Soundman sized up Jack, then returned his attention to me.

"Lynn, got something for you," Soundman said as he reached into the pocket of his baggy pants.

"Oh?"

Jack crossed his arms over his chest, and I thought for a second steam came out of his nose—bull-style. Soundman purposely ignored Jack, and I jumped as Jack put his hand on my thigh and gave me a possessive squeeze.

I should have laughed and shoved Jack's hand away, but my stupid hormones flooded me, and my whole body hummed at the contact. God, I really needed to get laid if I reacted like this at male posturing.

Soundman's eyes flickered to where Jack had touched my leg, and an overprotected look passed over his face. He handed me something small on a chain.

I took the item and covered my mouth, a squeal trying to find its release. It was a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* keychain. I dropped my hand, flipping the plastic key chain over, looking over the image of Buffy with Mr. Pointy, her arm up, ready to stake someone. I knew by the pose it was made during season three, so it was an older shot, which made it a rarer find.

"This is awesome." I reached over to hug Soundman. "Thank you so much!" I could barely get my arms

around his chest as he hugged me back, swallowing me in his embrace. Jack couldn't keep his hand on my leg as I leaned into Soundman, though I could feel him trying.

Soundman shrugged. "Knew you liked that stuff. If you'd come out more than once in a friggin' blue moon, I could have given it to you sooner..."

I grinned, whispering in his ear, "You're such a doll," as I pulled away from him, giving him the mandatory peck on the cheek. He followed suit with his own chaste kiss.

As he let go of me, he glanced up, and I followed his gaze. Through the doorway came Rainie Simon.

"Rainie!" I waved at the chestnut-haired gal I hadn't seen in weeks. Wait, it was probably more like months. God, I needed to get out more.

"Hey," Rainie said, a broad grin on her face. She came over to my side of the table. She glanced at Jack and smiled as Soundman stood.

"Hey, Soundman," Rainie said.

"Hey," Soundman said, pulling her into an embrace. I nodded in approval over that one. For the longest time, Rainie wouldn't sit at the same table as Soundman, much less speak to him. Since Rainie's fiancée died in a car crash, she and Soundman had been pretty much at odds with one another. I'd heard that Soundman was there when it happened, but I knew very little about the details. It was good to see that they didn't still fight. They probably had come to a truce months ago, but since I never came out, I wasn't aware.

As Rainie let go of Soundman, she stared at him. "My God, you could have taken my eye out with that spike!" She gestured to the piercing in his chin.

"If you were taller, we wouldn't have issues," Soundman said.

"Like I can control that," Rainie said.

"Wear heels."

"You'd like that."

Soundman wagged his eyebrows at her.

Rainie smirked and glanced over at Jack, then at me, and back at Jack. "Hi, I'm Rainie." She held her hand out for Jack.

Jack shook it graciously, and smiled that hundred-watt smile that already sent so many of us at the office over the edge.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Jack."

Rainie glanced at me, patting me on the shoulder. "It's good to see you."

"I'm surprised you're here today, usually you don't come out on Saturday."

“Got my tax return, had the night off from work and my school load is not that horrid this semester.”

I nodded, understanding the weight of school and work. Part of my problem when I was dating Dickwad was no money, and credit card companies loved to give college kids credit. “You gonna sing?”

Rainie shrugged.

“Please?” I begged, lacing my fingers together in mock-prayer. “I really need some Evanescence!” Rainie could belt out the songs, in high school she’d been big in choir, and had even sang a bit in college. She usually got a standing ovation when she sang Evanescence.

Rainie laughed, patting my shoulder. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Bella, surprising me, waited until Rainie and I were done talking, grabbed her arm and tugged her off to the bathroom with her.

I rolled my eyes. Who knew what they would be talking about... wait, I know I do, it would probably have something to do with this hot guy sitting next to me. Jack’s defensive posturing diminished after Soundman walked off, but his hand still lingered on my leg, and I crossed my legs under the table, trying to casually shake his hand off me.

I knew it was just the testosterone rising, and I should have been mad about it, really I should have, but maybe I was already feeling the buzz of my Tequila Sunrise. I thought it was funny.

“Easing back on the testosterone?” I asked Jack, since his hand was no longer near my lap.

Jack shrugged. “Guy thing. You’re my date here, not sure how I feel about another guy bringing you presents.”

“And what makes you think this is a date?” Whether I said that for his benefit or not, I wasn’t sure. I may have been trying to reassure myself more than him.

“We’re here together. A date.”

“Dates involve getting together, riding in the same car, usually dinner or a movie, then going to the bar. Not just meeting up somewhere. A date this is not.”

Jack smirked. “And what if I kissed you before the night was out, would we still not be on a date?”

“It’s still not a date, it’s a hook-up.” I tried to ignore the slamming in my heart, while registering the fact that Jack would even consider kissing me. He had to be speaking about the hypothetical.

Was it me, or was he getting closer to me? No, he couldn’t be, why would he want to kiss me?

He still seemed to be getting closer. Was he leaning in for a kiss?

“So do you do hook-ups?” Jack asked, his breath on my ear.

I shook my head, and I told myself the reaction was because of his question, not the shiver that ran through me in his nearness. His arm rested on the side of my chair and I considered scooting away. I didn’t want him thinking he needed to hit on me because I’d asked him to join me. This wasn’t a date.

I grabbed my almost empty glass and sucked down the last of the yellow-orange drink.

Jack mumbled something that I didn't hear because Skids called me to the karaoke stage. I almost leapt out of the seat, heading for the stage.

"And now, we present the lovely Lynn," Skids called out to the crowd. A meager applause started as I took the mic from Skids. The large man smiled at me, patting me on the shoulder. "You look great tonight," he said, not in the mic. "I flipped your songs, wanted to do No Doubt first."

I nodded my head. "No problem." I brought the mic up to my mouth to begin the No Doubt song.

Jack watched Lynn sing the opening bars of "Hella Good," and drank a little of his beer. Lynn surprised him, she sang pretty decently, and seemed on pitch. She shimmied around the stage area, the deejay standing behind her, following her movements.

Jack couldn't help smirking at the performance. She shook her hips, her curves swaying in time to the music, and Jack felt an instant tug in his groin.

A table full of guys sat by the stage area. They were watching Lynn closely, and they gave him a bad vibe.

One of the guys got up and headed toward the bathroom. He stumbled, revealing his drunkenness. Jack glanced back up at Lynn, and she continued to sing, her eyes shifting over to the monitor with the words on it. Even though she did it, she still seemed to know the words without any problems. Both she and the deejay continued their moves, and Jack wondered how many times they'd done this song like this.

"She's good," Alex, the guy sitting to Jack's right said, leaning over to him. A cigarette dangled in his hand as he spoke, and he held it up to his mouth not like a cigarette but like a joint.

Jack nodded, "Yeah, she is." Looking at the guy's eyes, he didn't see any signs of pot usage recently, but he bet the guy used the magic weed on occasion.

The drunk guy who'd been sitting at the rowdy table before came back from the bathroom, but he didn't sit. Instead, he stood watching Lynn sing. The hairs on Jack's arms started to rise.

Alex looked up at the guy. "You think he's trouble?"

Jack shrugged. About that instant, Soundman, the one who'd come over earlier, saw Jack's gaze, and he checked things out as well.

Lynn seemed oblivious to this drunk guy, especially when she continued dancing on stage, her legs spread, her knees bent, and she rocked her hips back and forth mimicking bedroom moves. A tug in Jack's pants made him clench his teeth as he watched, refusing to let his mind wander to that place.

Evidently, he wasn't the only one who thought Lynn's shimmy was provocative.

The drunk guy rushed to the stage, put his arms on Lynn's hips, and tried to bury his face in her chest.

Lynn looked up, sheer terror on her face. Jack, Alex, Luke and Soundman were all on their feet in an instant. Skids, however, grabbed Lynn and pulled her away from the guy, and simultaneously shoved the drunk away from her.

“Get off her,” Skids yelled. The drunk guy laughed, but the door bouncers appeared at the guy’s side, and pulled him out of the way.

Lynn’s song was almost over, but she just stared, her face ashen, and she stayed behind Skids.

Skids patted her shoulder, and Jack and the others sat. The urge to walk Lynn back to the table overwhelmed Jack, but he didn’t. Which was probably a good thing, because Lynn picked up the mic, and returned to the song, a smile on her face, as though nothing happened, finishing to wild applause from the audience.

One of the men at the table reached out to grab Lynn’s arm, and she brushed him away, speeding up her steps to the table. As soon as she dropped onto her chair, Jack saw her shaking hands. Lynn mumbled something about that not being the norm at the bar, trying to laugh off the experience.

Jack did the only thing he could think of; he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and hugged her.

Chapter Eight

It didn’t take long for the guy who’d decided my boobs were up for grabs to be ejected from the bar. One of the guys at the table he’d sat at did eventually come over and apologize, but he had to talk around Jack. Jack didn’t let anyone near me after that drunken display, keeping an arm around me for the rest of the night.

I did sing again, but only one more time, finishing off my slip, and when I did sing, Skids brought the mic to me at the table, so I didn’t have to go to the stage. Not that I actually expected some other guy to try and use my chest for a pillow, but I suddenly wasn’t very comfortable getting up in front of everyone.

And I just didn’t quite want to leave Jack’s arm. It was warm, it was safe there. The few times he got up as the night went on to go to the bathroom, I huddled down in my chair, feeling exposed.

The incident became a topic of conversation, not only because of what happened, but Bella told me because of which males at the table reacted to the scenario. Soundman’s reaction was pretty standard for him—he would have done it for any of the gals at the table, the same for Alex, both of them having military backgrounds. Jack’s jumping up impressed the snot out of Bella, and she told me repeatedly that he was a keeper, and if I ruined this potential relationship, she’d beat me.

The evening ended pretty smoothly, no more interesting outbursts from anyone, and I had begun to feel a buzz from my three tequila sunrises.

“You gonna make it home?” Jack asked me.

I nodded to him. “Sure, not a problem at all.” My fingers laced through his, and I leaned my head on his broad shoulders.

Jenny came by, delivering the tabs, and laid pieces of paper in front of everyone. I glanced around, my

own tab was not in the bundle she delivered.

“Jenny?” I reached for the waitress’s arm, “where’s mine?”

“He’s got it,” Jenny said, gesturing to Jack.

I whipped my head around to see Jack pulling two twenties out of his wallet and laying them on the check. “Jack.”

“What?”

“Let me see that.” I snapped the receipt away from him. Sure enough, all my drinks had been put on his tab, although I didn’t get a chance to see the amount because Jack snapped it out of my fingers.

“That’s not yours.” Jack grabbed the cash and handing it to Jenny.

“You don’t have to pay for me,” I said, reaching for my purse to hand him my half of the bill. I knew I probably owed at least fifteen for my drinks and the chips and salsa I’d ordered at midnight, so I started digging in my wallet for money.

“Put your cash away.”

I was about to object again, but Bella grabbed my arm and pulled me toward her. Whispering in my ear, she started to berate me. “Lynn Broadmore. If he wants to pay for your drinks, let him.”

“But,” I sputtered at her.

“No buts. He’s a gentleman, let him pay for the drinks.”

I was about to say something else, and Bella waved that finger at me, the one that reminded me too much of my mother, and I shut up. Bella let go of my arm, and I slacked against the chair.

It was a no-win situation.

Oh well, maybe I’ll buy Jack’s lunch someday at work as payback. Or some week.

I stood, stretching as I did so, and grabbed my jacket out of the crease of the chair, and slipped it on. It had been a good pillow behind me all night, and when I shoved it on, it was still warm.

Jack stood as well, and I grabbed my purse, giving hugs to everyone around the table. The process was part of the tradition, and all the while, Jack stood there patiently. Alex whispered that he’d loan me a few condoms if I needed them, and I smacked him on the arm.

Jack slipped an arm on the small of my back and we headed out the door.

“I hope it wasn’t too boring for you,” I said as the night winds slapped me across the face, instantly removing any leftover buzz that may have been lingering.

“No, I had a good time.”

“You didn’t have to buy my drinks.”

“But a gentleman always pays for his escort’s drinks.”

“If I’m your escort, you’re getting royally screwed.”

“Is that a promise?”

I blinked. It took a second for my mind to actually register what I’d said. And as soon as it did, my cheeks flamed red, and I stared at the ground. “Not what I meant.”

“Too bad.” Jack grinned back. “Could have been fun.”

“Jack,” I said, smacking him in the arm. *Man, I’m having flirty, giddy banter with Jack Edwards, and we’re enjoying it.* I felt pretty darn cool.

“Okay, okay, just kidding,” he said, with a laugh. “You started it.”

“But you could have just let it lie.”

“And miss a perfect opportunity? Never.”

I shook my head at him. Suppose I do deserve it for leaving myself so open for that one. We weaved through the cars. Reaching mine, I realized that either Jack was walking me to my car, or he had parked near me.

Sure enough, we reached my car, and Jack pulled out keys to his big-assed black SUV, and it was parked next to mine.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket.

We reached both vehicles and stopped, stuck between the two. I didn’t want to climb in just yet, but out of habit, I opened my driver’s door and started the car, letting it warm a bit before I would drive off.

Jack waited, and stood, staring at me with that analytical gaze, and I shoved my hands in my pockets, noticing the detailed knitting in the shoulder of the sweater, the very shoulder that I’d been cuddling into all night.

“So what now?”

I shrugged, the cold wind biting at me more than I liked. “I don’t know about you, but I’m fricking freezing out here, so I’m gonna go home.”

In answer, Jack pulled me up next to him, wrapping his arms around me, and I relaxed into his embrace. His smell was smooth and masculine, not really perfumed like the guys who hose themselves with cologne, but just a husky guy scent that I couldn’t quite place, maybe sandalwood?

“Is that better?” Jack asked, whispering in my ear.

I nodded against his chest. “Yeah.” I brought my head back to look at his beautiful blue eyes.

He smiled down at me, loosening his grip to brush a hair out of my face. “Thanks for inviting me.” His

eyes hooded, and he inched closer to me. His lips loomed before me, a feast not yet tasted, and I felt myself lick my own lips in anticipation of that gourmet meal.

“God, you couldn’t even wait till you got home?” a voice hollered at us, and I immediately jerked away from Jack, spinning to face the voice.

“Get a grip,” I yelled back to Alex, as he started to get into his car. Alex just guffawed at me, and climbed in his older-model sports car. I had no clue what it was, a Camero maybe? Certainly not a new one. And not old enough to be a classic, either, not that he kept it in good enough shape for car shows or anything.

My shoulders slumped, and I let out a sigh as Alex bathed us in his headlights before pulling out of the parking lot.

Jack put his hand on my shoulder. “I should go.”

I nodded my head. “Yeah, my car’s probably warm now.”

“See you at work.”

I nodded. “Yeah, see you.”

By the time I got home, I wanted to beat Alex for interrupting a possible kiss from Jack. And I had an inspiration for a new fan fiction story.

I flipped on my computer, slipped out of my new clothes, tossed them in the laundry basket and put on my pajamas. I got a bottle of carbonated water out of the fridge and turned on the little lamp on my computer desk, ready to write.

I growled as I waited for my computer to load. It was being incredibly slow. I let out a sigh, figuring I probably needed to defrag and clean it out again.

Almost on impulse, I logged into my IM program, and saw a couple of authors online—Lodan, Sunshine and Rugby. At two a.m. I hoped no one talked to me, and I considered posting a “busy” signal on my account.

Now, logic would tell me that I should just log off, so I could write in peace, but, like any addict, I couldn’t do that. Yes, I know I’m an Internet addict, and maybe part of me wanted to talk about my quasi-date...

’Course, I didn’t IM anyone, just minimized the screen, and pulled up a blank document. In a few minutes, I was lost in a new story, one about an almost-kiss.

Bing.

I let out a sigh as I checked the IM box.

Rugby:*Hello, how are you tonight?*

Hush:*Fine. And you?*

I minimized the screen and went back to writing, hoping I would be able to actually get this story done now.

Rugby:*Not too bad. How are things with you?*

Hush:*Good. Working on some fan fiction.*

Maybe that will deter him from talking. I really regretted logging into the system.

Rugby:*Cool. A new Rennati story, perhaps?*

Hush:*Yes.*

Rugby:*That is terrific. I look forward to reading it.*

Hush:*Great.*

I went back to work, closing the box, and was about to sign off when another IM went off. Now I'll never get anything done.

Willowrocks:*Hey chicky. How's this Sat night treatin' U?*

Hush:*Good, writing right now.*

Willowrocks:*What R U writin? An epic?*

Hush:*General smut to vent my frustrations.*

Willowrocks:*Frustration?*

I was about to mention my sexual frustration about Jack, but Rugby popped back up a reply.

Rugby:*Are you certain you are okay? You seem distracted.*

Hush:*Fine, just got other people who require my attention at the moment.*

Rugby:*Ahh. Would you like me to leave you alone?*

I shook my head. I had to admit, Rugby was a pretty decent guy, he always seemed so polite. I hated to blow him off.

Hush:*Not really, just be patient with me, okay?*

Rugby:*Certainly.*

Minimizing the screen, I managed to get three words written before another IM ping from Will came up.

Willowrocks:*So Y R U frustraded?*

Because idiots like you who don't know how to type or spell are the ones I'm hanging out with in the middle of the night, and not hotties like Jack. I resisted the urge to type my thoughts into the IM box.

Hush:*Because my hottie went home.*

Willowrocks:*Any particular hottie?*

Hush:*As a matter of fact yes.*

Willowrocks:*Guess UR d8 went well.*

Hush:*Not good enough... I'm here, talking to you, right?*

The last thing I wanted to do was talk to Will about my date. I doubted a nerd like Will would have any idea what a date would be like.

Willowrocks: *touché*

Rugby started to blink.

This was so going to be a long night.

Chapter Nine

March

Cathy Donaldson stood pacing in the small office she'd managed to commandeer at the Wichita, Kansas office of the FBI. Technically, it was the KBI, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, but she'd take what she could get. The locals weren't exactly pleased that Cathy had come in bringing her team and demanding a section to work, and as a rebuttle, they'd given her a cleaned-out storeroom and a folding table to set up as her work station.

Like she gave a shit. They had their own problems, working on the case against a local serial killer who'd decided to start sending letters to the newspaper. They were giving her the space she needed, and she was staying out of their mess.

Fair enough as far as she was concerned.

At least the table was wide enough for her to spread her papers out and still have room for her laptop.

On the wall hung a collage of photos, each one of Benne's victims. The images of them covered the wall, a few feet between each. Tacked up around them, were the "online" images the women used to portray themselves, or their characters in their fan fictions. Copies of the fan fiction stories the women wrote, as well as photos of their remains and other forensic evidence hung around each victim.

And in a plastic bag at the bottom hung the feather found on each body.

Cathy stared at the collage, certain there was something vital about the feathers that she hadn't been able to figure out.

A lone pheasant feather lay on her desk, striped and long, and she stared at it, because it was so much like the ones found on the bodies. This one she'd found outside, blowing on the breeze about the time the case started, and she just happened to grab it and put it in her briefcase.

Then these bodies had started showing up with damn feathers.

Didn't make any sense. She picked it up, ran her fingers up the sides, smoothing the feathers out, then back down, roughing them, and repeating the motion over again.

She let out a sigh, dropping the feather in her pen cup. She ran her fingers through her hair, and glanced at the stack of files from the trojan they'd stuck in Lynn Broadmore's computer.

She'd already backtracked several of the people Lynn talked to online, and ironically, a couple were agents that Cathy had put on the case. Others were fairly simple to find, mostly young females, early twenties, a couple of teens, but from what they said, she bet Lynn didn't know they were teenagers.

Cathy's cell phone rang.

"Donaldson," she said, seeing the number of her partner.

She didn't put down the papers she was looking at, mentally mapping out the city and states of the ISP addresses. They had to know who Hush was talking to.

"We need to talk," came her partner's curt reply.

"What's wrong?" She grabbed a pen and a legal pad.

"She needs to know."

Cathy shook her head. "No, really, she doesn't. And I'm not having this conversation again."

"Leaving her in the dark is making her vulnerable."

"Her vulnerability is what is bringing Benne to her." She started looking over the papers again.

Wait a minute.

One ISP address—the computer itself didn't change, but the location kept changing.

"He could already be here."

"Then we just need to make sure Lynn doesn't get near him." Cathy hung up the phone. Pulling out a map, she started plotting locations of that particular ISP address. If she was reading this right, it really looked like the owner of that computer was getting closer to Kansas.

I'd uploaded four new stories last night, and tonight, as I started scrolling through the site, I was wondering if I should redo the site again. I tried to redo it about once a quarter, and it had been Valentine's Day since my last redo.

I was bored with the current layout. I wanted something bright, springy and fun.

Glancing about my bedroom, my eyes fell on an unopened bottle of shampoo in the closet. The bottle was bright orange. Bright Sunny Delight—orange, with black and white lettering, and dark orange accents—this was what I needed. I snagged the bottle off the floor and set it next to my monitor.

As I stared at the bright bottle, I opened my graphics program to build a new opening graphic for the site's entrance page, and I started working, scrolling through my Buffy and Angel pictures to see what would look good with the bright orange.

Bing.

I had just finished the new opening and started one of the page banners and I grumbled to myself.

Rugby:*Hello, how are you?*

Hush:*Good. Redoing slayerdomain.*

Rugby:*Really? Redecorating or reformatting?*

Hush:*Redecorating.*

Rugby:*If you are busy, I can chat with you another time.*

I moved the layers of the graphic around then replied to Rugby.

Hush:*I can multi-task. I am woman.*

Rugby:*LOL, and men cannot?*

Hush:*Most are not able. When I meet a man good at multi-tasking, I'll marry him.*

Rugby:*Well, I can multi-task.*

Hush:*Uh huh. Clicking the remote and eating popcorn doesn't count.*

Rugby:*Darn. :)*

I smirked at the screen as I finished the graphic layers and dropped the text in, using a bold sans serif font in the corner of the page banner that would appear on every page of the site.

Hush:*Ah, finished...*

Rugby:*Finished with what?*

Hush:*The new slayerdomain graphics. Now just have to code them into the pages, and we'll be golden.*

Rugby:*How long does that part take? I am intrigued, your art is always so pretty.*

I laughed at that.

Hush:*It's not art. Technically, I could probably get sued for manipulating the images like this.*

Rugby:*You will not, though. I doubt that The Powers That Be would bother with something so trivial.*

Hush:*I've never heard of it happening, but if I ticked off the right people, I'm sure I could get sued.*

Rugby:*Did not mean to make your work sound trivial. You have a gift of creativity, and you manipulate the images very well. Just do not see The Powers That Be attacking one fan fiction site on the internet is all.*

I smiled at that. Rugby, I had noticed, was terribly sweet. I hadn't been offended at his initial comment, but here he was, trying to make sure I wasn't mad at him. I wondered if he had some security issues.

People sometimes backtracked their words online, and I guessed they were afraid that what they wrote didn't translate well.

Frankly, if I had a problem, I'd say so.

Hush:*No problem, I knew what you meant.*

Rugby:*Good. ;)*

I continued chatting with Ruby while coding in the HTML for the new graphics. 'Course, it was pretty easy, mostly cutting and pasting, and within about thirty minutes, I had all the graphics taken care of, and started the process of uploading the new look to the site.

I hadn't had it loaded more than two minutes when a new IM binged me.

Willowrocks:*Hey chicky—U redid the site? It rocks!*

Hush:*Just finished. Glad you like it.*

Willowrocks:*Sweet. Sexy picture of Buffy.*

Hush:*Glad to know the male populace will appreciate it.*

Willowrocks:*I do my best 2 serve and protect.*

Hush:*Uh huh.*

I let Rugby know the new layout was up, and he immediately replied.

Rugby:*It looks wonderful, Hush. You have outdone yourself. The colors are very springy and fresh. Nicely done.*

Hush:*Thank you.*

A new noise disturbed my ears, and I realized it wasn't coming from the computer, but from the apartment telephone. I popped off a note to both Rugby and Will that I had a call, and would be right back.

“ello?”

“Hey, it's me,” Bella said. “Just wanted to know if you were coming out this weekend.”

It was Thursday, and she was talking about Saturday? I had no idea, I hadn't even thought that far. I had bills to pay. I was still trying to make up for that shopping spree we'd been on. I had to get the bills paid off that I should have paid instead of getting my hair done.

“Bella, I don't know. Money's tight.”

“Well, if that Jack guy comes again, you won't have to worry about that.”

“But that would also assume that he'll buy my drinks. Just because he did once doesn't mean he'll do it again. Next time he may think I need to buy the drinks.”

“That's a lame excuse.”

I sighed. “Seriously, I just don't have the money right now.”

Bella groaned. “You have got to get out more than you do. Pretty soon that computer's gonna be stuck to your fingers.”

“Oh please. I may not sit around and use the computer all night. I could do laundry, I could watch a movie...”

“Uh huh. You'll watch a *Buffy* marathon if anything.”

“And what's wrong with that?”

“If you don't know, I'm not telling you.”

We said our goodbyes and I hung up the phone, going back to the computer, and telling Rugby and Will I was back.

Rugby:*Everything okay?*

Hush:*Sure. Just my best friend called wanting to know if I was going out this weekend.*

Rugby:*Are you?*

Hush:*No, probably not. Financial strain.*

Rugby:*I understand. You should get a date, a gentleman would buy your drinks.*

Hush:*Well, next time you're here, you can be my date.*

Rugby:*It would be an honor.*

An honor, to buy my drinks! Ha! Hard to imagine anyone thinking anything about me an honor.

Hush:*So when are you coming here?*

Rugby:*I do not know. The company is being bought out, and I am not certain of my job's future right now. But as soon as I can, I would love to come down and see you in person.*

Hush:*That would be cool.*

I wasn't stupid, I wouldn't go out of town for anyone I met on line. If they wanted to meet me, they had to come to me.

Rugby:*It would be groovy.*

Hush:.)

And I thought about it, and it really would be cool to meet him. He was such a brilliant writer, the layers and subplots in his stories were so intense, I loved it. I'd love to know if he was as deep in person as his writing was.

So few people I knew had a depth to them. My mind flickered to Tina Smith, and some might say she had depth, but her depth was only to see how many rungs she could climb at work using her manufactured body.

Not that she was a friend or anything.

I realized as I talked with Rugby about that fan fiction story idea he'd mentioned before, that Will hadn't come back. I clicked on the IM screen list, and realized that his icon marked him as idle, meaning he hadn't touched his computer in fifteen minutes.

Oh well, his loss.

The theme from the old Pink Panther cartoons started playing on my cell phone. I glanced at the clock, it was nearly ten o'clock. Now what?

"ello?"

"Lynn?"

I froze. It was a hot phone-sex voice. Which meant it could only be one person.

"Hi, Jack." Now, if it wasn't Jack, I'd be embarrassed, but then I'd wonder why someone else was using Jack's phone, since I had him programmed and all.

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Voice." Didn't feel like telling him he sounded like a male phone-sex operator, that would be bad.

"Oh. So, hope this isn't a bad time?"

"No."

Just at that moment, Willowrocks decided to come back to the page.

Willowrocks:*Sorry, phone too.*

I cradled the cell phone against my ear—a feat in itself since the darn things are so tiny. "Just, uh, checking mail and all that," I told Jack.

Hush:*Kismit.*

Willowrocks:*Yeah. ;)*

"Oh. Well, I was wondering, are you going out Saturday night?" Jack asked.

I blinked. What, does everyone have Saturday night on the brain tonight?

Willowrocks:*So who called you?*

“Um, Jack, I’m not sure, really.” Talking and trying to a reply to Will at the same time wasn’t nearly as easy as I thought it would be.

Hush:*Friend wanting to know my plans for Saturday.*

“Why not?” Jack asked.

Willowrocks:*Which are?*

Hush:*None. Too broke.*

“Um, don’t feel like it.” I wasn’t about to admit my beautification process made me broke.

Willowrocks:*That sux.*

Hush:*Yep.*

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just don’t want to go out this weekend, that’s all. Just kinda want to hang out at home, you know? Relax, watch a movie, that kind of thing.”

“Oh.”

Willowrocks:*What bout a d8?*

God, there he goes with that damn shorthand again.

“Lynn?”

“Yeah?”

“What are you doing?”

I let out a sigh. “I told you, checking mail and such.” I seriously needed a headset for the phone. ‘Course, the irony would be that if I bought one of those cool super expensive hands-free devices, I’d never need it, or I’d never have it nearby when the phone rang.

“So why did I have to say your name three times just now?”

“You did?” I didn’t hear three times. “I heard you once. Sorry, mind musta wandered. What’d I miss?”

“I said, if it was a financial thing, I could cover you.”

Damn, was the dude psychic? Geeze. Or just smart enough to know that I didn’t want to admit it was a financial thing? “Thanks, but that’s not the issue. Just don’t feel like the noise of the bar.” Yeah, okay, so I lied. I don’t want Jack to play charity to me, though.

I realized I had never replied to Will.

Hush:*Don’t have any potentials for a date. Well, I do, but I don’t, you know? Not gonna use a guy like that. Not one of those gals, you know?*

“So you wanna rent a movie or something?” Jack asked. “I’ll get the movie, if you get the popcorn.”

Willowrocks:*But if he offers?*

Hush:*Doesn’t matter. Should be able to take care of myself.*

I blinked. “Jack, really, uh, it’s uh, just too far ahead for me to think about, okay?”

“Okay, we’ll talk about it tomorrow.” We said our goodbyes. I slapped my phone shut, and blinked.

What the hell was that?

Will’s IM screen blinked. Now what?

Willowrocks:*Is it really taking care of URself if someone offers 2? Isn’t that a gift?*

My head was starting to throb.

Hush:Possible. Now, I gotta go, my head is starting to hurt.

I shut off my computer before letting Will respond, and I crashed on my bed. This multi-tasking thing is for the birds...

Chapter Ten

After finishing off a stack of files, or rather, emptying out my work email box, I leaned back against my chair.

I think Jack must have been having an out of body experience last night, because I hadn't seen him all day, aside from the occasional greeting in the halls. He even left me alone at lunch, a feat in itself.

Was I disappointed that Jack left me alone? Well, maybe a little. He didn't seem to be a complete idiot and I enjoyed his attention.

Made me want to look at Tina Smith and go "Neener neener neener!"

It was nearly four, and I had all my work done for the day. Rugby evidently was serious about doing a fan fiction story with Rennati and Evan, and we'd tossed around a few ideas via email.

Whipping open a Word document, I started letting the juices flow to see what I could come up with for a storyline. Something simple, something believable and very much wrapped in the *Buffy* fandom. I lost myself in the idea of a spiritualist and a non-believer trapped in a world of magic, demons, vampires and slayers, I couldn't help wondering if there wasn't a nugget of something there that might make a salable novel later.

Taking out all aspects of *Buffy* and any reference to such a world, of course.

Whap! A stack of files landed on the corner of my desk, jerking me out of my revel of writing.

"Lynn," a deep voice said.

Damn, he had the worst timing in the world. Jack Edwards must have an interior scanner or something, he always knew exactly when I was working on fan fiction for the website.

I minimized the story and pulled up the office files I should have been working on with a quick flick of my finger and a small jerk of my mouse. God knows I could get fired if my boss saw what I worked on "on company time".

I licked my lips and didn't raise my head, trying to remove any signs of viewing-of-Jack drool. Didn't matter how much I saw him, he still sent a strong urge to drool just a bit.

"Lynn, are you in there?" His arm swam in my vision, breaking me out of internal dialogue.

"I'm here, what do you need?" I looked up, even though his face stained my mind. His clothes remained

inconsequential, although today, he wore a button down navy shirt that brought out the dark flecks in his crystal blue eyes very nicely. His blond bangs were brushed back and set off his chiseled cheekbones. He glanced over his shoulder at my open locker door and picture of Spike and Angel.

A grin slipped across his lips as he looked back at me. "I see you're working hard."

I stood from my chair and stepped around to my locker door and closed it. "What can I do for you?" I tried to keep my composure, but I felt myself falter as Jack stood to his full height and crossed his arms over his broad chest. I put my hand on my desk for support, trying to keep myself looking casual, but truth be known, I was trying to keep upright. My knees had turned to goo, as they always did when he stared at me like that.

Felt like I was a four-course meal on Jack's latest menu. Even after working with him for six weeks, I should have gotten use to that intense stare. Considering he'd never done anything about it...well...that's not true. There was that moment last weekend...

Ahh, fond memories. My eyes flickered to my monitor and my minimized fan fiction story. At least there I could dream about how it could have been.

"These files are not adding up. I can't find the numbers that match these reports." He opened one of the files he'd brought in, and started pointing to different columns of numbers.

Trying not to think about his large hands and that old wives' tale of hands relating to the size of other pieces of anatomy, I read the numbers, trying to act composed, mouthing the numbers to keep my focus on what I was reading and not getting my brain lost in the admiration of Jack zone.

As luck would have it, my brain jumped to work mode and I started seeing the problems he was having.

"Wait, here, these figures aren't applied to the right places." I pointed to a column of numbers. "They should be here, and then these should be over there. It should be reversed from what you have. That should..." I stepped behind my desk and flipped on my ten-key calculator. The paper started to spill out as the machine printed off the numbers I pounded into it. "Yes." I handed him the tape from the calculator. "There it is."

"That was stupid." He raised an overly adorable eyebrow. "You sure you don't want to do this for me?"

"Not on your life, buddy."

He shook his head. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

Yes I can, you seriously awful flirt. "It was a simple mistake, no big deal." Which was about all I had with Jack—flirting. Not since last weekend when Alex rudely interrupted an almost-kiss, had he done anything else.

"Well, I can't thank you enough. I have to have these done today."

"So go finish them." My gaze flickered to my monitor. I was eyeing my minimized story tab instead. I was really getting into the idea for that fan fiction story with Rugby.

He smirked. "Yeah, I'm sure you have a lot to do, too." He winked at me. He grabbed my locker door as he walked out and opened it.

I clicked open my file, but the locker door swung back open again.

“What, Jack?” I asked, seeing him stick his head back in out of the corner of my eye. My fingers paused over the keyboard, hoping I could get back into my story.

“So what time can I come over?”

“Huh?” I shifted to face him. What in the world was he talking about?

“Saturday night, what time do you want me to come over?”

“I, uh, well, I really wasn’t planning on having...”

Jack rested his arm on the top of the locker and stared at me. “That’s not what I asked. I asked what time I was coming over.”

“Jack.”

“And you would say ‘Six would be great, Jack’,” he said with a fake falsetto.

I just stared at him. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I’ll see you at six.” Jack walked out of my cubicle.

My jaw sat on my desk, and I was pretty sure super glue wouldn’t put it back in place.

Saturday is laundry day. The day I take my week’s worth of dirty clothes to my parents’ house, wash everything up, watch movies and generally relax a bit. I start the day early, getting to the grocery store at seven in the morning, just to beat the Saturday rush at Wal-Mart, pick up what I need, and then go home, get my laundry and head down to Mom and Dad’s.

A lot of the time, I wind up mooching dinner off them as well, but not tonight. Jack was coming over.

I did my laundry at the folk’s house in record time, and floored it back to my apartment. I had to get everything clean and put away before Jack showed up. Although I had a laundry room beneath my apartment, that didn’t mean I was paying out every quarter I’d ever had just to use it.

Running rampant through my home, I cleaned, tidied, straightened, dusted, vacuumed and started getting out the food I was gonna make tonight. He’d called earlier to verify my security code, and I told him I’d have dinner ready at six.

I’m not much of a cook, but I could come up with some food. Tonight, we’d be having a chicken enchilada casserole my mother said her bunko group went nuts over. It was really easy, and I had chips and salsa to go with it, and some salad-in-a-bag that I brightened up with some red and yellow bell peppers.

My cell phone rang as I poured the rest of my ingredients in my salad dressing.

“ello?”

“Hey,” came Jack’s voice. “What do you want to drink?”

“Oh, uh, Diet Coke, I guess?”

“No, what do you want to drink? I’m in the liquor store.”

“Oh.” Shit. Now I have to decide on alcohol? Great. “Uh, how about, um,” *Think brain think. What are those things that Rainie drinks all the time? Zima? They’re not bad.* “Zima, or, uh Smirnoff Ice.”

“Kay.”

Jack arrived about fifteen minutes later, giving me enough time to finish everything off and get the casserole out so it could “set” for a few minutes. And it allowed me enough time to make sure I didn’t have anything on my face, like cheese, or some other foreign substance.

He came in toting two bags, one the obvious outline of two six packs of beer, and another sack, with something in the bottom I assumed were movies. Jack glanced around, taking in my decorations.

“You sure this isn’t a ritualistic offering of some sort?” He gestured to the toys and seasons of *Buffy* and *Angel* on the entertainment center.

“Bite me.”

“Make me.” I refused to dignify that with a comment.

“You’ll like this.” He tossed a box to me.

I caught it against my chest, and pulled it open. Inside was a boxed set of Joss Whedon’s television series *Firefly*. I raised my eyebrow at him.

“*Firefly*?”

“Thought you might like a change from *Buffy*.”

I scanned over the box cover. I was a huge Joss fan, really I was, but even though I had heard of *Firefly*, I had never actually seen the show.

Jack raised an eyebrow at me. “You’ve never seen this?”

“Nope.”

“Well, then, it’s about time.” He looked past me into the kitchen, grabbing the paper sack with the beer. Well, Zima wasn’t exactly beer, but it worked. Jack headed in and put the drinks in the fridge.

“This smells really good.”

“Thanks.” I handed him a plate. We dished up our food, Jack marveled at the fact that I dressed up a bag salad, and went back in the living room.

"This table is exquisite." He ran his hand over my coffee table.

"Thanks, it was my grandmother's." Grandma didn't have room for it in her house anymore. She got new furniture. It was amazing how much of my stuff was hand-me-down.

In fact, probably the only new thing I had was my computer and my computer desk. And the desk came out of a box from Wal-Mart.

"It's gotta be, what, fifty years old?" He ran a finger along the top of the table, following the wood grain.

"I imagine something like that."

He stroked the edges and pulled the drawer out a bit. "Pine."

"How can you tell?"

"The knots in the wood."

"Oh."

Jack put in the first DVD from *Firefly*, and started telling me about the fact that it was the pilot, which had never been aired until after the series got canceled.

As the show started, we both watched in relative silence, the only sound either of us making was the clanking on our plates of my mother's 1970's silverware she had given me when I moved out.

It didn't take long for me to wind up engrossed in the story. Less than five minutes, as a matter of fact.

At some point during the pilot, Jack brought me a Zima, and got himself a Heineken, and even took the plates and put them in the sink. I was too engrossed to even move.

At the end, I glanced over at Jack. "Can we watch another one?"

Jack smirked. "I knew you'd like it."

I hopped up to pee and quickly put away the kitchen stuff, while he got the next episode cued up. It only took me a couple of minutes to put away the dinner stuff, tossing the leftover casserole into a Rubbermaid tub and shoving it in the fridge.

Jack came in just as I put it away. "Anything I can do to help?"

I shook my head. "Nope, think I've got it covered." But a thought did occur to me. "So you knew I was a *Buffy* fan. Are you as well?"

"It's okay. I don't have pictures of Sarah Michelle Geller in my living room, but I've seen the show, and I know the premise."

I nodded my head. "And you don't think I'm weird for having *Buffy* posters in my living room?"

Jack smirked. "Lynn, you have an *Angel* poster in your locker and a crocheted tissue box cover on your desk. I've thought you were strange from the moment I met you."

I raised my eyebrow at that. “And you’re here why?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. Strange huh? Well, that sent my hackles on full alert. I clenched my jaw, preparing for that “you’re a great friend, like a sister to me” comment. Not that I wanted a relationship with him.

Right?

So why did I suddenly feel disappointment masked as annoyance?

He reached up and patted my nose. “Because strange is a good thing, Lynn.” He stared at me with that intent look again, and the hairs on my arm start to rise. I bit the corner of my mouth, and Jack’s smirk hardened into a firm line, and he walked back into the living area.

“Come on. There are a lot of episodes to watch yet.”

I walked back in and sat back down on the couch next to him. He clicked the play button, and I noticed there was enough space for a pillow between us, so I sat, hugging the end of the couch.

What the heck was that all about, anyway? And how dare he make fun of my grandmother’s tissue box cover. After all, she made it, therefore it was awesome. It didn’t matter that the neon blue didn’t match anything I owned.

I grabbed a pillow and wadded it up in my lap as I watched, trying not to think about Jack’s comment.

Not that it did any good. I wanted to grab him by that perfect friggin’ hair and throw him out the door. What was I, just another “one of the guys”? The way his face hardened in the kitchen, you’d thought I had a booger hanging out of my nose or something.

Or worse, he didn’t think of me beyond anything but a friend.

I tried not to think about this as I watched the episode about the *Firefly* crew getting a train heist job.

We kept watching episodes, and as the time went by, I started uncurling myself from the end of the couch. In between episodes, we had bathroom breaks, got drink refills, and Jack would cue up the next episode. We made it through the first DVD, then went to the second one.

Pretty soon, I was wrapped up in the shows. I loved all the characters, the interactions and how things happened. I hardly noticed Jack beyond the fact that another person was in the room.

A shocker in itself, considering how handsome he was.

“You’ll like this one.” He cued up the first episode on the next DVD.

“Why?”

Jack smiled at me. “Kaylee makes this episode.” He grinned and started the episode.

As we watched, Jack did the guy-stretch-lay-arm-behind-me move. I almost rolled my eyes at the move, but I did shift on the couch, closing the expanse between us. The pillow wasn’t in my lap anymore, and I stuck it behind my back, trying to get more comfortable.

Wrapped up in what we were watching, I didn't realize that both Jack and I had shifted right next to each other until my knee brushed Jack's leg. My heart slammed in my chest at the contact, and I pulled my leg away from him, sticking my hand between us to keep any accidental brushes from happening again.

Jack shifted on the couch, pulling his arm out from behind me, which made me let out a sigh of relief. Any contact with Jack was going to send me into a major fit of silly girl mode, and I didn't want that.

I kept my hand between us, a physical barrier to keep Jack from touching me.

Or at least, that was my plan.

Jack had different ideas.

He rested his hand by mine, lacing a couple of fingers with me, and the television started to lose its image. I blinked a few times, refocusing on the episode. His hands were manly smooth—just coarse enough to show he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty, but no nasty hang nails or anything like that.

His thumb caressed the top of my hand, and the screen went all blurry on me again. My brain screamed for me to get a grip, after all, I wasn't a teenager, but something about Jack made my insides turn to goo.

Squeezing his fingers, he tugged gently on my hand, making me look over at him. In the light, his eyes darkened to a feral shade of blue, and I shuddered.

"Cold?" Jack asked, his voice just above a whisper.

I shook my head.

Jack only blinked at the comment, and faced the television again. His jaw tightened, and I faced the television myself.

Not two seconds passed, when Jack, using the hand he'd captured as a prisoner, pulled me up against him, and tucked me under his arm.

"Jack."

"Is this a problem?"

A problem? It could be, if I didn't think he was God's gift to the world, but the fact remained that I thought he was, and being pulled up against him was pretty much heaven on earth. The warm smell of him sent my senses on alert, and I knew I'd know his scent forever. No one else could wear this cologne, whatever it was. It must have been specially made.

Eau de Sex.

"Nope." I burrowed further into his arms. I felt so warm and cozy. I could feel his chest rise and fall, and I rested my head against his shoulder. One of his hands reached up and brushed a hair off of my face. This was way cooler than at the Chalet last weekend.

I could stay like this forever, I thought as I purred a contented sigh.

Of course, Fate had another idea.

My cell phone started to ring.

Damn.

I pried myself out of Jack's arms, and I thought I heard him grumble something, which only made me smile.

"This is Lynn," I said, out of habit on the cell.

"Hey," Bella said, and I could hear the noise of wind and music—she must have been in her car. "What're you doing?"

"Watching television."

"Okay, so just shut that off and come out to the Chalet."

"Can't."

"It's real easy, you just push that button labeled 'power', and the box goes dark. Then you can come up to the Chalet."

I smirked. "I really can't. I have company."

"Buffy and Angel don't count as company. If you think they do, I'm taking away your dolls."

"Bella, Jack is here."

"What?"

"Jack is here," I said again, glancing back at Jack, who had paused the DVD. He glanced at me, his eyebrow arched, and I resisted the urge to tackle him.

A car horn blared through the phone. "What was that? This friggin' asshole just cut me off. Say that again?"

"Jack is here!" I yelled into the cell phone.

"What? Jack is?" Bella said, and her phone cut in and out for a second.

"What?"

"I said," Bella started to repeat, "that you both should come!" I held the phone out from my ear because Bella was screaming at me.

Oye, technology.

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I about jumped out of my skin. Jack stood next to me, and motioned for the phone. As I handed it to him, he leaned over and whispered in my ear.

“Allow me.” Into the phone he said “Bella, we’re otherwise occupied tonight, okay?”

I could hear Bella talking, and even Jack had to hold the phone away from his ear. “Oh, well, why didn’t she say—”

“Goodbye, Bella.” Jack flipped the phone shut. He set it back on the kitchen table, his gaze roaming all over me, and I felt heat rising in my cheeks, forcing me to suddenly become very interested in the wood grain on the table.

“She can be, uh, stubborn.” I ran my finger over one of the wood grain lines.

“She cares. That’s better than a lot of people.”

I nodded my head.

Jack put his arm around my shoulders and started guiding me back to the couch. “Come on.” We took a seat, him starting up the DVD again.

I wanted to curl back up into Jack like we’d been before, but I hesitated. Jack relaxed into the couch, right in the center, and I sat once again, hugging my arm rest.

“That won’t do.” Jack slipped an arm around me and pulling me against him. I rested my head against his shoulder, thankful that the moment wasn’t completely lost.

In a flash, we were back into *Firefly*, enjoying the stories again.

I flipped on my computer, Jack having barely gotten out the door, and I wanted to bounce off the computer chair as I waited for the thing to boot up.

Hope somebody’s on! Hope somebody’s on! Hope somebody’s on!

I had to brag about Jack.

Granted, there were no good-bye kisses or anything like that, and unfortunately, that stupid need to sleep started to overtake both of us, and after fits of yawning, we decided to call it a night.

We didn’t finish the DVDs but Jack promised to bring them back over sometime, and we could watch them again.

Whoo hoo!

Flipping on my Messenger program, I saw that Sonya/Sunshine was on. I didn’t wait for her to IM me.

Hush:*AACCKK...*

Sunshine:*Hey you, what’s going on?*

Hush:*Oh my God! I'm so giddy :)*

Sunshine:*Holy Crap, you had a date.*

Hush:*Yep. At home, watching movies!*

Sunshine:*Well, dish, girl, dish!*

I proceeded to tell her about dinner, hanging out and watching *Firefly*. She immediately informed me of her opinion that Nathan Fillion, who played the captain, was the hottest guy ever. I had to concur, but then I started gushing about Jack and the cuddling.

Sunshine:*Did you get any?*

Hush:*Would I be here if I did?*

Sunshine:*Probably not. What about kisses? Did you get kisses?*

I laughed at her.

Hush:*No, no kissing. Unfortunately.*

Sunshine:*Well, that just sucks.*

Hush:*We did have that awkward do-we-shake-hug-kiss-or-walk-away moment.*

Sunshine:*So what did you do?*

Hush:*Just hugged. I think I'm terribly hard up. Just hugging him made me feel all gooey.*

Sunshine:*LOL, I would think that would be a good sign of hard-up.*

Hush:*ROTFLMAO*

Another IM box popped up, and it was from Rugby.

Rugby:*Ahh, it is the illusive Hush. How are you doing tonight, my dear?*

Hush:*Good.*

Rugby:*Anything wonderful going on in Kansas tonight?*

Hush:*Had a date. Guy came over and watched movies.*

Rugby:*And you are online now? Why are you not otherwise occupied?*

Sunshine binged in with questions about Jack, and I started spilling them to her—what he looked like, how we'd met, all that jazz, but I couldn't help stopping and thinking about Rugby's comment.

Why wasn't I in bed with Jack right now?

I mean, tonight counted as a date didn't it? Well, he didn't really ask, and I didn't really invite him, but he did come over.

Hush:*Guess he didn't want to stay busy all night with me.*

Rugby:*Why not? I am sure you are a stunning woman.*

I laughed out loud at that comment. Stunning my ass.

Hush:*Not hardly.*

Rugby:*Pish posh. Women always think they are not nearly as beautiful as they truly are. And if your writing is any clue, you are stunning.*

Hush:*I promise, I'm not exaggerating.*

Rugby:*So prove it. Send me a picture.*

I shook my head.

Hush:*You're very sweet to try and cheer me up, but trust me, if you see a pic, you'll understand.*

Rugby:*I think your logic is flawed. Show me a picture of you, Hush. I am certain you are far more beautiful than you think you are.*

Hush:*Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you.*

I started hunting through my files for a decent picture of myself. As I did, I got IM'ed again.

Damn.

Willowrocks:*Hey chick, what's up?*

Hush:*Looking for a pic of me to send to a friend.*

Willowrocks:*I want a copy!*

Hush:*I don't have any fancy ones. Nothing in bikinis or anything of the like.*

Willowrocks:*Damn. I'd still like 2 C 1. :).*

Hush:*Fine, I'll send you one too.*

I found a picture I liked and put it in an email, sending one to Will and one to Rugby, telling them both they should have mail any second. I talked for a few more minutes to Sunshine, but she had to go, she had church in the morning, so we said our good-byes.

And I found myself biting my miniscule nails, waiting for Will and Rugby to say what they thought of the picture.

Rugby:*You are stunning. Truly you are.*

I blushed at the comment.

Hush:*You flatter me.*

Rugby:*I mean it. You have incredibly inquisitive eyes, I can see the creativity just bursting through you.*

Hush:*Now you're just going over the top, Rugby.*

Rugby:*I am not. You have incredible eyes—ones that a man could be lost in for hours.*

Hush:*Well, thank you, but I just don't see it.*

Willowrocks:*Wow, UR pretty cute. U sure U don't have a bikini pic somewhere?*

I rolled my eyes at Will.

Hush: *Give me a break, Will.*

Willowrocks: *You really R a cutie. I'd d8 you.*

Hush: *Well, thank you. But a lot of good that does me, Will, you're in another state.*

Willowrocks: *R U sure?*

I blinked and the hairs on my arms stood up.

Without saying good-bye to Rugby or Will, I shut off the computer. I leaped up from the desk and headed into the living room, double checking the locks on my door, then checking the balcony door, making sure my piece of wood was still there to hold the door shut and then headed into my room to make sure my bedroom window was still locked.

I ran into my kitchen and grabbed a kitchen knife and set it on my nightstand. I didn't have any big knives, but this one would be enough to inflict a bit of damage on someone if they busted into my apartment.

Running my hands over my arms, I sat on my bed, pulling the covers up over me, and stared at the computer.

There were some things you did, and some things you didn't do.

Willowrocks had scared the shit out of me.

And I didn't like it.

I continued to sit on my bed, glancing from the computer to the window, any sound making me jump a foot in the air, until sleep finally took me.

Benne stared at the screen.

She was gone. Hush was gone.

It wasn't like her to disappear like that without at least saying good-bye. He pulled up the picture of her again, and stared at the face he'd been dreaming of seeing for months.

Her large, innocent hazel eyes, a well-balanced mouth, soft brown hair that screamed to be grabbed and held on to, she fulfilled all his expectations and more.

Benne needed her. He needed her in a way so primal, he couldn't completely comprehend it. Yet he knew deep within his being that she was the one, the one that would break the spell, the one that would save him.

His perfect fantasy girl.

Soon he would be at her side, creating the perfect world for her, the one she dreamed about, the one that was all that she needed.

He would be there soon.

It was time for him to instigate the next step in bringing all of Hush's fantasies to life.

Chapter Eleven

Four days after WillowRocks scared the crap out of me, I got an email from him.

Hush,

Listen, did I do something wrong? Y won't U talk to me?

Will

I considered printing the thing out and filing it somewhere in case I needed some proof later of crazy men on the Internet stalking me.

I did save it in a separate folder in my inbox, just in case. I didn't think I wanted an actual hard copy of it though. Just the thought of it made me shiver. If actually holding it was enough to make it real.

And real was something I did not want to deal with in the online community.

"Lynn," came Jack's voice from over the top of the cubical wall.

I glanced up. His head looked like it floated over the line, and I repressed the urge to laugh at him. "What can I do you for?"

"Well," he said with a grin, "all I have on me is a twenty, if that's okay."

I blinked. "Huh?"

Then I replayed what I said... "What can I do you for..." My cheeks flamed red.

Jack just laughed.

"Bite me."

“Where?” Jack asked, his eyebrow raised as his gaze trailed over me.

I let out a sigh. I seriously didn’t want to think about that right now. I was still considering if I should reply to Will’s email. Four days had past, and I wasn’t as scared as I had been, but I still didn’t know what exactly I should do about the whole thing.

“What’s up, Jack?” I realized he still was looking at me over the top of the cubicle.

He kinda stared at me for a minute, then a grin spread across his face. “I don’t know.”

I blinked. “Huh?”

Jack just flashed that killer smile at me. “I can’t remember what I wanted.”

“So you’re just going to stand there, staring at me over the cubicle wall?”

“I might.”

I rolled my eyes. “Doubt you’re gonna get much of a show.” I returned my face to the computer monitor, trying to decide what to do about Will.

“I don’t know about that.” He disappeared back down behind the wall. I just shook my head. He was such a goofball.

A big, gorgeous goofball, but he was a goofball anyway.

I glanced up just in time to see him walk into my cubicle. “Jack, really, I’m sure I can find something for you to do.”

“I bet you can.”

Gah, men. “Look, I’m, uh, working on something here.”

“What is it?” he asked. “You’ve been distracted for a couple of days. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Just got a weird IM note the other night, and it’s kinda got me freaked out a bit.”

Jack leaned forward. “What was it?”

I shook my head. “Nothing really, just one of my friends online freaked me out. Said something that rubbed me wrong, and I’m trying to figure out what to do about it.”

“What’d he say?”

“I was running off at the mouth, saying something about him being in another state, and he replied with something like ‘are you sure?’. It really threw me for a loop. He’s supposed to live on the east coast somewhere.”

Jack nodded his head. “Is it possible he was just joking around?”

“I just don’t know, Jack. I didn’t give him a chance to reply. I just shut off the computer. I’ve been sleeping with a knife next to my bed for the last few days.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“And what would I say? That I was freaked out by some text on a screen?” I almost laughed at that.

Almost.

I could just imagine how stupid I would have sounded. *Jack, Jack, come over, I’m scared of an IM*. I shook off the thought. I probably would have sounded like Tina Smith.

It didn’t matter that I was still a bit creeped out by the whole thing.

“Lynn, if you were scared, you were scared. The Internet can be pretty safe, most of the time, but weird shit does happen out there. There’s nothing wrong with being afraid.”

I stared at him. *But I’m Hush, Damnit, I’m not some stupid kid who doesn’t know better, I know what I’m doing. I’m thirty years old, for God’s sake. I shouldn’t be scared, I shouldn’t be freaked out by the littlest thing!*

I tried my hand at levity. “Yeah, you’d just love to come over in the middle of the night to comfort me.”

His face remained serious. “I would be there in a heartbeat.”

“I was kidding.”

“I wasn’t.”

The day progressed onward and upward, and no more visits came from Jack Edwards. That made the day even better, because I had to get my latest fan fiction story done, and of course, that took precedence to my work.

Yeah, well, it did in my mind.

Bing. A small square box popped up on my screen, relaying a new incoming IM message.

Willowrocks: *Hey chicky*, came the opening line from Will.

Hush: *Hi*

I said, unsure how I should respond. I hadn’t answered his email from earlier.

Willowrocks:*R U talking 2 me now?*

Hush:*You freaked me out, Will .*

Willowrocks:*Sorry, just messin around. Didn't mean to scare U.*

Hush:*Well, you did.*

He didn't reply for a few minutes, and I pulled up my fan fiction file and started working.

Willowrocks:*I'm sorry.*

Willowrocks:*Really I am.*

Willowrocks:*Forgive me? @->—*

I smirked at the screen and the little rose he drew. Yeah, it was cheesy, yeah it was dumb, but it was somewhat cute. And what else do you have when you're online? It's not like you can send real flowers to someone.

Willowrocks:*I should have known better, I wasn't thinking.*

Hush:*Look, don't do it again. That's not something you should be messing with, yanno?*

Willowrocks::*crossing fingers over heart>:: won't happen again.*

Did I forgive him? I guess I did. I mean, really, I don't doubt his sincerity, after all, I had pretty much figured Will for a total nerd anyway. But I was leaning toward an Urkle nerd than Jeffery Dahmer nerd. I've never seen a picture, but I swear, sometimes he's such a geek it's scary. Mentally, I drew him as being about twenty, five foot seven, one hundred and thirty pounds, glasses and adult acne. And the longer I talked to him, the stronger the image becomes.

Willowrocks:*I'm really sorry about the other day, what with the serial killer running around right now.*

Hush:*Holy shit! You too?*

And I seriously thought the letter from Sunshine was a bunch of crap. Now Will's bringing it up? Too weird.

Willowrocks:*Not kidding. Very legit.*

Hush:*How does he do it?*

I really didn't have a clue as to what it was all about. I avoided the newspapers as much as possible, but seriously, something like this should have been a huge topic online. At least among my friends.

One would think, anyway.

Willowrocks:*From what I've read, he gets women 2 trust him, and meets them in real life. It gets worse from there. I won't give U the details. Don't want you 2 have nightmares.*

Hush:*Thank you. How does he earn their trust?*

Willowrocks:*Not sure, actually.*

Hush:*I can't believe this isn't all over the internet, blasted on all the boards at every fan fiction site out there. How do you know so much about it?*

I wondered if I just hadn't been on the right boards. After all, this was my forum that I was frequenting. I didn't spend a lot of time on other forums. Several topics have been started about laws in different states about Internet stalking and such, but I posted the only topic about Internet stalking, and that was just a "be careful" warning for the minions.

Willowrocks:*If I tell you, will you promise not to get mad?*

Hush:*Huh? How would I get mad? What are you CIA or something?*

Willowrocks:*FBI actually.*

"Right," I muttered to myself.

Hush:*Sure you are. And I'm Angelina Joile.*

A rolling eyes icon appeared.

Hush:*Okay, Mister FBI, then be true with me, what's the guy's MO?*

Willowrocks:*We don't know exactly. We're still working on it.*

Hush:*Uh huh. I have this feeling you're making all of this up.*

I giggled at the screen. Too easy of a response. Still working on it? Whatever. Will had a bigger imagination than I thought possible.

Willowrocks:*I take it you don't believe that I'm really FBI.*

Hush:*Nope, not even a little.*

Willowrocks:*Seriously, though, Hush, this guy is bad news. Be careful out there online.*

Hush:*I'm always careful.*

Willowrocks:*Good.*

Chapter Twelve

Hush's apartment complex was secured with a gate and passcode, though it wasn't as complicated to get into as Benne had originally thought. Nor was her front door.

Standing in the apartment, Benne marveled at all the *Buffy the Vampire* posters and toys.

She truly loved her *Buffy* .

The thought made Benne's heart ache.

This was the devotion he wanted—this was the kind of passion his Goddess needed to have. She needed to be completely devoted.

Soon enough, she would be devoted to him, and not to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* .

Benne opened his backpack and started to work. In almost every light fixture he installed wireless cameras and audio taps.

Already, Benne had been to Hush's, actually known as Lynn Broadmore, place of employment. He'd found her there while impersonating a custodian, and Lynn hadn't batted an eye when he'd come into her cubicle to get her trash.

Oh, he'd been so close. Hush's radiance exuded from her, and it took all his strength to not grab her and pull her close, claiming her as his, right then and there.

He worked quickly in the apartment, and was out as fast as he had come in.

At home, Benne booted up his computer and connected to Hush's apartment. Clicking a few settings, every angle of Hush's apartment appeared on his monitor. The posters and toys had made it surprisingly easy to hide his monitoring equipment, and now that he tested the system, everything seemed fully functional.

Good. Everything was moving along perfectly.

I hate public bathrooms. Even work ones. I always am afraid to sit, for fear of who sat here before me or what was done in the stall the last time it was used. Unrolling the toilet paper, I laid out a nice little seat cover for myself as I got ready to do my business.

I heard laughter as I got situated, and I recognized one voice right away.

Tina Smith.

"...oh I know! I don't get it," Tina said to someone.

"Well, maybe he's gay," the other voice said, and I recognized her voice as one of Tina's cohorts. Their shoes clacked through the bathroom. It was easy to tell Tina's partners in debauchery, they all wore spiked heels.

"It would be such a waste. That boy has an ass on him."

"I know." The cohort giggled, whose name I didn't remember, and frankly didn't care.

"Now," Tina said, as a stall door creaked, which meant she was going into one. "If he'd only quit hanging around that Lynn."

That Lynn? What the hell did that mean? I wanted to jump out of the stall and pummel Miss Fake-Boobs, but I stopped myself. Who knew what interesting tidbits I might learn if I stayed quiet. As silently as I could, I lifted my legs to make sure they couldn't see me.

"I know, there's nothing pretty there."

The toilet paper rattled, and then I heard a flush. "Why he was even bothering with her, I have no idea."

"You say 'was' like his time with her is over."

"It will be, after tonight."

"Why tonight?"

"I'm bringing him to Hero's after work."

Oh no you are not! I thought.

"You asked him?"

"Not yet, I'll catch him later. Make it seem very casual."

"Ahh."

"After he's gotten a load of me, he'll forget all about little Miss Nerd Girl," Tina said as the two of them walked out of the bathroom, chatting and laughing.

"Like hell," I muttered as I set my legs down and got up. After taking care of the necessary hand washing, I stormed back to my cubicle, but instead of going in, I walked into Jack's.

He sat behind his desk, hard at work on something, typing like a madman on the computer.

"Hey." He didn't look up from his computer.

I plopped into the chair in front of him. "Got news for you."

He glanced over at me. "What's that?"

"Tina Smith is going to ask you to go to Hero's tonight."

"And what's Hero's?" He didn't stop working on his computer.

"A bar in Old Town."

"Old Town?"

"Downtown Wichita, all these old buildings, old businesses and stuff. Kind of a neat little area."

"I thought we were already downtown?"

"Old Town is more of a neighborhood of downtown. A more cleaned up place, if you will, but I don't go over there."

"Why not?"

"Crowds of people looking to get laid."

"Ah."

"Don't you care?"

"Not really, no."

"Why?" I would want to know if Tina Smith was planning on attacking me and dragging me to a bar.

"I'll just tell her I have plans."

“I don’t know if that’ll cut it with her. She can be rather ambitious.”

“With you. I have plans with you.”

I grinned at him. “Oh, that’ll be perfect. She was saying I was a nerdy gal, and that you needed to get away from me anyway. That’ll just chap her hide.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “She said what about you?”

“That I was a nerd. ’Course, before that, she thought you might be gay, since you hadn’t looked her way.”

“Huh,” he said. “Well, maybe we can do something about that.” His eyebrow arched, and he gazed at me quizzically.

“Like what?”

Jack just shrugged. “We can think of something.”

Chapter Thirteen

After my conversation with Jack, I went back into my cubicle to work, although I really didn’t get a lot done.

I was too busy trying to plot something in order to chap Miss Smith’s purchased hide. Frankly, though, I had no idea what would work.

Well, aside from making out with Jack in front of her, but that wasn’t going to happen.

I mean, we had even done the movies-at-home thing, and aside from curling up on the couch, nothing happened. If there ever was a blatant time to try and jump my bones, that would have been it, yet Jack had seemed almost indifferent about the experience.

And was I upset about that? I really wanted to say yes, but part of me wasn’t. After all, I really didn’t know that much about Jack, and taking things slowly always was a good idea, because then you didn’t have the is-it-love-or-is-it-sex thing going on in your world.

Myself, I’d rather take things slow.

So why did all the characters in my fan fiction wind up jumping each other’s bones so early in the stories?

I let out a sigh and shoved away from my desk. Rocking my head from side to side, I loosened the tension in it. I resisted the urge to try and crack my neck, not that I ever could, but sometimes, you can just feel when you need to crack your neck.

Better get the chiropractor’s number out of the address book again.

I glanced at the clock on my desktop. 5:27—three minutes to quitting time. I started shutting down my computer, including transferring all the files on my desktop to my flash drive so I could take my fan fiction

home and post it.

“Hey,” came a voice around the corner. Jack stood there, only his head and shoulder visible around the edge of the doorway.

“Hey. Ready to leave?” I asked as I put my flash drive in my purse.

“Yeah.” He stepped into my small corner of Rodriguez Accounting.

“Did you figure out what you wanted to do about...uh...”

Jack smiled. “I have a couple of ideas.”

“I bet you do. You gonna tell me what they are?”

Jack just shook his head. “I think it would be best if you just played along.”

I nodded my head. “Sure.”

We headed out of the cubicle, and toward the elevators. As we walked, I heard the telltale clacks of high heels on the floor, and I prayed for the elevator doors to open.

No such luck though.

Tina Smith caught us.

Damn.

“Jack,” she said in a singsong voice. “There you are.” Tina glided up next to him, with little to no regard for me, already standing at his side.

“Hello.” Jack kept his distance, trying to show as little interest as he could.

“I was just looking for you. A bunch of us are going over to Hero’s for Happy Hour, and I just knew you’d be ready for a drink after those files I sent over to you.”

Excuse me? Since when was Tina sending Jack work?

“A drink does sound good.”

I almost elbowed him in the side, but I stopped myself, I wasn’t going to act like I knew what was coming.

“Great, so you’ll come?” Tina continued to ignore me.

Jack glanced at me. “Doesn’t it?” His eyes gleamed with mischief.

I nodded my head. “Sure does. I could really use something with an umbrella in it.”

Jack smiled. “Good, because I think they have those at Kobe’s don’t they?”

I nodded. "I think so."

Jack faced Tina. "I already have plans," he said. The elevator dinged and the door slid open. Jack ushered me inside. He held the door. "Going down?"

Tina only stood there, staring. I had never really seen anybody shoot steam out of the top of their head, and to be honest, I didn't actually *see* any steam coming out of Tina's head, but I knew if I touched her head, my hand would have burned.

Jack even added icing to the cake, slipping an arm around my waist as the door shut.

It took every single bit of my strength not to burst out laughing as the elevator doors closed. I wrapped my arms around Jack's neck and hugged him tight, the laughter pouring out of me as soon as the elevator shut fully.

"That was wonderful!" My excitement overwhelmed me for a second. "Thank you for that." I placed a kiss on his cheek.

Jack held me tight up against him. "No problem."

I stared at him, realizing I still had my arms around his neck, and I let go, ready to regain my composure. Jack, however, wasn't having any of it.

His blue eyes darkened, and he stared at me with such intensity, I thought I would melt.

"Okay, you can let go now." I tried to pull away from him a bit, but Jack kept his grip around my waist.

"No, I think I like you right here." He pulled me flush against his body. I could feel every inch of him against me, including that rather warm spot on the lower front of his body.

I gulped. "Uh..."

He leaned a bit closer to my mouth. "I have reduced you to muttering. I think I like that."

"Really, Jack, I don't think Tina has spies in the elevator." I pulled away from him, even though every girly part of me screamed to let him continue to hold me.

The joke was good and over on Tina.

Jack let go, although quite a bit reluctantly, running his fingers through his hair. He reached over to the elevator control panel and slapped the emergency stop button.

The elevator groaned, skidding and shuddering to a stop.

Oh my God. I grabbed the rail, and held on for dear life. This elevator was probably older than I was. Hitting the emergency break might be enough to...to...I didn't know what, but I knew it had to involve me and Jack in the bottom of the elevator shaft. And not in a good way.

I felt his closeness as though I'd been slapped by "Essence of Jack". I wanted to grab onto him, holding on for dear life as the elevator shook.

My head screamed at me to start berating him for scaring the living shit out of me, until I looked at his face.

His gaze narrowed on me, and his lips were in a tight line. He seemed a mile away from me, anger exuding from his every pore, and he took one step, pinning me against the wall. I felt myself cowering from him, tightening my grip on the rail in some feeble attempt to rip it from the wall if he tried to hurt me.

He placed a hand on either side of me on the rail, effectively trapping me.

“You just assume that I don’t want to touch you?” He narrowed his glare at me, his gaze boring into me, and had it been vampiric, I would have been hypnotized and baring my throat for a drink.

I stared at him. *Well, duh, I wouldn’t have thought you would, I mean, you haven’t even kissed me...* “Uh...” Once again my mind is much sharper than my tongue.

“You think I don’t see you, hidden under all those T-shirts and jeans?” His breathy, harsh voice hit me, and I shuddered.

“Uh...” My brain locked. *Wait a minute. Was that a compliment?*

He leaned in a bit closer. I could feel his breath on me, and damn, if it didn’t feel amazing. The heat radiating off of him was bound to set the elevator on fire any minute.

“You think I don’t want to feel you, except to thwart Tina Smith?”

I gazed down at my plain white T-shirt and Old Navy low-rise jeans. I could see the tuft of tummy that protruded out from my abdomen, my huge muscular thighs that should have been put on a guy and not wasted on an un-athletic female like myself, and I shrugged. *Why would he?*

“You don’t, do you?” He nodded his head in comprehension. “Because nothing has happened yet, you assume that nothing will.” He released the rail and stepped away.

I took in a sharp breath, realizing that I really hadn’t been breathing the whole time. How I didn’t swoon and fall over, I’ll never know. Still, the lack of Jack next to me felt cold and lonely in a way that I’d never known, and I slumped against the wall, feeling chilled, and I ran my hands up and down my arms to get some of the warmth back, even though my own body heat just didn’t quite cut it.

Running his hands through his hair again still didn’t mess up the blond locks, but the way he fisted the ends, I took in a sharp breath.

This was so not going to be pretty. I knew the pre-warning signs of getting my ass chewed. Not that I could quite understand why he was pissed, except maybe because I called his bluff.

And he was right, after all. I didn’t actually expect anything from him. He was a German-built god of beauty and style, his blond hair so pretty and so touchable, his jaw sculpted just so... In the confined space, I could feel the heat that burned through me more when we were in close vicinity. I could smell his cologne, and the cool masculine scent made me wonder if he’d ever sweat in his life, he smelled so good.

I couldn’t handle the heat I felt, and I had to turn away, because I knew it wasn’t reciprocated. Not that the extra two inches made a big difference.

And after all, this was Jack Edwards, the hottest man I knew, and he could have any woman in the building.

Then he looked at me, his eyes still dark, but something else was hidden behind them, something much more intense than the anger I'd seen in his eyes just a few moments ago.

"I'm going to say this once, and then we're going to move on. I like you a lot, Lynn. You're very smart, you're good at your job and you're very sexy. So whatever man told you you're ugly, I'd like to hunt him down and beat..."

"No man ever told me I was ugly," I said, cutting him off. Which was true. They didn't have to—my dating record was enough to prove that. Considering the last date I went on when the guy was actually interested in me was well over a year ago, and there'd been no prospects since then... Well a girl gets the hint eventually.

Wait a second.

Did he just say I was sexy?

I must have heard him wrong... And if I did, do I really want to know what he really said?

Hell no.

"So why are you convinced that I don't see it?" Jack's voice was a bit softer, but still, it pulled me from my mental reverie.

Reality came crashing down on me. "Have you seen me?" My hands ran over the air around my body, like Vanna White trying to show off her dress or something. 'Course, she is way prettier and better dressed than I am.

"Yeah." His intense stare glared back at me.

"Mousy hair." I flipped out a piece of my hair.

"Glossy soft hair." Jack moved closer.

"Pathetic boobs." I gestured to my chest.

"Perfectly sized chest." He took another step closer.

"Fat pooch on hips." The air suddenly got very thick in the elevator.

"Nice round curves." He was practically on top of me.

I cowered back. "You're not playing fair." I leaned back into the wall as he pinned me against the rail again. He loomed over me, his chest mere millimeters from mine, his left leg brushing my thigh. Powerful flares of flames seared me at the somewhat passive contact.

Oh my God in Heaven, who is this man? What's he doing?

"Perfect little lips that craved to be kissed."

Thank God for being a good creator and actually attaching the eyeballs inside the head, because with that comment, I'm sure mine would have fallen out and rolled around on the floor right then.

"Jack."

He leaned in closer. His lips grazed mine. "Yes?"

"Are you?" No more time for questions. Jack's lips met mine in a tender kiss on the lips, and I swear, I think I growled. And it wasn't even a real kiss, and I growled. *I'm so done for.*

Then the brat had to press harder on my lips.

Oh, man, I'm in so much trouble.

Chapter Fourteen

Pressed against the rail in the elevator, Jack wrapped his arms around me, and I grabbed his waist, holding on for dear life. This time, though, it wasn't because I was afraid that the elevator would drop.

It should be illegal for someone to kiss like this... Grroowwwllll...

His hands roamed up my back, sending seven-alarm fires throughout my body. What his lips did, not even the entire state of Kansas's fire departments could extinguish.

The smallest part of me waited for him to pull away, say something like, "oh, your lips are too dry-chapped-rough-smooth..." Anything to make an excuse for ending this wonderful tasting.

We all have it, we all know that little demon called self-doubt, we feel it when we let any man touch our bodies. Anywhere, the first thought is, "oh, does he feel that fat roll and is he grossed out? Does he think I'm too skinny-fat-sweaty—even if just out of the shower—dry-rough-acne-prone-smooth," anything that would register the over critical nature of being women.

I am no exception.

So as his hands slid up my back, I was acutely aware of every curve, every layer of skin that's on my back. And I prayed that he wasn't disgusted.

So I held back, resisting the urge to dive into the kiss, to lose myself in the feelings of it, the sensation of his incredible mouth caressing mine. I fought my desire to open my mouth, to really get into this. The inevitable disappointment was too much to bear.

Then my mouth opened too.

My self-control just sucks.

There was no creeping in of his tongue, or anything tentative about this kiss. This was hot, wet, and he was sucking the life-force out of me. If I was still corporeal when he was finished, I'd be surprised.

His tongue met mine, and I didn't know I could move my tongue like that. The way they danced around, I was starting to think my tongue was possessed, a thought way back in the recesses of my mind. In the

forefront was the taste of Jack, soft, salty, manly—the smell of him, musky, warm and dominating. Intense pleasure poured through every brain cell as we kissed.

Brring! Brring! Brring!

Jack ripped his mouth away from mine, mumbled an obscenity and opened the panel where the emergency phone was.

“Yes?”

I didn’t hear what was being said, but from Jack’s body language, I could tell we were busted. I was too busy cursing whoever had bothered us to care if we’d been caught.

“I understand. Everything’s fine. Yes, I’ll do it.” Jack hit the emergency button, and the elevator slowly restarted its drop.

I smoothed out my T-shirt. At some point, he’d managed to pull the back out a bit. It didn’t seem like he’d gotten it all the way out of my pants, but it wasn’t from lack of trying. So by doing a bit of re-tucking, I got myself presentable as the elevator slowed to its scheduled stop.

As the doors opened, five people were standing there, tapping their feet and grumbling as the two of us stepped off. Jack didn’t say a word as we worked our way through the crowd and out into the lobby.

Not even an utterance until we reached the parking lot. Myself, I was still a bit dazed from the kiss, although I did my best to hide it from him. Part of me wanted to smack him for taking indecent liberties with me on the elevator.

Then, of course, there’s the practical side of me who just laughed, because God knows you can’t rape the willing. And oh how willing I had been. My pants would have dropped for him in an instant if we’d had more time.

They’d drop for him right now if he would show any interest.

Jack Edwards was the image of cool, calm and collected.

Butthead.

He didn’t even look a bit rattled from the make-out session in the elevator. My reflection in the lobby windows had shown flushed cheeks and swollen lips.

Had he been kissing me that hard? I thought that only happened in romance novels. I couldn’t help myself, and I ran my tongue over slightly swollen lips. It was so cool. I had Angelina Jolie lips. ’Course, they wouldn’t last, but for the moment, they rocked.

“Still think I am kidding around?” he finally said as we exited the building into the bright afternoon sunlight.

“Well, if not, you need an Oscar. I think I may have to get a shower when I get home.”

“A cold one sounds good.”

This conversation is not helping me.

If he needed a cold shower, and I needed a shower...we could always kill two birds with one stone. A big cheesy grin formed on my face, and I couldn't repress it.

Jack glanced at me, and he grinned some kind of male grin that had to be the outward sign of a swelling ego, and I had to blush a bit.

"Thinking about showers?"

I like the idea of you half-naked, my brain screamed. "Well," I muttered, the cheesy grin sticking on my face.

"I'm thinking about showers." His voice was thick and heavy.

I bit my lip. My rational brain screamed for me to stop this crazy onslaught of thought, but I couldn't dare.

Wet Jack.

Wet Jack in my shower.

Wet Jack in my shower with me.

"Lynn," he asked as we reached my car.

"Uh, yeah?" I reached up and touched my mouth to make sure there wasn't any drool on it.

"I'll meet you at your house."

I blinked. "What?" I mean, I knew we had played that off, and seriously, we'd played that really well for Tina, but what's he coming to my house for?

"Dinner? At Kobe's?"

I blinked and looked around the parking lot, half-expecting to see Tina walking up, but I didn't see her anywhere. "Uh, charade is over."

"I never said I wasn't taking you out to dinner," Jack said.

"Well, uh, okay, then." I blinked at him. I couldn't quite register that he was going to take me out. "But we don't have to do Kobe's. We can go anywhere, really." Though part of me did want to argue about this, it was overruled by the Bella-like voice in my head that was screaming *Let him take you out!*

"You don't like Kobe's?" He stepped a bit closer to me in the parking lot. He almost had me pinned against my car, and that dark look was in his eyes again.

I shrugged. "It's okay." I didn't want to tell him that it was far too expensive for him to take me out to dinner. I mean, average dinner for two there was damn near a hundred dollars, with alcohol. That was a bit more than what I wanted to spend out for dinner.

But he's paying! screamed that voice again. I wanted to strangle that voice.

Jack reached over and pushed a random hair out of my face. "And where would you rather go?" His hand slid down the side of my face and rested on my shoulder.

I seemed to be developing an indifference twitch, because I shrugged again. "Chili's is good." I tried to think of someplace that wasn't so expensive. 'Course, Jack's hand on my shoulder wasn't helping things. The skin he'd touched before, just brushing that hair out of my face, felt singed.

I seriously needed a drink. And a relaxed place to go.

"Chili's?" Jack's thumb stroked that spot where my neck met my shoulder, and I felt a surge of heat run through my body.

What was the question?

Oh, right. Chili's.

Chili's was sounding more and more appealing. Their onion blossom thingies are to die for, in fact, one of those and a frozen margarita sounded divine.

"Can we get the onion blossom thingy and a margarita?" I asked, astonished at how juvenile I sounded saying that aloud.

Jack grinned, his hand gently stroking my neck. "As you wish."

I'm a geek. I like the Kansas sky. Tonight's sky showed a strong storm front coming in, something that brought a smile to my face. There's nothing like a thunderstorm in the spring. 'Course, there's always the addition of tornados that add a bit of extra excitement to the mix. I'm not a big fan of tornados, but I don't totally freak out. I had always had a house with a basement, and now, the storm shelter is the laundry room that's just below my apartment, so if I feel really worried, I just run down there with my cell phone and my tornado bag.

Unlike most people, though, my tornado bag doesn't contain insurance papers, emergency contacts or the number for FEMA. Mine contains a backup of my computer, including all the files from my website, my Buffy fan fiction and all the stories that have been sent to me to post for the site.

Not exactly the most important things, but it is what I need. The only crappy thing about it is that I have to back up my flash drive every time I think a storm is coming. It's not terribly hard, but just turning on the computer in lightning always gave me the willies.

I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. Depending on what time he wanted to eat, I might have time to back up my computer before we go, just in case. Looking in the rear-view mirror, Jack's SUV stayed right with me.

God, Jack kissed me.

And it wasn't a sweet kiss, either. My lips still buzzed at the sensation of his lips on mine. It made me all giddy just thinking about it.

Shoot, the thought of his caress on my shoulder made me giddy.

I wanted to pinch myself to remind myself that I wasn't dreaming.

Whipping into my parking lot, I saw that Jack took a spot just a couple down from me, and he got out carrying his dry cleaning. I gathered my purse, and as I got out, I saw that he waited next to the front end of my car. God, he looked like he was my husband or something. Or moving in...

Stop it.

When we came inside, Jack scanned around, like he expected the boogiemer to jump out.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," he said, his posture relaxing just a bit. "So do you want to take a shower?"

My insides started to boil. Was it hot in here? Maybe my air conditioner needed to be worked on.

No, Jack did not just ask me if I wanted to take a shower with him. Really he didn't.

"Uh..."

A broad grin spread across his face, and his eyes went dangerously dark. "Alone, Lynn. Do you need to take a shower?"

My face flamed red, and I covered my mouth that had started salivating of its own accord.

Get a grip, I screamed at my horridly horny head. No... I will not get lost in insane mental anguish over the prospect of any man. I won't do it.

At least that was my determination until I looked at Jack Edwards.

Damn sexy man.

Okay. Now whether or not I needed a real shower was the question. A two-minute cold shower would probably knock this outrageous horniness out of me, but do I really need to take the time to groom and stuff?

I did a quick physical analysis. Is the hair clean? Check. Did I feel stinky? Not really, unless you count my damp—need to change those. Okay, legs? When did I last shave? I rubbed my calf against my leg through my jeans. Oh yeah, definitely need to shave.

"Better take a quick one." I knew that my legs were probably a deciduous forest by now. What had it been, three days? I hate shaving, simply because it takes forever since I have to shave from my belly button down pretty much.

I am the missing link to the Sasquatch.

I darted into my room and grabbed my robe, a flowery grandmother gift from a few years ago that I never wear unless there's a need.

Of course, this qualified as need. I didn't want to completely scare off Jack Edwards yet. He may claim my shape is quite appealing, but the dude hasn't seen me naked. He'd be running for the hills at the first glimpse. Especially if I do my usual damage while attempting to shave down the forest.

I can't help it, not only am I a walking Sasquatch link, but when I try to shave any of it down, I wind up nicking the crud out of at least my knees. White skin and red blood do not make a pretty combo, let me tell you—no matter what the vampire books say.

"Do you mind if I use your room to change?" Jack asked as I headed into the bathroom.

"Make yourself at home, I shouldn't be too long."

"Thanks."

In the bathroom, I noticed for the first time that the bathroom door didn't have a lock on it. Not that I felt like Jack was the voyeuristic type, but the thought of him running into the bathroom to "check on" me sent interesting quivers through me.

Maybe I should make this a cold shower.

I hopped into the shower, lathering up then getting to work on the deciduous forest. One leg down, no signs of blood—hey we're having a good day. Two legs down—damnit—blood. Got too cocky with the razor. I don't care what any manufacturer says, it's a razor blade. I will cut myself with it.

Thump. I shut off the water and climbed out doing the after-shower shiver as the cold air hit my legs. Granted the bathroom is probably twenty degrees warmer than the rest of the apartment, but once the air hit my legs, I might as well have not bothered with shaving, the goose bumps making new hairs sprout out of what had just been shaved.

I slathered on lotion and assessed the razor damage. Not too bad. Nothing gushing today. My left knee looked like it had it out with an acupuncturist and lost.

I slipped into a clean thong and dried my hair, bundling it up in a towel. I know what you're thinking—*ewww butt floss underwear!* But let's evaluate this logically. There are times when the wrong thong will rub just right and about kill your stuff, but I've found that only happens with string ones. Cotton ones don't do that nearly as much.

Then you have the whole boil thing.

Being part Sasquatch, I am covered with hair, which also means that I am covered in hair follicles. These follicles, when rubbed against bikini panties have a tendency to accumulate more dirt and oil. As such, I get whopping huge cysts, boils, blackheads and milia all over my butt and hips. Let me say, those suckers hurt like there's no tomorrow. I could not figure out what caused those ugly nasty things until I tried wearing thong underwear.

Problem solved.

So I guess you could say I wear them for medical reasons. I don't think I look overly sexy in them, what with my thirty-year-old cottage cheese butt and all, but I certainly didn't get the super-chaffing problem anymore.

And, as an added bonus, no panty lines across my butt. Not that I wear anything tight enough to show off panty lines, but hey, gotta enjoy the added benefit.

“Lynn?”

Oh crap! Male in the house. Really hot sexy male in the house.

My stupid random brain. How could I forget there was an amazingly hot, modellesque man in my living room? Mental groan.

“Yeah?” Keep it cool.

“Are you decent?” I heard his hand on the doorknob and I tightened my robe. ‘Course, if I tightened it too much more I wouldn’t be able to breath.

My hand clasped the open neck and I looked around. The bathroom had a linen closet, or so the ad had claimed, but it’s really just a stack of shelves in the corner without a door. Not that it ever bothered me before. However, all my tampons, pads, douches, emergency pregnancy tests (slightly dusty), emergency condoms (never opened) and other girly paraphernalia seemed to glow with neon lights. Even my *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* sheet set looked extra bright blue today. Thank God those weren’t on the bed when Jack came over the other day.

Why didn’t I ever hang a curtain over that opening?

Dumb, dumb, dumb.

The door crept open.

“Oh my God, it’s a sauna in here!”

“I prefer calling it my tropical rain forest.” The steam started billowing out into the hallway and the cold air from the rest of the apartment bombarded me, and I felt the deciduous forest growing again.

Nuts.

Jack smiled, his posture a bit more relaxed than it had been before. His white, crisply starched shirt framed his broad shoulders well, and I wondered if the steam from the shower would wrinkle it up. In the light, I could tell he had no T-shirt on under his pressed dress shirt.

Coolness. Easier to fantasize about ripping it off and rubbing on the planes of his chest.

Stop it!

“Do you mind if I use the bathroom?”

I blinked. *You mean you’re not standing in my bathroom to caress me?* “No problem.” I glanced down at my clothes strewn all over the floor. “Give me one second.”

“Sure,” he said, pulling the door shut.

I picked up my clothes and flushed the toilet. I have this whole thing about flushing the toilet before I get in the bath or shower. Some stupid wives' tale my grandmother told me about it going into the bath when I was five, and ever since I can't bring myself to flush before I get in. I hung a towel kind of willy-nilly over the shelf with all the girly paraphernalia, stuffing it under another one on the shelf above it.

Satisfied that I'd managed to cover the more embarrassing things, I scooped up my clothes and headed out.

"All yours." I carried my wad of clothes into my room and tossed them in the hamper. I grabbed a bra out of the dresser and put it on. My walk-in closet looked like a bottomless tomb of clothes.

Oh shit, what am I going to wear?

Chapter Fifteen

As fast as I could muster, I called Bella for a wardrobe consultation, she must always be consulted when dealing with my wardrobe. I'm horribly clothing inept.

I threw my robe off and started dressing. Just as I got my sweater on, the phone rang.

I took a half a second to see that it was Bella calling back. "What?"

"No white bras under that pullover."

"I don't." I pulled open the neck of my sweater. Oh crap, I did have my white bra on. "Shit."

"I knew it. You are unbelievably clothing impaired." She hung up the phone, and I did the same, stripping off the sweater and starting over.

The towel that my hair had been wrapped in lay in a pile on the floor. Scooping it up, I started squeezing my hair again to get the most moisture out possible. My hair hung limp like the locks of a corpse just removed from its watery grave.

"Jack?" I emerged from my room, towel in hand.

He sat on the couch, flipping through my cable television channels. "Yeah?"

"I'm gonna go make my hair behave, shouldn't take too long," I told him. Like that'll happen, but hey, we all have to dream.

Jack found ESPN. "Take your time." My television was probably going into shock from displaying sports for more than a split second.

"Well, feel free to make yourself comfortable."

"I think I already have. Do you know you're out of soda?"

"Don't drink it." The amount of sugar in any pop made me a wee bit crazy, and I didn't need any help, thank you very much.

"Oh, okay. I thought everyone drank soda."

“And it’s pop, not soda.”

“Huh?”

“This is Kansas, bub, if you want to fit in, you’d better use the right words. It’s pop, not soda. Bag means *plastic* bag, and sack means *paper* sack. And we don’t say soda.”

He looked back at me with that you’ve-gotta-be-kidding-me look. I registered it, but chose to ignore it, because, frankly I get that look a lot.

“I’ll keep that in mind. They do use contractions here in Kansas, right?”

“Of course. You’d sound like some stuck up snob if all your English was proper.”

“Will do.”

I stepped inside the bathroom and left the door open. Privately I hoped the invite might encourage Jack to come talk to me and away from the television. Always thought that was a sweet sentiment when a man visited with a woman while she got ready. Not that any man I’ve ever dated dared visit, but hey, what can you do?

’Course it always seemed so cute on TV.

I moussed, root-boosted and blasted my hair with the blow dryer in hopes to get some body. I even bent over and dried with the hair upside down like Sydney, my stylist, told me. ’Course, while doing this, I prayed that if Jack decided to visit me in the bathroom that he wouldn’t choose this particular moment with my butt up in the air to be all sweet and cute.

As I popped up, my hair stood out to the ceiling. I shook my head and the mop started to fall, so I grabbed my pick and started the loose backcombing to keep lift without looking totally fake. Of course, in my hair’s typical fashion, as soon as I touched it, the thoughtless hair crashed against my head, looking only a miniscule bit like it had any body in it.

“Stupid friggin’ hair.” I continued my work of spraying, brushing, curling and everything else I could think of to make it flip out and resemble something of order.

Now it looked like an organized mess. Not much better than when I started. I misted some spray shine in the air and wiggled my head to catch it, so the stuff didn’t coat my hair too much.

“Having a breakdancing moment?” Jack asked from the doorway.

I proceeded to jump almost high enough to hit the eight-foot ceiling. “Oh God! Don’t do that. You scared the crap out of me.”

“Sorry.”

Did he say something about breakdancing? “What did you say?”

“That whole head wiggle thing, it looked like a breakdancing moment.”

"I'm too young to remember breakdancing," I lied. Of course I remembered. I used to moon walk very well when I was a kid. *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* was one of my favorite movies in my youth. Not that I can stand to watch it now, but hey, I was a kid.

Kinda like those old seventies episodes of *Wonder Woman* with Lynda Carter. They were awesome when I was five, but to watch them now...

Jack started to cough, and in between coughs "bullshit" came out.

"You know, not agreeing with a girl about her age is truly no way to get laid." *Oh my God, did I just say that?*

Mental head slap.

"And there was a prospect before?"

"Before the age thing, well, yeah, um, maybe..." Hell, there's a prospect right here, right now, on my bathroom sink if he's into that. And where did my resolve go that I wasn't going to get involved with him just an hour ago in the parking lot?

"Well, I may have to make you forget about that comment." He leaned in the door a bit more, and I took a step backwards.

No way was he cornering me again like he did in the elevator.

Not that it wasn't great, but I feared for myself, because if my loins got hold of my mind, Jack Edwards would be on the floor while I...

My logical brain tried to start a spin-doctor program to backtrack away from what I'd started, because I could see the fire building in his eyes, and damn, if I didn't want to respond to it.

"Jack, I don't know." I ignored my throbbing innards as he watched me. My brain kept its program running, but already it was calling in for backup. Which was never good, because that's when my mouth took over.

So I wondered if Jack would believe me if I tried to explain that I had no control over what came out of my mouth next.

"I mean, we work together. Next to each other, even. I mean, you know, you're the sexiest man I've ever seen, and I keep wanting to pinch myself because you're here in my apartment, and remind myself that this isn't some out-of-control fantasy."

"You have fantasies about me?"

At least he had the decency to look slightly embarrassed and flattered. I pulled his arm over to the mirror so he faced it. His crystal blue eyes stared back at me through the mirror like he feared what I may do next.

'Course, I had no idea what I was doing. The spin-doctor program was now running full steam ahead, with a destination unknown. At least a destination that I had no control over. Now, whatever my subconscious, or Hush, who hadn't been let out to play on the Internet today, had in mind, I have no

clue.

I just hoped that it wouldn't get me arrested before the night was out.

"Look at yourself." I paused to gaze at him. Warm eyes, a bemused smile on his face, and that look like he either thought I was the only person in the world, or that he was only humoring me because he was afraid I really had escaped from the mental hospital, I didn't know. Still, it was a nice look.

He put his hand on the small of my back.

For a moment, I could see us growing old together, sharing a bathroom. A little Jack running around, getting ready for a baseball game, a little Lynn with piggy tails and Jack's blue eyes.

"I see myself every day. I haven't changed since the last time I looked."

"But do you *see* yourself? Your amazing cerulean eyes that rock a woman's soul? The hair that falls just right on your face in perfect little waves? That cleft in your chin that screams to be nibbled on?" I reached up and touched his chin, my fingers grazing the start of a five o'clock shadow. "Lips that frown just enough, like they're doing now because you're humoring me, and in your head you just want me to shut up."

Jack smirked.

I went on. "Broad shoulders that just make a woman giddy with the thought of curling up into them."

"You think that just by looking at me?" His cheeks flushed a bit of pink that made me swoon.

Still looking at ourselves in the mirror, he pulled me directly in front of him and wrapped both arms around me.

"So what do you fantasize?"

It was my turn to flush red.

I opened my mouth to speak, but stopped myself. Wait a minute. He needs to reciprocate a bit before I confess any more of my inner-most thoughts to him. Share and share alike and all that jazz. I'd just rambled on about his handsomeness, it was time for him to praise me...

How I had the brainpower to realize this I'll never know, but I found the courage to voice my opinion.

"Not until you return the favor a bit, buddy."

"So I need to share what I see?"

"Sure. Just don't mention the fat storage..." I tried to cover my stomach, but he pretty much had his arms around my waist, and control of the fat. If his fingers dug into the fat rolls...

"I see no storage on you." He placed a chaste kiss on my temple that was both sweet and incredibly sexy all at once. "What I see is a funny, sharp, very smart woman, who doesn't begin to see what kind of beauty she really has within herself. She wears jeans and T-shirts to work to hide the amazing curves that cover her body, and I keep expecting to see a wedding ring on her long, thin, piano-playing fingers any

day now because she's so beautiful. Your doubt of your sex appeal confounds me because you *are* so gorgeous."

Oh my God, save me from my ears. I think I may be in love. God, this is so what I didn't need to hear. I may wind up in bed with him before the night is over.

Again, my cheeks turned the color of a tomato. What is it with the whole blushing thing? You'd think I never talked sexily to a man before.

Wait a minute, I haven't. Sure, I've done my fair share of phone sex with out-of-town boyfriends, or whatever, but not in person. Even on the Internet the one time I tried cybersex, it seemed stupid.

Which is why I write smut stories. Everything's perfect in smut stories. And right now, this is a bit too perfect...which is only the setup for disaster.

I started to say something but self-doubt started twisting its ugly head my way. What if he thinks I'm dumb? What if he thinks I'm crazy? In the mirror I could see him waiting for me to speak.

So I did. "What about you? Do you...um, you know?" Again, do I really want to hear the answer to this question? I mean, what's he going to say? Yeah, Lynn I've had fantasies about you. I've jerked the salami to the thought of doing you. Blech. Gross.

"I have before."

My jaw dropped, and I had to stare for a moment. Not exactly the answer I expected. However, I liked that answer much better than what I thought he'd say. Heat swelled in me, even hotter than the elevator. I shifted backwards into him, and I could feel heat coming off his hips, and the sensation made me almost groggy.

"What do you think about?" I think I said that out loud. I hope so, I sure was thinking it, but if the words came out, I didn't know.

His eyes met mine in the mirror. "Well, I considered joining you in the shower."

I almost choked. Jesus in Heaven. Deliver me from the insanity of this moment. Suddenly my shower no longer seemed as safe as it had been just a bit ago.

"Your turn." Jack's voice heated my ear, and I felt myself swooning.

"Um," my mind rambled around. Something, anything that could compete with that. Come on. I write smut stories for God's sake. And Lord knows Jack has swum in my mental vision when writing some of that stuff.

One came to me. A nasty little thought that had inspired a short, naughty story the other day. "Last week, in the staff meeting, I wanted to take you on the conference table."

His eyebrow went up, as did the heat level of his body. My knees turned to Jell-O. Had he not held me in a firm grip, I would have been on the floor. He pulled me even tighter against him, and I could feel his excitement against my butt.

"This is a very dangerous game we play," Jack was mere millimeters from my earlobe, warming my

already fired-up body with his breath. His lip grazed my ear. Not much, but just enough to send my heart into overdrive.

Nonetheless, I tried to maintain some level of dignity.

As if that was possible.

“Are you ready to quit?” I gazed as defiantly as possible at him in the mirror.

“No, are you?”

“I am the smut goddess, you can’t best me in this game.” I was too. I had a little plaque on my website (okay, it’s a picture that looks like a plaque, but I can’t do better than that online) that a frequent visitor made me. She loves my sex stories.

Of course, at this very moment, my smutty mind wasn’t functioning right since the object of many lurid fantasies had me plastered to his chest, staring at me.

“We’ll see, smut goddess.” He grinned wickedly and nodded his head. “A few weeks ago when you were helping me install that new printer and you had to crawl under my desk, I imagined you staying under there and taking me in your mouth.”

I blinked. Whoa, now that’s so not right. I had the same thoughts that day. Mine involved a few more details, but hey, same basic strategy.

Which is really freaking me out a bit. Is this some evil trick of Aphrodite’s to give us the same fantasies?

“Lynn, it’s your turn,” Jack said, staring at me with those cerulean crystal eyes.

I couldn’t help it. My eyes flickered to the clock on the countertop. 6:25 p.m. If we were going to get a decent table at Chili’s, we needed to leave very soon.

“We have to leave for Chili’s soon.”

“Plenty of time.” His lips grazed that sensitive spot just below my ear.

“You are so not playing fair.” He pressed little kisses around the back of my neck, swinging my hair out of his way as he tortured me.

“I’m not hearing your turn, smut goddess,” he muttered between kisses.

I couldn’t help it. My brain had pretty much turned to goo, burned by the heat that came from my nether regions which I was certain would cause a fire if they came into contact with anything wooden.

Of course, something that felt like wood stabbed me in the back, and no fire had started yet.

“Come on, Hush, give me your best shot.” He nuzzled my neck, sending shivers through my body.

Wait a minute.

Hush? Hush? How’d he know that? What the hell? No one knows about that. Everything once warm

and fuzzy had now turned to ice, frigid and cold, ready to pound Jack into the ground, even though he was probably twice the size of me. Mentally, I was the toughest Navy Seal or Marine on the block.

I jerked away from him, spun to face him with my hands on my hips.

“How the hell did you know that?”

“What?” He asked, looking like a kid who’d lost his favorite new toy.

“How did you know about Hush.” It was a demand, not a question, and I certainly wanted to know the answer. Inside, I shook like I’d been robbed. No one knew about that other life, no one knew about my private computer time, and it was my world. Not anyone else’s. I didn’t tell anyone about my pseudo cyber-life. “Have you been going through my computer?”

“No!”

“Mister, you’d better explain yourself.” At that moment, I realized I was yelling at him in the bathroom. The one place where the air vents were practically connected to the other apartments. But still, I didn’t feel like moving somewhere else for privacy. I was too pissed off to care what my neighbors thought.

“You had the site up on your computer.” Jack put his hands on his hips, his blue eyes flipping to ice.

“I did no such thing.” I wasn’t careless at work. I never left the window to the site open while I was at work, for this very reason.

And even if I did, there’s no way he could have known that name. I don’t tell anyone in real life my cyber name. Bella doesn’t even know that much except that I hang around a few message boards online. She knows I’m a *Buffy* freak, but she doesn’t know the extent of my freakiness.

“You have pictures of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in your locker.”

“Big deal. Lots of people hang personal stuff in their lockers.”

“Not huge posters of television shows.”

He had me there. But did I care? No way.

“Big deal, I love the show, sue me! There’s friggin’ all the *Buffy* DVDs out there in the living room, as well as the *Angel* DVDs. So what? That doesn’t explain why you know that.”

“I started reading, okay? It wasn’t hard to figure out which one was you.”

“No way.” *But could I have been careless? Just once?* Checking the tag board and message boards, and leaving the Internet screens up? Something, and Jack had wandered in, seeing it? A chill ran through me at the thought of such foolishness.

Wait, when did he see this? “Fine, then, what color was the site banner?” This will prove exactly when he saw it.

“Orange.”

I gritted my teeth. Orange was the new layout I'd just done.

Well, maybe this was a good thing, right? Maybe him figuring it out just in the last few days isn't a horrible crime against nature. He couldn't possibly have read everything at the site could he?

Of course his knowledge of my other life sent a strange chill through me that he could possibly know what I wrote about...

Jack stared at me, kind of shaking his head in that you-can't-be-serious-I-ain't-lying look.

I really felt like I'd been robbed or raped. Jack knew about slayerdomain.com. God, what now? How long would it be before I was an office joke? How long was it going to be before I wound up being known as the freak who wrote smut stories on the Internet?

The real reason he must have wanted to go out with me hit me in a flash.

My eyes narrowed. "So you're here just to see if you can seduce me, and see if I can do it as good as I write it?" And I knew that it had to be the reason that Jack was taking me out. He just wanted to see if I was as good as my stories. Everything made perfect sense. There's no other reason why a man who looked like Jack could possibly want anything to do with a mousy office wallflower like me.

"Like your stories?" Jack paced around the small bathroom and swung out at the shower curtain. He took a step and was millimeters in front of my face. "How come you find it so hard to believe that I might be interested in *you*? Your stories are fun to read and interesting, but you are who I'm here with. Why can't you believe that?"

"Because I'm thirty years old, single and never had a decent boyfriend!" Tears boiled up in my eyes, and I broke down.

"Oh, God, Lynn," he said, a warm hand caressing the tears away.

"Get away." I jerked his hand away. "Don't give me your pity. I'm still pissed at you," I said, walking out of the bathroom.

Jack started cursing again in that muffled, almost unintelligible way he'd done before.

Anger seethed through me, as well as vulnerability. He knew. Knew who I was. Knew about the cyber world that I immersed myself in nightly, and he... God, will this nightmare never end?

I walked into the living room and dropped onto the couch, trying to wipe the tears away. I felt like a complete bonehead. To make all this even more repulsively stupid, I just rattled off my dating history in a sentence to Jack Edwards. Which was sadder, the fact that I rattled it off in a sentence, or the fact that it could be summed up into a sentence?

A debate for another time.

"Would you have wanted me to say something at work?" Jack sat next to me on the couch. Fortunately, he put about half a person between us, and I stuck a pillow in the hole, just to make sure he didn't get any more ideas.

"Hell no." I wiped away another tear.

“Why are you so embarrassed about this? You write sexy stories online. It’s not like it’s illegal or anything...”

“Uh, well, technically, it is...”

“Only if you make money at it.”

“True.” And God knows I’m not making anything for it.

“I was impressed by the amount of work put into the site, as a matter of fact.” He stretched out a bit on the couch. “Have you ever considered web designing? Your site is easy to manage, upfront and clean looking. You probably could make some money at it.”

“Oh, I can see that,” the sarcasm dripped from my voice. “I’ll build you a web page, here look at the smut site I take care of.”

“Seriously, Lynn, it’s a good site. You could do it for a living.”

I bit my lip. Oh my God. Another flash of reality hit me. This incredibly hot guy has known one of my deepest secrets and he’s not completely repulsed by the sight of me. And he’s actually encouraging me to build web pages for people.

How screwed up is that?

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s not that hard if you know the coding.” I projected a somewhat genuine smile at him.

“Well, it looks fancy.”

I took in a deep breath. The anger lessened a bit. It’s amazing how compliments can do that to a person. “So you know about the site. And you know I go by Hush online. What else do you know?” Where the courage came from to ask that, I’ll never know.

I ignored the fact that I felt drunk from embarrassment, anger and shock. The living room took on a surreal feel to it, as though this was all nothing but a bizarre dream and any second I’d wake up, pleasantly blissful that no one knew my secrets.

Or Dr. “tell it like it is” Phil would show up with a McGraw test, and yell at me for angst encouragement.

Of course, that would only make this surreal moment even more dreamlike.

“I read all your stories.”

“Really,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. I didn’t believe that one. I doubted very seriously that he’d actually read them.

“I think that ‘Break Time’ and ‘Sucker’ are my favorites, I like how confused Buffy is in those, it shows a depth to her character that really didn’t come out well until season four or five.”

“Uh,” I didn’t know what I should say. So I just tried to keep my jaw from mopping the floor.

“And the whole Angel/Rennati series was really pretty good. I liked how you introduced him to her when she was a kid, and she grew up with him.”

“Oh God.” I bowed my head. Lord, he’s read enough of the stuff that he knows the storylines? Either I’ve really and truly impressed him, or he’s a bigger freakoid than me.

“You have a wonderful gift of writing, Lynn, you should write real books.”

“I try, but I can’t come up with a good enough story.”

“How can you say that? Look at that series, it has all the potential. Just rework the characters a bit.” He smirked at me as I shifted on the couch, suddenly very interested in the textured ceiling.

“And your adult section—you have an amazing gift of description.”

My cheeks flamed red again. I swear, the blood might as well stay in my cheeks as much as he kept making me flush.

“It’s all made up.” I knew exactly what he was referring to. Just like a man to be thinking of sex. Not that I wouldn’t mind trying all the stuff I wrote about just to see if it was half as fun as it was to write.

Jack’s eyes flickered to the clock over the television. “How badly do you want to go to Chili’s?”

My brain shifted to high gear. The emotions that coursed through me were so random and exaggerated. I wasn’t sure how I should feel about anything.

I mean, he knew.

And I should be embarrassed, and I was to an extent, but at the same time, I was pleased that he thought my work was good enough to be published, which made me feel happy.

Then one look at Jack, and the whole lust thing came into play. So here I was, debating in my brain what would be a good evening. Should we actually go? Or should we wind up doing something else? Or even just wave the white flag and call it good? I couldn’t keep my head on straight. Thank God it was actually attached, or it would have blown up by now.

My protective skin felt like it had been ripped off, but at the same time, I felt like I now had a friend I could actually talk about my site and my writing and my girls with, and not feel horrifically embarrassed.

But yet, I’m not sure if I should be horrifically embarrassed or not...

“I never get to eat at Chili’s,” I said, realizing that Jack was waiting for an answer.

“Do you want to go?”

“Of course.”

“Well, we’d better get going then.”

And I had no makeup on.

“Give me two minutes.” I darted back into the bathroom and put on some resemblance of a face.

As I worked to make myself presentable, I tried to rationalize this new onslaught of information.

Jack Edwards knows about my cyber life.

The mix between relief and embarrassment ran through me, and I still felt unsure about this.

Shouldn’t he be repulsed? Think I’m weird or something?

Yet just one look at him, and I was smitten and gooey, and he didn’t find me repulsive. Shouldn’t that be a feat in and of itself? Any other man would be offended. ’Course, most other men didn’t have anything to do with me. Or I with them.

Then I realized who I was talking about, and this was Jack Edwards, the first man who’d ignited a fire in me in years.

And whoa, baby, what a fire...

Chapter Sixteen

No, you don’t have to go pee, I told myself as I stood in the foyer of Chili’s. The trickling water feature made me want to cross my legs and do the pee pee dance as Jack got us a table.

It didn’t help that the rain had started to fall, so in the background of the water feature, rain drizzled down, making the urge to go to the bathroom even more pronounced.

I stared at all the prints and such that hung up around the foyer, and I couldn’t help wondering if the Chili’s restaurants were decorated by the same people that decorated Applebee’s. Old rotted wood benches sat in the entryway, and the walls had pictures of jalapenos colored in all sorts of ways, done by children who were bored out of their minds while waiting on their food.

They seated us in a darker booth, even with the window blinds open, the booth remained fairly dark and cozy—the rain leaving the bright sky dark and dingy outside. I darted to the bathroom after telling Jack to order me a Diet Coke. He had to ask me why I was drinking pop if I didn’t keep it in the house. Normally I would have taken the time to explain the need for this, but considering, a, he’s a man, and b, he’s a man, he wouldn’t understand the enjoyment of certain things outside of home.

Like how movie theater popcorn only tastes good in the theater, or those awful nachos that are pretty much canned cheese product and stale chips only taste good at a baseball game. Men don’t quite grasp that concept.

When I got back, Jack had a beer in front of him, and I had a glass of water. He glanced up at me as I sat down.

“I went ahead and ordered you a margarita, since you were so interested in one before and an onion blossom thingy.”

I blinked. “Oh, okay.” I smiled at his word choice. After our conversation in the apartment, I’d forgotten about the need for an alcoholic drink, though now that he mentioned it, the thought of one sounded rather

incredible. The waitress appeared and set down this enormous lime margarita in front of me. "My Lord."

"I just guessed, and got you the biggest one."

"I don't know if I can drink all of this."

Jack shrugged. "You don't have to. She brought you water too."

I nodded and took a sip of the margarita, sighing as it went down. God, margaritas were the greatest things ever.

"So tell me about this other life of yours."

"You seem to know a lot about it, why don't you tell me?"

"What I see is simple. A woman who's afraid of being hurt hiding behind a façade of fake names and fandom to be the boisterous person she suppresses from in the real world."

I raised my eyebrow. "Very astute observation. Very wrong, but very interesting theory."

"So correct me."

"I don't hide behind anything. I have a special appreciation for *Buffy* and *Angel*, and I've found a whole group of people who love it like I do."

"So you write smut?"

"People enjoy it. You said yourself, I have a way with words."

"You write for others then?"

"And myself."

"What do you get out of it?"

"Praise."

"You write and maintain this massive website for the praise of others to make you feel better about yourself?"

"I feel fine about myself."

"But you seek other's approval."

"What, were you a shrink in your last life or something?"

"Nope, just observant," he said with a smile.

I really wanted to wipe that smug grin off his face. I write what I write because it's fun to make a life up that's more interesting than the one I'm faced with.

The life where I can't figure out what to wear on a date, when I actually have one, is just plain, it's simple, and it's boring. The life where things are exciting and sensual and powerful and pleasurable is a much more fun place to be than the life where I have to regularly purchase batteries for my vibrator. I'll take my fan fiction world, thanks.

"I am fine with myself." I am. I know my limits, I know my abilities, and I know when and where I can be myself. And it ain't in real life. Just trust me on that one.

"Then why the fantasies?"

"Because!" I stammered, hoping I didn't sound like I was stuttering. "Because I want to be the belle of the ball once in a while." The words poured out of me, and I wondered if I had been slipped some truth serum, because twice tonight, I'd already revealed something about myself to Jack Edwards, something that I've kept down deep inside me. Things I never would reveal to anyone, and I was pouring them out to Jack.

God, what's with him? Why do I feel this need to share everything with this guy? The urge to smack him, just on general principles crept into my mind, but I repressed the thought. Wouldn't be polite at the table.

Jack nodded his head. I ground my teeth as the waitress fawned over Jack for a few moments, then, probably louder than I should have, I told her "thank you", dismissing her instantly.

"So who is the belle of the ball?" Jack said as I took a plate and helped myself to the fried onion.

My mouth got away from me. "Bella." I clamped my jaw shut wishing I had wire to tie it together. The sad thing was, I knew I had said the truth. Bella's ability to turn the head of any male she walked past was probably the best and worst thing about her. Best for her. Worst for me.

Bella dominated any conversation, not because she wanted or needed the attention, she just had that charisma that exuded from her like a tornado, swooping up and grabbing any and all attention around her.

Bella would introduce me to guys all the time, but none ever really gelled. They all remained caught up in the tornado that was Bella.

"Bella, eh?"

"Yeah."

"She's all right, charming," Jack said, as he took a bite of the appetizer.

Oh, boy, here we go. "She's more than charming, she's..." I paused as I twirled my bite of onion blossom in the dip. "...she's Bella."

"I take it she doesn't know about your cyber life?"

"She knows it exists, but, not in great detail."

"Why not?"

"She wouldn't understand." I sipped on my margarita.

“Does anyone understand?”

“Me, and that’s all that matters.”

“True, so very true.”

The waitress returned, placing our orders down for us. I barely remembered ordering anything, but from the smoking plates and the sizzle, I must have ordered fajitas. And so did Jack. Good call on my part, it gave my fingers something to do while talking.

“So what about you? You hail from Pennsylvania? You come all the way to Kansas and you don’t know the difference between a sack and a bag.”

“Well, they do things a bit differently in Pennsylvania.”

“Such as?”

“You talk slow.”

“I think you all are just too busy to slow down and appreciate a good conversation.”

Jack smiled. “True, we don’t spend a lot of time just visiting. Except for the Amish, that is.”

“The Amish?”

“I lived in eastern Pennsylvania. Near Lancaster. The Amish lived all over that area. Lots of wagons with those orange triangles on the backs.”

“Ahh.”

“And you had to speak a bit of Pennsylvania Dutch.”

“Oh really? Charm me with some Pennsylvania Dutch.”

“Do I have to? What about just backwards speak?”

“Backwards speak?”

Jack cleared his throat. “Throw Grandpa down the stairs his hat. Could you outen the light, m’boy?”

I had to laugh, those sentences would make a grammar teacher cringe. “So how did you get out of it?”

“Lots and lots of school.”

“Where did you go?”

“Back East.”

“I see. Probably some Ivy League school?”

“No, just a plain one. What about you? What kind of schooling have you attended?”

“High school, vo-tech, nothing exciting. A bit of college here and there.”

“What would you major in?”

“I considered getting my CPA, but I decided against it.”

“Why? You certainly could do it.”

“I like myself the way I am. I have a good job that pays the bills, and there’s room for advancement, and all that jazz. I figure in a few years if I want to go back, I can take one of those ‘fast-track to your bachelor degree’ courses at Friends University or something.”

“Would you want to?”

“Not right at the moment. Things are pretty good right now. I’m free and single, and I can do what I want with my time, what else is there in life?”

Jack took a sip of his drink. “You’re happy with you and your cyber life?”

“God, you’re chatty tonight. What is this? Dive into Lynn Broadmore’s Life 101?” I did feel like I was being psycho analyzed, and I wasn’t sure how I totally felt about it.

“Just curious about you. You’re not at all like what you appear at work.”

“Thank God.” Which was true, if I was as nerdy in real life as I was at work that would be a bad thing. What am I saying? I write fan fiction for God’s sake, I’m a total nerd. But a sexy one since I write smut.

“I’m beginning to think so.”

“Good.” I started making a couple of fajitas on my plate, loading them up with all the fillings.

Jack quickly made himself one as well. “I think you must have the most amazing internal conversations about things. Creative people always do. Who knows what you think about your co-workers when they’re around.”

“We don’t want to go there.”

Jack grinned. “I’m guessing Tina Smith is one of your favorite co-workers?”

“As if. She is the biggest version of an office slut I’ve ever seen. And somehow she manages to not get labeled the office slut, but the office dominatrix.”

Jack took a bite of his fajita. “I’ve heard some stories.”

“She’s a man-eater, trust me on this one.”

“I think she’s in heat most days.”

I had to laugh at that one. “When you’re around, she is.”

“Have you noticed she rocks her shoulders back and makes sure her chest is puffed out when she talks to men?”

I raised my eyebrow. Okay, this is turning into an almost girly conversation. I’m getting a bit worried. “I haven’t noticed. I usually only see the men staring at her boobs.”

“Probably because she practically points them in someone’s face. It’s hard not to notice them.”

“And you’ve noticed them, I know you have.”

“Because?”

“I came around the corner one day a while back, and you were staring.”

“I appreciate ample bosoms.”

“Admit it, you like her boobs.”

“I like boobs, but the watermelons she carries could put out an eye.”

“Personally, I think she has an unconscious fear of drowning.” This sent us both into fits of laughter. When I calmed down a bit, I decided it was time to learn a little more about Jack.

“So what about you? Do you have any weird hobbies?”

“Not weird to me, but you might not like it.”

“What’s that?”

“Gun club,” he said.

I blinked. “Mild mannered accounting clerk has an obsession with guns? You’re not going to go postal on me are you?”

“Haven’t yet. I grew up around guns.”

“Got a big family?”

“Not really. Just a grandfather and an uncle.”

“What happened to your parents?”

“They died.” He took a sip on his beer, and from the grimace on his face, I realized this pretty much closed the subject.

I reached across the table and touched his hand. He gripped my fingers tight, but didn’t bring his gaze up to mine. “Dad died when I was four. Mom died about four years ago, cancer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He snapped his head up, meeting my eyes with that stare of his. "Thank you." The pain in his eyes sent a physical ache through me, at least for a few moments, then the angst disappeared from his eyes, and he forced a smile on his face. "Guy walks into the doctor's office with a frog on his head," he muttered.

"What?"

"The doctor says 'What is this?' and the frog replies, 'I don't know it started out as a wart on my ass.'" A cheesy smile spread across Jack's face, and I couldn't help laughing at his stupid joke. The rest of the evening went rather simply. We ate, had small talk about work, the usual date stuff. Nothing too exciting.

Not once did Jack attempt any more discussion about my cyber life and for that I was grateful. Nor did we delve into any more heavy conversation, and that I was thankful for. When we left, Jack paid the bill, but I managed to convince him to let me at least get the tip. He escorted me to his SUV, the rain had let up a bit, so I wasn't completely soaked. However, when I glanced in the door's reflection, I growled because every bit of bounce and body I had in my hair had evaporated.

"So, do you wash this thing nightly?" The Tahoe was impeccable. Even the rain didn't dare seem to pool on the overly waxed finish.

"Not nightly."

"Aha! Anal retentive about vehicle. You keep your car clean but you can't..."

"SUV."

"Whatever."

"There's a difference."

"Yeah, one costs a lot more in gas than the other."

"That's not a problem."

"What does a single guy like you need a car that seats," I glanced around, "six for anyway?"

"I just like them."

"You must be overcompensating for something."

"That's sports cars, not SUVs."

"SUVs are the new sports car."

"Do you just make this stuff up as you go, or do you actually read this shit somewhere?"

"I make it up as I go. I am a smut goddess, after all." In my head, I have all these quick, smart-assed answers for everything, but I never let myself actually say this stuff. Hush does. Some may think that I'm insane, or at least certifiable for allowing another personality to rule my cyber life, but trust me when I say there are a lot of people who live their lives by what they make up on the Internet. Why be your normal shy self, when most of the time, it's just text on a screen right? Say what you think, paint the image of yourself you want... then go from there.

Jack dodged in and out of traffic like a true NASCAR driver trying to qualify as he zoomed down Central back toward my apartment. How he could see through the rain, which had turned from a sweet drizzle to buckets downpouring, I didn't know, except that my hands were creeping closer and closer to the "oh shit" handle.

"So what driver do you like?" I finally relented and grabbed the "oh shit" handle.

"What?" He dodged around another pack of slow moving cars, and I say slow moving, because, God forbid, they were doing the speed limit.

"You drive like a NASCAR fan. I assume you like NASCAR, so who's your driver?"

Jack smirked again. He had the cutest little smirk. "Gordon."

"Ewww! Gordon? Jeff Gordon?"

"He's the underdog."

I almost slapped him upside the head. "The dude wins everything. And he enunciates. The two most hated traits of any NASCAR fan. Besides, he's a prick."

Anyone who watches NASCAR hates Jeff Gordon. Gordon wins, he's cocky and has good grammar. True NASCAR fans only like their driver if he's not completely understandable. A NASCAR driver is only as good as his grammar is bad.

"Who do you like?"

"Mark Martin."

"The Viagra guy? That's just odd."

"Hey, we women must support the Viagra. It's made a lot of women happier."

"Your logic is frightening."

"See why I don't talk a lot at work? If they knew how this noggin worked," I tapped my temple, "they'd be running for the hills."

"I don't know about that."

Chapter Seventeen

We ran back inside my apartment, trying to dodge the rain, or so we claimed. Personally, my insides were tingling, and I hoped the cool rain would lessen the desires.

No luck, though. Even my nipples were rebelling and standing at full attention. I tried to rationalize, because this still was the first official date, what with dinner and the driving in the same car and all.

A couple of steps inside the door, I shook off the cold of the rain, and I moved far enough away from Jack to spin around and face him.

Jack shook a bit, and ran his hands through his completely unscrewed-up hair, and met my gaze.

“So now that we’re here, what do you want to do?” I asked, my teeth chattering a bit.

“We should warm up.”

I ran my hands over my cold arms. “Warm would be good.”

“Yeah.”

Oh God, his eyes turned predatory. His shoulders arched forward a tiny bit, his head dropped just enough to make the few steps he made look more like stalking, incredibly erotic and slightly frightening.

Mental note—wear double layer panty liners around Jack.

I took one step back, but he reached me, wrapping his arms around me and shoving me back, back, back—oh, there’s a wall there.

His mouth devoured mine and my knees turned to jelly. Jack allowed no room for timidity, and frankly, if he had, I probably would have shoved him away and locked myself in the bathroom.

His arms slid up my sides, one hand tangling in my damp hair, the other running over my already fully erect nipple. I really couldn’t comprehend exactly what he did with his hand, but I knew I liked it. It seemed like he must have sprouted an extra dozen hands, for they were all over me, across my hips, my stomach, my chest, my arms, everywhere that they could feel. And all the while, he didn’t stop kissing me.

I wrapped my arms around his chest, pulling him harder against me.

A primal groan came out of him and I slid my hand lower to his rock hard butt. He smirked in my mouth as I squeezed his touchie. Had to smile as well at that one.

Grabbing the back of his shirt, I pulled it out, making contact with his lower back.

“No fair.” His hands slid under my shirt. I shuddered as he made contact with my bra.

“You like that?” His palm grazed my nipple.

My body reacted before I could say anything. I’d read about erect nipples straining against fabric. Hell, I’d even written such scenes, but never could I be prepared for the electroshock I received as he touched me.

Jolt after jolt shot through me, and I wondered if he was actually made of electricity. The more his skin made contact with mine, the more I thought he really was. The electricity between us could have lit up a room. Shoot, it could have lit up the apartment building.

Is this what was meant by free energy?

My fingers clawed at the buttons of his shirt as he ran his lips up and down my throat. Talk about mind numbing...

“How the hell do you undo these buttons?” I groaned as more electricity pooled from his wild assault on my neck. I grabbed his shirt, still fumbling with the buttons, and he bit down on a part of my neck that I never knew was so sensitive, and I cried out.

Somehow his shirt opened, and I started running my hands across his chest.

“Dear God,” he muttered as he looked down. Buttons littered the floor. “Never had that happen before.”

I really was paying him no attention. My tongue decided to do a bit of exploring of the wide planes of his chest.

And what a chest it was. Carved wide panels of smooth skin illuminated by random flashes of lightning. A sprinkling of hair, just enough traveling down to the belt line, promised great surprises in the nether regions. It was like open season in a candy store. I ran my tongue all over him, tracing every line, being sure to nibble and suck on his perfect little nipples. He groaned as I bit down on each nipple, his hands holding on to me like I was his lifeline.

The flavor of his skin mixed with the dampness from the rain remained as intoxicating as his kisses, and I was a kid on a pixie stick high, just wanting another fix.

His hands ran through my hair, gripping the back of my head with every one of his manly moans.

I loved being a woman in power.

As I worked my way to his stomach, I placed little kisses just above his belt line, being sure to swirl my tongue around his belly button and lick all the little hairs in place. The guttural sounds he made sent my heart fluttering like crazy.

I'm seeing the appeal of a dominatrix, I thought as I peppered his stomach with more kisses.

Jack's eyes darkened as he pulled me up to look at him. His arms wrapped tightly around me, and before I knew it, he was picking me up and carrying me. He maneuvered me into the bedroom and laid me down on the bed before joining me.

My fingers tangled in the sheets as he kissed my stomach in a way that should be outlawed.

He worked his way up, pushing my top off. “You like?”

Somehow my bra came undone and he released the lemons to his view. Okay, maybe they're not lemons, but they are small. Smashed oranges, maybe?

Jack didn't quiver or look disappointed, not that I could see his face, really, he was too busy attacking my breasts, and I was too busy moaning. My eyes rolled back in my head so far, I know if there was light in there, I could have seen my brain.

I grabbed his head, my fingers sinking into his blond hair as he pressed his bare chest against mine. His nether regions got hotter and hotter by the second, and it felt like a python lived in his pants.

God, would he fit?

Another searing kiss removed me from my worries about the possibility of him ripping me open, and as his chest pressed against mine, amazing electricity ran through me again. Even locked in that passionate kiss—*oh my God, did he just suck on my tongue?*—I could feel my shoulders fitting just right between his. His whole body felt, you know, right, on top of mine. The warmth that flooded between us almost rendered me unconscious. Is this why women mistake sex for love? I could live with the heartbreak if it meant more of...

Oh my God! What did he do with his hips? I felt a shock run from my hips to my head, and my eyes went missing again.

I felt everything. I turned my brain off and allowed him to work his magic. Whether it was minutes or days, I didn't know, but eventually he had all my clothes off and he remained in only a pair of boxer-briefs. Lightning flashed, showing that his python had eaten a small child as he sat between my legs and ran kisses up and down my calves and thighs.

Then he started working toward my small python cave. Actually, it was more a gardener snake cave, and even his fingers seemed too massive to touch that area.

"No, Jack, really, you don't have to..." my plea for him to not do that thing that so many men felt obligated to do was cut off by a groan as his fingers found my super-extra-sensitive magic button.

"I don't what?" He brought kisses closer to my center.

I started squirming around. I started scooting away from him on the bed. "You don't have to."

Jack raised his eyebrow. "And miss my favorite part?"

"Bullshit, I've heard the locker room jokes." I brought myself up to a sitting position. "Believe me, I don't much care for it anyway." I slipped a hand between my legs. "See, all ready for you anyway."

Jack let out a guttural groan. He snatched my hand and sucked my moist fingers.

"Jesus," I muttered as he slowly pulled my fingers out of his mouth. I shivered at the feral look on his face. A clap of thunder punctuated his expression, and I knew I was seriously in trouble.

Part of me should have objected when he shoved me back down, grabbed my hips and pulled me flat on the bed. It happened so fast, I swear I didn't have time to breathe when he started pressing kisses to my center. In the back of my mind, I registered that he gripped my hips, holding me in position as he performed his ministrations.

And whatever they were, I'll never know. All I do know was that I clawed at the bed, the pillows, the blankets, the sheets, anything I could get my fingers on.

Lord, Mary Mother of God, Lord Jesus in Heaven! A climax whirled around me so fast I thought I rode a cyclone. My hips arched into him as he did whatever it was he was doing, and he obviously enjoyed it because I swear I heard him moaning as well. I rocked my head back and forth, digging so hard into the mattress I thought I heard a rip.

I felt his fingers slide into me, and that tipped me over the edge.

Then I had my first sexually induced blackout. The primal screams that I heard couldn't have come out of me. I barely enjoy sex. What sex I've had doesn't even register in my memory. Usually I'm too busy wondering when he'll be done so he can go home.

"Damn, I think you woke the people in the next building."

"Huh? What? That must have been thunder." My entire body felt like rubber and all my bones really had turned to goo.

"Thunder, huh?" Jack climbed up next to me and smiled. "I may have to invest in ear plugs if thunder always comes in your bedroom."

"Surely I didn't make all that noise?"

"Honey," he stroked my cheek as he spoke. "You've not had a lot of orgasms, have you?"

"Not really, no. Is that why I feel like drunk jelly?"

A feral grin spread over his face. "There's something incredibly hot about knowing I gave you your first mind screaming orgasm."

I tried to flip him off, but I still couldn't move my arm. And what was that pulsing between my legs? Aftershock? What has he done to me?

Jack laughed, running a hand over my stomach. "So, are all the condoms in your bathroom?"

I nodded my head. Jack stood, and I think he said something about not going anywhere, but I can't be sure. My brain had frazzled as much as my body had.

I hoped what I had fit him. I arched my back as he disappeared, watching his gorgeous shoulders work as he walked out of the room. I couldn't help licking my lips at the thought of tasting him again. Running my tongue over him again, feeling his skin against mine.

I purred.

Jack returned and raised his eyebrow at me.

"Hi." I eyed the sleeve of condoms. "That's a lot of condoms."

"I like to be prepared." Jack grinned a most primal expression, and dropped his boxer-briefs. In a flash he had one condom on and had tossed the rest on the nightstand.

He met me with another searing kiss, and I could feel his hips poised at the entrance of my cave, ready to bury himself, but he stopped.

Instead, he sat up and lifted my legs to his shoulders. He entered slowly at first, and he bit his lip, moaning as he got his bearings. Thunder echoed and lightning flashed as he oriented himself, making him look more like a god ready to do battle.

Rhythm increased, and I started heading for a new level of existence. Every thrust nailed that one little spot inside me, that mythical place called the G-spot. I rose higher and higher toward another big O.

In fan fiction, orgasms are often described as climbing a mountain and falling off a large precipice when the moment arrives.

For myself, it felt like a great out-of-body experience, and Jack my only link to the reality I called life. My body shook and convulsed against my will, but still I felt like I hovered over myself, connected only by the bond of our bodies, holding me in place.

I reached my moment, shaking and quivering and evidently doing all the right things for Jack, because within a few moments, he started having his own orgasm, groaning and calling out my name.

My legs dropped from his shoulders, and he lay on top of me. I could still feel the aftershock of his explosion as he kissed my cheek. Or was that my aftershock? Too confused to tell for certain. The only thing I could be certain of was the heavy breathing as I tried to pump more oxygen into my blood to compensate for all the energy we had just burned.

How long we lay like that, I don't know, instead I focused on how amazing he felt on top of me. Even the rain had taken a backseat to how incredible it felt with his skin against mine. Even though I was physically exhausted, the touch of his skin against mine tantalized me.

There's just something about skin on skin contact that feels so right and so natural, and so amazing.

At some point, he climbed off me and got rid of the condom, but I barely registered it. I only noticed the loss of contact, but soon it returned.

Chapter Eighteen

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!

God, I hate that thing, I thought as my body started to regain consciousness. Sunlight streamed in my bedroom window, as if last night's rain had never happened. My insides ached, and I really could have hit the snooze for at least another hour. The bed shifted, and reality slapped me in the face.

Holy shit! Jack Edwards had spent the night with me.

A giddiness swept through me, and a wild grin spread across my face. The hottest guy in the office spent the night with me. With me. Not Tina Smith, not any of the hen club. Me.

I pulled the sheet up over my head and giggled.

"Are you always this giddy when you wake?"

I laughed and reached out to find him, and realized he was already upright, so I wrapped my arm around his waist. The warmth of him slid through me, setting new fires throughout my body.

So warm, I thought as I started peppering his hip with kisses.

"We need to get up."

Party pooper. "Let's not go to work," I mumbled as I continued kissing his hips. His fingers ran over mine, intertwining with them.

A sigh escaped his lips as he ran one hand through his hair. "We need to. It would look suspicious if we both didn't come in."

"Screw 'em." Who would really think that our absences would be related? And even if rumors started to circle, who would believe that Jack Edwards spent the night with me?

A benefit for certain...

I continued my kisses, running them up and down the expanse of his back and shoulders. Working my way up his spine, I reached his neck and tasted his skin, biting down on that spot he found on me, and a groan came out of him.

"Lynn," he sounded almost parental. Did I care? Not one bit. I was on a mission. And I was going to get Jack back into my bed one more time. And it was going to friggin' rock.

Wrapping my arms around him, I continued my peppering of kisses. Jack spun around, with speed faster than I've ever seen first thing in the morning, and he pounced.

Hard kisses pushed me back on the bed, and I moaned against him. The hairs on my arms rose as he pinned my arms behind my head and pummeled me with more kisses and bites all over my chest.

I fought back against the grip he had on my arms, but he didn't relent, which only made me even hotter. How many times had I written fan fictions about this very scenario, about women being sensually restrained? I couldn't even count. It was one of my wildest fantasies to have someone pin my arms back like that and hold me down.

And Jack was doing it.

He slid up and kissed me fiercely on the mouth, one of his hand reaching for the sleeve of condoms on the nightstand.

"You've been paying attention."

"You thought I was kidding?" Jack asked, mischievousness filling his eyes as he slid on the condom. He thrust into me so hard, my eyes rolled back into my head.

Gone was all sense of space, time and dimension. Once again, I was rocketing toward a place that can only be known in the world of mind-blowing orgasms. Only then could I feel the earth shatter, the skies electrify, and the atoms collide all as if I was nothing but pure energy, unconnected to the vast universe.

Jack reached that place only moments after me, and he released my hands as he wrapped his arms around me. Both of us gleamed with a dew-like covering of sweat.

His breath ragged against my ear.

"We really should be getting ready for work."

"I know. I'm considering the calling-in option."

"Oh, so when it's my idea, it's no good, but when it's yours, it's worth considering? I see how you are."

He smirked.

The most annoying cell phone ring ever invented, the Nokia tune, emanated from Jack's discarded pants. He grumbled an obscenity, and climbed off the bed.

"I have to take that."

"Sure." He grabbed his pants and headed into the bathroom.

Man, does he have a great butt, I thought as he walked away.

I told myself to get a grip. He didn't seem happy about getting that call, and this of course made me wonder who it could be.

A cold feeling of dread filled me. What if he had a girl back east? Someone he's never mentioned? Would he do that?

How do I know? Really, how do I? I know him from work, and that's about it. He could have a whole plethora of girls out there that I don't know anything about, and I may just be one in his harem of women.

He could be a total player, collecting women like they were toys.

Stop it. It could have been his mother for all I knew. I rolled onto my back, and I heard the water running in the bathroom. The muffles of Jack's voice could be heard, but it wasn't the greatest tone I'd ever heard from him. Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

I slipped into my robe and padded down the hall, and when I reached the door of the bathroom, I could still hear the water running. Either he was having a heckuva time trying to pee, or he was hiding something.

I knocked on the door.

Jack pulled it open, and I saw him slapping the cell phone shut as he regarded me.

"Is everything okay?" I leaned on the doorjamb.

"Fine. I was just about to take a shower."

I nodded my head. Trying to keep the situation light, I smiled at him. "Estranged wife or girlfriend?" I kept the smile plastered on my face, hoping like hell he said neither. The last thing I wanted to do was be the other woman. God, what a crock that would be.

"Neither, a buddy from the gun club." His eyes turned cold, like he was begging me to drill him on it.

However, I grinned so big, I thought my face might peel back. I would decide later if his membership in a gun club would bother me. At the moment, as long as he wasn't shooting people, I didn't have issues with it. "Well, I appreciated your gallantry at hiding the locker room conversation, but I've never been against hearing how great I am in bed." Holy crap. What was that? Am I losing my mind here with Jack? I mean, after all, I don't say things like that. Like I've ever been in a locker room. Ha!

“Babe,” Jack grazed my cheek with a soft kiss. “You are stunning in bed.”

My cheeks flamed crimson, and I thought I was done for. I was cooked. Jack just flattered my bedroom prowess, not a common occurrence in my life. Me. Lynn Broadmore, good in bed. And I got to actually hear it. Wow, maybe fan fiction really can come true.

Chapter Nineteen

God, will the numbers ever end? I have serious smut to write over here.

Last night’s amazing romp with Jack Edwards made me want to vent via some serious fan fiction writing. Or brag, as much as fan fiction allowed. I had a need to describe my whole amazing night with Jack, and even though I’ll probably not tell anyone who inspired the action, I would know, and I’d be able to grin every time I looked at the story.

And I have to commend Jack, he’s left me alone almost all day, even though this morning, as we climbed into our cars, he pretty much tried to eat my face before we headed to work. Nonetheless most of the day, I had hoped he’d stick his head over the wall.

I mean, I don’t want to look like I’m desperate for a repeat of the heaven of last night’s sexual encounter, but come on, at least something more than a “hi, how are you?” and acting like nothing happened.

Maybe I’m the only one who felt the Earth move.

And Tina Smith, aka Boob Thruster, has been glaring at me for most of the day. Well, not exactly glaring, but staring, like she’s trying to figure out if anything happened last night between me and Jack. I heard her comment in the lunchroom to someone that Jack and I had left for dinner together.

’Course, she also commented that it had to have been work related. Why else would Jack want to be seen in public with “that homely Lynn” anyway?

I wanted so bad to jump up and show her the nice hickey under my collar but I didn’t. Hush would have showed it. But that’s just a persona, a life that’s not my own. It’s an attitude, a fake person that I made up to fill the void in my boring life.

’Course, now my life wasn’t quite as boring—I had Jack to entertain me. I caught myself staring at the wall that divided our cubicles and I couldn’t help wondering if he would come over tonight.

After all, it’s Friday night. Date night and all.

Maybe Jack’ll come over?

Bing...

In the corner of my computer screen, I saw a box pop up. It was an IM from Rugby.

Rugby:*Hello my dear, did not see you last night.*

Hush:*Date last night.*

Rugby:*Have a good time?*

Hush:*Good enough to inspire some smut today.*

Rugby:*I hope you used protection.*

Hush:*Of course.*

Rugby:*Good girl. Keep it clean, my dear.*

Hush:*0:-) Always.*

Rugby:*Got some news. My job transfer to Wichita came through. Are you not somewhere in Kansas?*

Hush:*Yeah, I am.*

Rugby:*We will have to get together.*

Hush:*Of course! This is awesome! When do you get here?*

A grin spread across my face, and I was very excited about this. Rugby wouldn't be my first choice of who to meet from my online group, but he'll do.

Rugby:*Two weeks.*

Hush:*Rock on.*

Mister Wilmont walked by my cubicle and glanced at me. I hoped that guilt wasn't written on my face.

Hush:*Gotta go. Work.*

Rugby:*Talk to you later, my dear.*

Hush:*Bye.*

I looked up and Wilmont had been replaced by Jack standing in the doorway of my stall.

"Yes Jack?" I closed the screen down.

I tried to keep it casual, I really, really did. But the sight of him sent my heart into palpitations. I could feel the heat in my cheeks flaming and I knew that if I could feel it, he could see it.

“Playing again?”

“Who me?” I asked in mock surprise. “I work here, you know.”

Jack rolled his eyes.

“What do you want, sunshine?” I asked, noticing that Tina Smith was taking a long time getting a glass of water outside my cubicle. Her bouncy, sky-high teased blond locks didn’t move as she took a sip off her water, pretending to be rather interested in the painting over the water cooler.

Jack glanced over his shoulder, saw Tina and rolled his eyes. “Well, I wanted to ask you about some more of this stupid paperwork.” He stepped closer to my desk. “But the darndest thing keeps running through my mind.” He pulled open my locker door, pretty much shutting Tina’s prying gaze out of the cubicle.

“What’s that?” He seated himself on my desk.

“You, this morning.”

“Wha-wha-what about me?” Damn, I’m stammering like an idiot. HELLO! Brain, start functioning.

Jack’s feral grin spread across his face.

“You’re evil.” I scooted my chair back away from my desk. It was a whole foot and a half, but hey, I was a bit farther away and a bit out of his reach.

He leaned across the desk, planting his hands on all my stuff, sending paperwork flying.

“Jack,” I backed my chair up against the wall, another three or four inches. Still, it added a bit of distance, considering how delectable he looked leaning over my desk like that. “You’re making a mess.” I gestured to the skewed papers.

“You like my messes,” Jack said, almost crawling across the desk.

Oh. My. God. This man is the epitome of evil. The leer in his eyes intoxicated me. I could feel still-sore muscles responding to that look.

My chair became possessed and I started scooting toward him.

Jack’s face was mere inches from mine. I licked my lips, anticipating the action I was about to get.

Jack leaned a bit more across my desk, and I began to appreciate his height, when a voice outside the cubical froze us both in place.

“Oh, Jack? Jack? I need to talk to you.” The voice of Tina Smith sounded like nails on a chalkboard, and I never realized how much I hated that blond bimbo until this moment.

"If we ignore her, will she go away?" Jack murmured, slipping his hand into my hair and pulling me toward him.

Our lips brushed together, and more electrical currents flowed through us.

There was a knock on the locker door and it started to open. Jack shoved the rolling chair backwards, and it collided with the locker door with a crunch. The sound stopped Tina from trying to open the door again.

"Jack?" Tina said through the door, "This stupid locker door is jammed."

"Take a hint."

Jack let out a sigh, and I thought for a second he was going to start cursing. I burst out laughing as he pushed up away from me. He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair.

"Do you want to tie her up, or should I?" I asked as the door started to get shoved against the chair.

"I'll take Mr. Pointy. You think she'd dust?"

"It's possible. She always hides from the sun." I imagined Tina Smith going up in a puff of dust like a vampire, the only thing left would be her implants.

There was nothing cooler than knowing that your boyfriend liked the same stuff you did.

Whoa, did I just think boyfriend?

I seriously gotta get a grip. One incredible night in bed does not a boyfriend make.

Well, if you want to count raucous sex and a surprising enjoyment of *Buffy* as a connection, then yeah, Jack was unofficially my man. But in today's day and age, and the over twenty-five dating scene, how do you even make someone official? It's not like you can get a class ring or anything. I mean, that's very high school. Nowadays, what do you do? Introduce them to Mom and Dad? Get engaged? Grope in public? What was *themodus operandi* ?

It'd been so long I couldn't even remember.

Jack winked at me as he moved the chair and closed my locker door. Tina, stood just outside my cubicle and looked like she had unbuttoned at least two more buttons on her too-tight fuchsia sweater. Her chest was about to burst out of that thing.

I shook my head. Did she really think she looked good?

She couldn't. Either that, or she's attended Slut Dressing 101. And it looked like she was acing the class.

"Oh, Jack, I needed to run over a few things with you." Tina leaned into him. Then she glanced over at me as she put her arm around his. "I'm sure you're done with Lynn, right?"

Jack glanced at me. "No..."

“That’s great.” Tina tugged Jack away from my cubicle. They passed the edge of my line of sight, and I ground my teeth.

How I hate Tina...let me count the ways... I hate sluts. I hate bimbos. I hate women who sleep their way through the office. I hate women who come to my cubicle and steal my man.

My man? Did I just think that? That’s almost as possessive as that whole boyfriend word.

I could hear Jack’s voice outside my cubicle. And he didn’t sound happy. “I said no, I’m not finished talking to Lynn. When I am, I’ll find you.”

Something akin to a protest screech came out of Tina Smith, and Jack came back around the corner.

In my mind, I started doing the super-happy-dance, but I tried to look uninterested when he reached my desk.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry.” He let out a sigh and dropped into the chair across from my desk. “She is unbelievable.”

“I can imagine. Must be rough, all these women throwing themselves at you...”

“I’m not really interested in most of them.” That leer came back in his eyes.

“Most, you say?”

“Well, pretty much only one.”

“Oh, and who would that be?”

“Guess.”

“Tara from the mail room? I hear she’s got the hots for you.”

He laughed. “You’re so funny.”

I shrugged. “What is it you want anyway?”

“To come over.”

“You already are in my space.”

“No, to your place.”

Be calm. Be cool. “Only if you bring dinner.”

“Pizza?”

My mouth started to water. I hadn’t had pizza in forever. Granted, it’s a staple when you’re single, but I just can’t bring myself to order a whole pizza for myself. So I eat frozen ones when I get the urge. “With everything on it.”

“Including pineapples and anchovies?”

I mashed my face in revulsion. “Ewww.”

“You said everything.”

“Smartass.”

Jack grinned. “Okay, what about seven?”

Seven, that’ll give me just enough time to do a quick update at the website and see what email I’ve gotten among other things. There is my latest story to post, and I’m pretty sure that I have a couple of new ones from some of the girls. I don’t think I posted that one from Sunshine yet. But I’ll have to reformat it, her pages always come so screwy.

Then there’s the forum, gotta see what was going on over there, make sure the waters were still clear. Can’t have any upset girls. It’s been almost forty-eight hours since I checked it, anything could have happened by now. I should be able to get everything done by the time he gets here.

“Lynn?”

“Sorry, I was organizing in my brain. Yeah, seven’s good. But I have to do some work online, so if I’m not finished when you get there, I should be only a few minutes.”

“You and your computer.”

“Don’t mess with a web mistress and her Internet, buddy boy,” I said with a mock-evil grin.

“Seven it is.” Jack stood and left my cubicle.

At home that night, I pulled up my website and started doing updates. Which meant reformatting accepted submissions, coding them into the site, then updating them to the Internet. This time, it only involved nine pages for the update. When I finished, I scooted over to the forum to see what kind of smack was being talked by my girls and guys.

I tried to organize the forum as a way to inform people of new postings at the site, so I usually started threads about new stories so people could leave their comments. I hadn’t yet figured out a way to allow people to comment on stories on the actual site, although I knew there was coding out there to do it.

An IM popped up on my screen as I worked. It was from Sunshine.

Sunshine: *Yo, chicky, what’s up?*

Hush: *Updates.*

Sunshine: *Coolness.*

Sunshine was one of my favorite writers. She wrote the cutest stories, and I swore the next time I went on vacation, I was going with her. She has met more celebrities than anyone I know. Needless to say, having grown up in Kansas, I've never met anyone, so I am all about meeting anyone I can. And if it includes going to Scotland with Sunshine sometimes, then I'm all about that.

Hush:*How are you doing?*

Sunshine:*Not bad, I have writer's block.*

I rolled my eyes at the screen.

Hush:*You are practically prolific, how can you have writer's block.*

Sunshine:*Trust me I do. Haven't been able to write anything for a week.*

Hush:*So go write some other fandom.*

She wrote for me, plus for a couple of other sites that had different genres of fan fiction.

Sunshine:*Not even the latest Harry Potter is inspiring me.*

We continued to chat about the latest *Harry Potter*, a shock to Bella that I even knew who *Harry Potter* was, considering the whole *Buffy* obsession I have. She figured no other fandom could infiltrate my brain.

Another IM screen popped up from Will. Great, now I'll never get anything done.

Willowrocks:*Hey there.*

I tried to keep up with my posts.

Hush:*Hey.*

I was almost done, but one glance at the clock in the corner, and I had about a half an hour until Jack showed up. Not a lot of chatty time.

Sunshine chatted at me about the craziness of her life in college, her finals coming up and all the studying she had to do. Studying biochemistry wasn't easy, I learned.

Meanwhile, since I didn't have a lot of time to really visit, I cut to the chase with Will. I knew he'd had a hot date he was nervous about the other day... God, was it just a few days ago? Seemed like a lifetime since I'd talked to him last. I'd given him some advice, including the importance of a clean car.

So I felt somewhat vested in how the date had worked out.

Hush:*Dude, did the date work out?*

I really wanted to know, too. After all, if it didn't, I would feel really bad, and if it did, I would be very excited for Will. He didn't seem to date a lot. At least not that he had mentioned.

Willowrocks:.)

Hush:*That's all I'm getting? A smiley face?*

Willowrocks:*It worked out well. Think she was swept off her feet.*

Hush: ::::doing the happy dance:::: *That's great, Will! Congrats! Do you have another date planned?*

Willowrocks:*Yes. I have to leave soon.*

Hush:*AWESOME! Let me know how it goes...*

Willowrocks:*Will do.*

I glanced at the clock again, saw I had about ten minutes until Jack arrived, and I quickly said my goodbyes to Sunshine, then flipped off the computer.

Do I dare shower? Or do I do a fast quickie shave with a dry razor? One glance at my still sore legs screamed no.

Bang bang bang!

Crap, he's early!

I could smell the pizza through the door. As I let Jack in, my stomach growled, ruining my need to be overly casual about his arrival with food. And it was loud enough to garnish an arched eyebrow from Jack as he set the pizza down on the coffee table.

"Hey." He sat a bag on the floor. I could see a couple of bottles of pop in it, and I had to smirk. 'Course, he could have brought beer and not pop, which would have been more male. And the fact that he brought two did not go unnoticed by me.

"Did you get your computer stuff done?" He pulled out the bottles and set them on the coffee table. Aww, he remembered and had brought me a diet.

I nodded my head. "All loaded up. Should keep the minions happy for a while."

Jack straightened and grinned at me. "Anything from you?"

"One, I think. Nothing exciting, just an ABH."

Jack's eyebrow went up. "Those are the naughty ones written in second person, right?"

"Yes."

"They're always educational." That predatory look crossed his face, and he pulled me close.

"Educational? Is that what you call it?" I tried to act like being pressed this tightly to him meant nothing to me.

"Yep." He planted a kiss on my mouth, and my knees literally buckled underneath me, but Jack held me firm.

"Umm..." I managed to squeak out as he released me.

"I've wanted to do that all day."

"Umm..." Once again, I was a great conversationalist.

Jack smiled at me, those crystal blue eyes staring at me, and they were twinkling. "Are you hungry?"

My stomach answered for me, and I flushed red.

"Come on." He grabbed the bag. "I even have plates." I smelled the pizza, and it took all my restraint to keep from ripping the lid off the Pizza Hut box and tearing into a slice.

Then my social graces returned to me. "Oh, do you need a fork?"

"This is pizza."

"Well, do you?" I stepped into the kitchen.

“No.”

I grabbed myself a fork, and brought a handful of napkins into the living room. Sitting on the couch next to him, I resisted the urge to drool on the beautiful Supreme pizza with all its toppings and grease and drippy goodness.

You’d think I never had a pizza before.

Jack picked up one of the Chinet plates and got himself a piece as I pulled the one with the big bubble out of the pie and tossed it on my plate.

Something still remained in the bag he’d brought. “What else did you bring?”

“Firefly.”

My eyebrow went up and I giggled. “And you’re sitting there, not putting the next one in why?”

“Just waiting for your okay, ma’am.” He stood, popped one in the DVD player and started it.

As it cued, I scraped the toppings off my pizza and started eating them, leaving the crust alone until I ate the meat, cheese, mushrooms and peppers.

Jack stared at me while I ate.

“What?”

“Strange way to eat a pizza.”

“Savoring the flavors.” I shoved a bite in my mouth so I didn’t have to say anything else as the next episode started.

We watched six more episodes. A little after two in the morning, I realized, one, that Jack and I were still fully clothed, two, that I was curled up in his lap, and three, that neither one of us had made a move on the other since starting the DVDs. Well, no obvious moves. I did register that he’d been stroking my hair as the episodes played, but that only relaxed me.

Wow, this is cuddling? This is cool. What was it about these shows that had made me just curl up into Jack’s arms and lay there? I’d never just laid with my head on a guy’s chest and let him hold me. The sounds of Jack’s breathing were smooth and regular, and I wondered if he’d fallen asleep. Risking awakening him, I glanced up.

Jack looked back down at me, his blue eyes twinkling a bit, but he didn’t seem to be upset or suffering from blue balls. He butterfly kissed my temple and laid his head back, closing his eyes.

A deep yawn came out of him. “Do you want to watch any more? There’s still one more on this disk.”

I wanted to, but it was getting late, and you know what? I really didn’t want to stay home alone tonight either. Having Jack up next to me was amazing. Just the feeling of him being near me was fabulous. I contemplated watching another one.

After all, it was Friday night, it’s not like we had to go to work in the morning. “We don’t have to work

tomorrow, do we?"

"Not unless there's a mandatory meeting I don't know about."

"So will you stay?"

Jack didn't reply instantly. Never a good sign.

What the hell? It's not like I was asking him to do rocket science or something. It was just spending the night, which seemed a natural enough order of things at this moment. It was two in the morning. Him leaving now would just say...

What would it say? That last night was a fluke? That he didn't find last night as incredible as I did?

And who's to say he did? I mean, he did avoid me all day at work.

"I don't know if it would be a good idea."

Here it comes. The total brush-off. I felt tears welling up in my eyes, and I held them back.

Stop being so stupid, I berated myself. There was no way a night with Jack Edwards would ever develop into anything substantial. Who was I kidding anyway?

But he's here now, my optimistic side said. *Don't forget that.*

But he doesn't want to stay...

I coughed a bit, trying to choke back the tears that threatened to burst. I hated myself for feeling so disappointed. "And why is that?"

"I doubt I'd get any sleep, and I desperately need some. Especially after last night's lack of it."

I couldn't help smirking at that. And a rebel tear slid out of my eye. I brushed it away, hopefully before Jack saw it.

"Lynn."

I forced a smile on my face. "What?"

"Are you all right?"

"Fine." I waved my hand at him. "I understand you need to go." I fought off my own yawn. "I just..." And what could I say? That I wanted him to stay the night? And sound like Tina Smith in the process?

No thanks.

He gritted his teeth and stood, walked over to the DVD player to eject his movie and put it in the case.

He moved meticulously through the apartment, returning the DVD to its box, putting on his shoes, picking up the pizza box and putting it in the fridge. He took his empty bottle of Pepsi to the trashcan, and kept moving.

“Jack?” I wanted him to look at me again. If he looked at me, if he acknowledged me, then I’d be okay, then I’d be able to see his eyes, and know he regretted needing to leave as much as I regretted him having to go.

But what if he didn’t? What if he wanted to go? What if he was just biding his time to get out of here?

I kinda hoped he wouldn’t turn and look at me.

He let out a sigh and ran his fingers through his hair and walked back to me, wedging himself between the coffee table and the couch.

“How do you do that? How in the hell do you look at me like that, and make me forget my damn name?”

The nearness of him sent my loins into overdrive. Just his breath on me was enough to get my motor running again, a charge of electricity from his nearness. It wasn’t like it was a few minutes ago on the couch. That predatory look was in his eyes.

“Do wh-what?” What is it with him? Why am I always stammering around him?

Jack gave me very little time to think. He leaned over and captured me in a slow kiss. His hands held my face, and I couldn’t move away if I wanted to. Even before I could stop myself, I was so deep into the kiss, I thought I would melt.

The kiss deepened, and he pulled me off the couch, pressing me firmly against him. Everything about him smelled incredible, and I wrapped my arms around his waist, loving the feel of him up against me.

At that moment, his cell phone started to shrill out that damn Nokia tune, and Jack grabbed it out of his pocket and opened it. He walked into the kitchen to avoid prying ears.

Chapter Twenty

A female voice could be heard on the other end of Jack’s phone as he shifted the cell from one ear to another.

My stomach started to roll. Another woman? My shoulders sagged, and I felt my eyes grow hot with tears. Why did this happen to me? Why did I have to meet a great guy like Jack, and find out he’s involved with another woman?

Men just sucked.

“No.” Jack’s voice low. “Not a problem.” This time even more muffled.

I couldn’t make out what the other person was saying, but I didn’t have to. I figured it was some woman, someone he wanted to see tomorrow, or tonight or whatever.

I dropped to the couch and buried my head in my hands, letting the tears fall. It didn’t matter anymore. I was second fiddle, and I knew it.

I also knew when he came out of the kitchen that he’d grab his stuff, maybe try to give me a good-bye

kiss, but the effect would be the same. He'd be gone. And I wouldn't see him again.

At least not until Monday.

I steeled myself against his reappearance.

A muffled "out" came from the kitchen, and he snapped the cell phone shut. Two steps brought him back into sight, and I stood, ready for anything this time.

"I'm sorry. My sister."

I raised a questioning eyebrow. "Yeah, Because sisters always call after two in the morning."

He didn't say anything, just glowered at me. I met his gaze, the stains of tears on my cheeks, but I didn't wipe them off.

Let him see how much he'd hurt me.

"Don't think I'm leaving because I want to," he said with surprising conviction.

"Sure."

"Lynn, I would stay, but I have an important meeting in the morning with the gun club." He stared back at me, nothing in his posture buckling.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up at attention. "And the fact that it's a woman shouldn't bother me at all. I've written better excuses than that, buddy."

"It's not an excuse." He clenched his jaw, holding back the anger seething in his eyes.

"Fine, go, do what you have to do. God knows the gun club will fall apart if you're not there." The tiny antagonistic part of me wondered if it really would fall apart. Yet that part was smashed down by the fact that there probably wasn't a gun club.

He muttered something about stupid meetings and demanding women, but I didn't catch it all, and I don't think I would have wanted to catch it all. I stood from the couch, taking a few tentative steps toward the door, ready to lock the door behind him.

He turned to face the door, and picked up his movies. Taking a few steps toward it, he stopped, his hand in mid-air over the door handle. His head shook a bit, and he grumbled something.

Jack spun around, took three strides back over to me and grabbed me around the waist, hauling me against him.

"You make me insane." He grabbed my face and captured me with a desperate, powerful, wild kiss. I groaned at him, grabbed the back of his head, and he let out something primal sounding from deep in his chest.

He started pushing me backwards until I was against the front door. He plundered me with kisses, and all I could do was grab onto him and hang on. I held his shoulders, my own mouth going wild and running up and down his throat, while he did the same to me.

His hands were under my T-shirt, and over my stomach and chest, and his fingers grazing my nipples sent shivers through my whole body. I reciprocated the sensations, rubbing his chest and playing with his sensitive nipples. He let out more of those guttural primal groans, and I let out more moans as we touched, licked, tasted and devoured each other from the waist up.

I slipped my hands inside his pants, and he started groaning my name as I teased the top of him with my fingertip.

Jack unfastened his pants, letting my fingers have more room. I pulled loose little Jack, who wasn't that little anymore, and I ran my nails up and down the length.

Fascination filled me as Jack's stomach twitched and shifted as I caressed this part, and touched that part. I slid down the door so I was on my knees to closely inspect this large swollen appendage. The tiniest bit of moisture was on the tip, and I scooped it off with my tongue.

Jack stumbled, bracing himself against the door. I grabbed his ass, holding him in place as I dipped down and tasted just the tip of his manhood with my tongue. Careful little licks and quick little sucks had Jack breathing heavy and shoving his hands in my hair. He yanked out what was left of my ponytail and gripped the back of my head, deep moans coming out of his chest as I continued teasing him.

"Oh God, Lynn." He pulled me off him. "I want you now," his voice a ragged whisper. He let go of me, and stumbled into the bathroom to retrieve a condom, while I pulled off my pants and thong. I headed over to the couch, sitting as he came back.

He had shed his clothes and stood before me, a strong, virile god of a man, his eyes hooded, and he was every part of ready to be inside me.

I spread out my legs, ready for his entry, but he paused long enough to slip two fingers inside, pumping for a few seconds, with a look of satisfaction spread across his face.

But instead of climbing on in, he sat on the couch, and pulled me on top of him.

My body started to tense. I never liked being on top, it never quite felt right for me. Panic filled me, because not only was I always told I suck on top, I never got anything out of it.

"I'm not good here." I tried to squirm away, without looking like I was trying to squirm away.

He gave me a soft kiss. "Let's give it a try," and he poised my hips over him, in the right spot to slide down.

I took him in, unable to hide my worry and fear as I slid down on him. He let out a groan as he held my hips in place. I started to rock up and down a bit, feeling like a bull in a china shop trying to do the Macarena.

Jack took one of my breasts in his mouth, sucking on the nipple for a moment. I shivered at the touch, moaning out, and arched into him.

Then he started to help me.

He pumped his hips up into me, and after one or two quick thrusts, I felt the groove he started, and I

grabbed onto the back of the couch and started to ride into him, slamming my hips into him as he pumped upwards into me. We found that mythical G-spot again, and I seemed to be hitting it with every thrust, my body quivering under the onslaught of sensation.

I tipped my head back, cries of ecstasy coupled with groans of pleasure coming out of me like a roaring river. So this is what it's supposed to feel like being on top. I held on for dear life as I rode him higher and higher toward the rapidly building climax about to take me.

I spared a glance at Jack and saw a wickedly carnal grin on his face, and I cried out in pleasure as the orgasm took me from off the peak I'd been climbing to falling, falling, falling, until I collapsed against Jack.

Jack held me close for a few minutes while I regained consciousness.

"Is that what it's supposed to feel like?" I nuzzled his neck.

"Yeah, honey. Shall we take this into your bedroom?"

I popped my head up. "You're not done?"

He grabbed me and stood. "Not by a long shot, babe."

"Oh hell," I muttered as he carried me into the bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-One

The first thing I registered when I woke up the next morning was a soft kiss on my forehead, and then the sound of the front door shutting.

I rolled over, not quite understanding what I heard, at least not for a few moments.

Then my brain kicked in.

I glanced at the clock. It was after nine, and Jack was gone.

Sonofabitchmotherfuckingasshole! Fury and fire poured through me and all I wanted to do was beat the shit out of Jack Edwards. Dickhead!

I fought the tangled covers, kicking and pounding the stupid blankets that had tied themselves around my body, ripping the last of the sheet off me, and throwing it on the floor in a heap. Stumbling out of the bed, I stomped off into the bathroom and started cleaning up.

I was determined to march over to Jack Edward's house and rip him a new asshole. Then I realized a few specific things as the hot water scorched some sense into me.

Number one, I didn't know where he lived.

Number two, my legs were a bit wobbly after last night's excursions.

Number three, oh, crap, I didn't have a number three.

What time did we finally get to sleep? I had no idea. Probably around three thirtyish? Maybe closer to four in the morning? I shook my head. Regardless of his sexual prowess, he left me this morning without so much as a “good-bye”.

Jerk.

My hair still wrapped in a towel from the shower, I plopped myself down in front of my computer and powered it up, adjusting my towel as I waited for Windows to open. I smiled at the pretty *Buffy* wallpaper I’d made a while back, loving how I’d gotten the words so transparent around the images.

“Kind of sad that the only things I can do right revolve around illegally taken images and novels that will never see the light of day because it’s copyright infringement.” I let out a sigh as I clicked on my IM messenger to see who was online.

No one was on yet, and I stood. Of course they weren’t, it was Saturday morning, most of my gals would still be sleeping.

So I stood long enough to get dressed. I didn’t move from the line of sight of the computer, and halfway through dressing, I saw that Will had logged on.

Hush: *Will, I need to talk to a guy, you free?*

I waited, hoping that Will had a few minutes. I really needed to hear from a guy about this stuff. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t being all overly girly about this.

Willowrocks: *What’s up?*

His icon of Willow in her black phase appeared with the comment “darkness frightens.” The image always made me giggle a little, and I smiled as I looked at it.

Still, not a lot of time for me to giggle. I had questions.

Hush: *Would you barrel out of a woman’s house first thing in the morning after spending the night?*

I waited, my hands hesitating over the keys. Usually, if I IM’d someone, I spent most of the time doing something else, so my fingers twitched as I watched the IM screen hoping the reply would come back up. It seemed to take him an eternity to reply.

Willowrocks:*It would depend. If I had something 2 do N the morning, like work, I would.*

I nodded my head. Yeah, but Jack didn't have to work. He just had a meeting. Still...

Hush:*Don't you think you would have at least said good-bye?*

Willowrocks:*Well yeah. Especially if I wanted to C her again.*

I felt a tear welling up in my eye.

Hush::*crying: He didn't say anything.*

I forced the tear back, but it rebelled and rolled down my cheek. I didn't know why I was upset, I pretty much knew this was a short-lived affair anyway.

Willowrocks:*Well, did he say anything B4 about having 2 leave in the morning?*

Hush:*Yeah.*

Willowrocks:*Well, then, there U go. He probably was late.*

Hush:*Still very rude.*

I groaned to myself. I didn't actually want Will to side with Jack. I wanted him to actually say "The dude was an ass. You're right. He sucks." But does he agree with me? Hell no. He's a guy.

Willowrocks:*Yep.*

He agreed that it was rude? Somewhat of a surprise.

Hush:*So what should I do?*

Willowrocks:*You could call him.*

Hush:*Don't wanna.*

And I didn't. I knew myself well enough to know that if I called him right now, I'd probably yell at him for at least fifteen minutes.

Willowrocks:*Well C if he calls.*

Hush:*Grrrr... Patience is not my best virtue.*

Which it wasn't. I had no patience for guys. I don't have to wait long to find out things go south, so I'm not used to waiting for anything. I'm usually too busy working on web stuff anyway.

Willowrocks:*LOL Stubborn female :-D*

Hush:*Bite me :-)*

Willowrocks:*:-D Careful what you wish for. My canines are sharp.*

Hush:*My stake is sharper.*

Willowrocks:*LOL*

Willowrocks:*Well, maybe he'll call.*

Hush:*Doubtful.*

After all there wasn't a good sign there. I mean, the call at two a.m., him dashing out of the place early... I doubted I'd hear anything from him at all.

Willowrocks:*Y? The sex no good?*

Hush:*Are you kidding me? The sex was awesome. At least for me. 'Course, that doesn't mean that he enjoyed it. I assume so. He made a lot of noise.*

Willowrocks:*Well, here's the test. Did you feel him pulsing?*

Hush:*Uh, what?*

What in the world was he talking about? Pulsing? That sounded like some weird, kinky thing.

Willowrocks:*You know. Pulse.*

Hush:*I know all men enjoy sex, but don't you think checking for a pulse would be a bit rude? And I'm not even a little into necrophilia.*

Willowrocks:*ROTFLMAO—Not what I meant.*

Hush:????

Okay, now he had me really wondering what in the world he was talking about.

Willowrocks:*Can't women feel that stuff?*

Hush:*What?*

Willowrocks:*After he comes, the pulsing inside.*

I blinked at the screen, and reread the words again.

Hush:*OH!!!!!!!!!!!! ::::slapping self upside head:::: I didn't know what you meant. Of course women can feel that.*

Sheesh! I felt like an idiot.

Willowrocks:*Well, that's the proof that it's good. The more pulses, better for him.*

Hush:*Okay. Never heard that one.*

God, learn a new thing every day. Nonetheless, I think I could have lived my whole life not knowing that one, but hey, I am talking to a male.

Willowrocks:*It's locker room talk.*

Hush:*I see. Thought I'd heard it all.*

Willowrocks:*Guess not.*

My hackles started to recede, and I didn't feel quite so angry at Jack, so I started doing some more updates while chatting with Will. As I worked, I ran over to my forum and saw a bit of an argument going on between some of the authors. I started playing monitor mommy and snubbing the debates before they got out of hand.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sun started to set Saturday night, and the orange ball in the western sky hung in the brush-stroked clouds, making the sky turn shades of blue, purple, red, pink and tangerine.

I watched the setting sun while I waited for a stop light on Forty-Seventh Street. Heading toward the highway, I exhaled a breath, free of my parents. Not that I don't love my parents. Trust me, I do. But you know, sometimes they're just kinda...ugh.

It sucked that I didn't have my own washer and dryer. Also I have issues with the fact that they don't keep any snacks in the house. And I don't care what they say, peanuts, cheese sticks and chunks of meat does not a snack make.

Snacks are crunchy. Period.

The sun continued to sink and the clouds that were once tangerine had changed to a bright fuchsia pink. I had to laugh. Not even Bob Ross on his best day could come up with that gorgeous sunset. Never would I have put together pink, tangerine, blue, gray, silver, red and purple. It was one of the nicest sunsets I'd seen in a long time.

I swung up onto I-235 and got to buzzing around toward the Central exit. Following the road's curves, I pretended I was qualifying for a NASCAR race since there were hardly any cars on the road. However, I kept myself from going too fast because I did get a speeding ticket once for doing this very thing.

As I drove, I couldn't help but think about Jack.

Pissed remained a rather stale word to describe how I felt about him running out on me this morning. He could have at least said good-bye.

Then he does go to leave, and winds up staying, seducing me in the process. I don't know what I was madder about—his sneaking out this morning, the phone call from a female at two in the morning or the fact that he intended to leave when I ordered him to get out.

Ugh...the lunacy of it.

I should have been pleased to see that he had been going to leave. I also should be extra happy about that since he did get that phone call, and wound up staying anyway. I smacked myself in the head as I drove.

This was just way too stupid. The anger was just plain nuts. I mean, in a way, I won, I got what I wanted—he stayed. So why was I still mad at him?

I debated stopping by the liquor store and buying a box of wine. I could get a bottle, but then I'd have "wine guilt" when I didn't finish the bottle by myself. And it would go to waste. Box wine, though, is vacuum-sealed, and always fresh. A drink sounded incredibly good at the moment.

I still wound up vetoing the wine and pulled into my parking lot. Carrying a box of wine in with my laundry seemed a bit unnecessary.

And as I made it up the flight of stairs, I found a note with a rose taped to it on my door.

Finding a flower on the door was strange enough. The smooth red petals almost open, the color a perfect shade of crimson, almost shining against the white paper of the note.

I shoved my key in the door, pushed it open and stepped inside, just enough to drop the laundry basket in the doorway. Yanking the rose and note from the door, I came inside and slumped onto the couch.

More than likely, this was from Jack. And more than likely, I was going to be irritated by whatever it said. The urge to smash it into a thousand pieces was very hard to resist. I couldn't bring myself to do it. It was a rose, and it wasn't the rose's fault that it was purchased by a asshole. I picked it up and sniffed it, enjoying the soft aroma.

I couldn't help myself, I opened the note and read it, recognizing Jack's totally male all capital writing.

LYNN,

SORRY ABOUT THIS MORNING. I HAD TO GET TO MY MEETING.

CALL ME.

JACK

I wadded up the piece of paper, intending to throw it directly in the trash, but I stopped myself, and before I could control what I was doing, I started smoothing the paper back out.

How did that Linkin Park song go? Something about once the paper's crumpled up it can't be smooth again? Something to that effect. The melody echoed through my head as I tried to smooth out the wrinkles.

Calling him seemed somewhat out of the question.

Will was right. I'm a stubborn brat.

Benne sat at his computer, staring at the monitor, watching Hush. She sat on her couch, trying to smooth the little piece of paper out that had been taped to her front door.

He shook his head.

Poor dear looked on the verge of tears. Evidently last night's tryst had not been in the best interest of her well-being. Why would she allow a man to manipulate her so? A goddess as she needed to be worshiped, to be treated with respect and love. She needed to be cleansed from her aches, from the touch of other men who tarnished her soul.

The man who she insisted on spending time with wasn't worthy of her goddess stature.

It was getting very, very close to time for Benne to move to the next phase.

He was almost ready.

The Kansas weather was taking some getting used to, the pollen count was high, and it made his allergies worse than usual, but he would deal with it.

Everything was dependant on getting ready to acquire his Hush.

Cathy Donaldson went over the data in front of her, and she couldn't help grinning. Grabbing the feather that sat in her pen cup, she ran her hand up and down the spine of it again.

She'd been doing that a lot lately, playing with the feather. Though for the life of her, she hadn't been able to make a connection between the feather and the case.

And she knew the answer was right in front of her too. Benne may have been smart at hiding his computer tracks, but the feather—it was on the tip of her tongue.

Of course, Benne wasn't as smart as he thought he was.

Logging on to the Internet, she emailed the agents working on the case, informing them of the link back to Benne.

She was certain she'd found him.

At least she'd found him online.

Where he was now, though, she wasn't sure. His computer systems were so well masked and untraceable, it had taken her weeks to find this much out.

He was in Kansas. He had to be.

The data was pointing to a particular part of the Midwest, though she had yet to pinpoint the location.

It was only a matter of time, and she would find him. They just had to keep Lynn safe that long.

Cathy let out a sigh. She hoped she and her partner were up to the challenge.

A week was all she needed.

Then they would have Benne.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bing!

Rugby:*Hello, Hush.*

I smiled. Friendly text in the middle of a dreary day. What was it about Rugby that made him able to know exactly when I was grumpy to make me feel a little better? Maybe he was psychic or something.

Hush:*Hey you, how are you doing?*

Rugby:*How are things with you?*

Hush:*Decent, I guess.*

No way was I going into details about the mess with Jack to him. It just made my head hurt thinking about it.

Rugby:*You guess?*

I shrugged. I wasn't exactly happy, I mean, I even bowed out of Sunday dinner with the family tonight. I just really didn't want to deal with them today. This is an ice cream day. Ice cream, sit in front of the tv, type day.

Probably because I haven't heard a word from Jack all weekend.

Well, except for the rose.

But I wasn't going to call him. I have other things to do with my time, thank you very much.

It didn't help that in the back of my mind, I knew I was being a stubborn ass, and that I needed to just break down and call him.

But that same stubborn ass screamed that he could very well have called me too. And he hadn't.

So pooey on him.

Hush:*Oh, my social life, which was going rather well, isn't exactly feeling the same exiting rush it was a few days ago.*

Rugby:*Trouble in paradise?*

Hush:*Something like that.*

Though right now, paradise only seemed to exist with Jack in between the sheets. Outside was a different story for us, or so it seemed.

Rugby:*Well, not to worry. I will be there soon enough.*

I smiled as I read that. If only it were true. A friendly face would be nice, someone who wasn't related to Jack, or anyone else I knew, would be a great thing to be around.

Hush:*You're sweet.*

Rugby:*I mean it. The transfer has come through. I should be arriving in Kansas sometime next week.*

My cell phone started to ring as I read this new information. I couldn't help grinning.

Hush:*You're kidding!*

What an exciting thing this was. I was going to get to finally meet one of my authors. To put a face and a voice with one of my online friends. I couldn't help giggling at the idea. And I don't even have to go

anywhere. I can stay right here, and he's coming to me. How perfect is this?

Rugby:*No, I am not. I am going to be there next week.*

"Hello?" I cradled the cell phone to my ear as I grinned.

"It's me," Jack said.

"Oh." I hoped my disappointment at his untimely call was evident. I still didn't want to talk to the big butthead right now.

I wanted to confirm stuff with Rugby. Set up a location and all of that.

"You didn't call." Jack sounded irritated. Good. He should be. I'm still irritated with him, so he should be a bit irritated with me.

I glanced at the blinking screen.

Rugby:*Do you still wish to meet me?*

Hush:*Absolutely! I'm dying to meet the face behind the fiction.*

A grin spread across my face as I typed.

"I'm still pissed," I replied, though I sounded much more chipper than I should have.

"You don't sound pissed."

"Oh, one of my authors is coming to town, and I'm going to get to meet him," I replied, grinning at the screen.

Rugby:*As am I. We should have lunch.*

"What?" Jack snapped.

"One of my authors—"

"I heard you! You can't go, Lynn! I forbid it!"

Hush:*Lunch would be great. Hope you like Mexican.*

“You forbid me?”

“Yes, damnit, I forbid you!”

“Get a grip!” I slammed shut the phone and threw it on my bed. Who in the hell did he think he was? Forbidding me to do anything? Jack had to be out of his mind. I wasn’t his kid, his servant, or his slave. Hell, I’ve never even been to his house.

Rugby:*I do enjoy a good burrito on occasion.*

Hush:*Good, because you’ve come to the right place. We have a ton of them here.*

I tried to keep my tone light, but I pounded the keys as I wrote, my fingers sounding like a machine gun.

My cell phone started to ring again, and I just ignored it, turning only to toss a pillow over the device.

Rugby and I continued to chat about eateries in Wichita, while my phone continued to screech behind me. Frustrated, I got up and reached the thing, shutting it off.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

I almost jumped out of my chair.

I didn’t have to look through the peephole to know who was there.

“Lynn!” Jack yelled through the door.

“Go away, Jack.”

“Open this door.”

“Go away. Or I’ll call the police.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Go away, Jack.” I turned and went back in my bedroom to continue my talk with Rugby.

Rugby must have had his psychic radar on, because he immediately asked if everything was okay. I just blew him off, telling him I was having trouble with the neighbors.

Which was going to be true enough if Jack didn’t go away.

I tipped my head to the side, and all was quiet outside my door.

“Serves him right,” I muttered. I went back to typing with Rugby. We talked for a few minutes about the fan fiction story we’d been working on together, and he emailed me the copy of his side of the he said/she said story. Basically, we’d agreed to write the same story, just from different points of view, for something a little different.

It was working surprisingly well too. So well, as a matter of fact, I wondered if there wasn’t a nugget of something that could be developed into a commercially viable story.

Ahh, to make money with my writing.

What a concept.

A weird noise made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I jerked at my desk. The noise made me come out of my bedroom, armed only with the heavy glass that I had drunk my lemonade in, and I tiptoed toward the door.

There was a strange crackling noise.

Then I saw it.

The tumblers to the deadbolt clicked. The lock started to turn. I raised my glass and as soon as the door opened, I hurled the glass at the person in the doorway.

And it collided with Jack Edward’s big fat head.

“Ouch! Goddamnit, Lynn.” He rubbed his forehead.

He held two of those long, skinny lock pick things, and a red bump was already coming out on his head. Man, my dad would be proud, he always said I was a horrible shot.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Did you just pick my lock?”

“Lynn, we need to talk.” Jack put the stick things in his pocket and closed the door.

“You just broke into my apartment.” *Way to go, Captain Obvious*, I berated myself. Somewhere in my mind, I knew that there was more I should be mad about, that his breaking in shouldn’t be my focus.

Yet all I could think about was how easily he entered my apartment. And Jack was a nobody. What would a skilled thief be able to do?

My heart hammered in my chest. No longer did the extra hundred dollars a month I paid in rent seem significant for security.

“And you should have your chain thrown when you’re here alone. But that’s not why I’m here.”

I still couldn’t get over him picking my lock. “You just...”

Jack muttered under his breath as he locked the door and threw the chain, then headed into the kitchen.

My brain started registering everything—Jack’s sudden bossiness, the lock thing, which was completely freaking me out, his sneaking off in the morning, the rose, everything.

Him telling me I couldn’t see one of my authors, that was the last straw.

“Who in the hell do you think you are? Barging into my house, make that breaking into my house, telling me who I can and can’t talk to? You don’t have that power over me. And you don’t even know anything about who I want to meet anyway.” I put my hands on my hips. Jack didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. *Buffy* fans were few and far between. I could trust Rugby.

“Lynn,” he snapped at me as he came out of the kitchen. He had a rag with ice wrapped in it, held to his head.

“What?”

“Shut up and listen to me.”

The tone made everything I saw turn red. How friggin’ dare he tell me who I could or couldn’t talk to or go see.

“No! You need to get the hell out of my home before I call the police about breaking and entering. You just broke into my apartment. You can’t do that.”

“I did, and I’m not leaving until you listen to me.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

Jack gritted his teeth, and didn’t speak for a second, instead sitting down on the couch. “You can’t go meeting some guy you met on the Internet, Lynn.”

I rolled my eyes. “And who the hell are you to stop me?”

“I’m your boyfriend.”

I blinked at that. Dang, talk about blindsiding me. Was he? Granted, just the other day I was thinking that very same thing. But he was a guy, they weren’t supposed to think like that, were they?

“You can’t be my boyfriend. I mean, I haven’t even been to your house...” Weren’t there certain things that qualified a boyfriend? Like seeing each other’s homes? Didn’t that rank up there in the whole “you’re my boyfriend/girlfriend” thing? I mean, if he was one of those guys who changed his bed sheets yearly, I don’t know if I’d want him to be my boyfriend.

And I didn’t know that.

It suddenly slapped me in the face exactly how much I didn’t know about Jack. Though I knew he was from Pennsylvania, I didn’t know what his family was like. What he wanted to be when he grew up, why he’s working in accounting, what brought him to Kansas, really.

There’s so much that a girlfriend should know about her boyfriend, right?

Jack shook his head at me. "Lynn, I'm not even going to pretend I know what the hell you're talking about." He adjusted the ice on his forehead. "You're not going to meet some guy you met on the Internet."

"And why not?"

"It's not safe! Lynn, he could be a rapist, a child molester, a murderer. You don't know anything about him. He could be..."

"He could be a nice guy that I've talked to for almost a year, who is just as much a *Buffy* freakoid as I am."

"Do you even know what he looks like?"

"No. But that's not the point. He's probably some big nerdy guy who looks like the comic book guy on the Simpsons. Still, he's my friend, and I'm going to meet him."

Jack shook his head. "You're not going."

"Bet me."

"If I have to tie you to the bed, you're not going."

"Like you could," I bit back at him, tipping my head in defiance.

Jack leapt up off the couch and was within inches of my face, his eyes dark and dangerous. "Do not tempt me, Lynn Broadmore. I'll tie you to your bed right now if that's what it takes. You posted that email you got from the FBI online. I can't believe that was some random thing."

"Dude, that was a hoax, I know it was."

"You think?"

"I know."

He grabbed my hand and hauled me into the computer room, and pounded in a web address.

Up popped more information about the Fan Fiction Killer. My jaw went slack. Scanning the information, it showed images of women who'd been taken, their online handles, what they had written and other tidbits of information.

Including images of the quills that were found with every one of the bodies.

My hands started to shake.

Jack raised his brow. "You're not going." He glared at me with dark, dangerous eyes.

That look scared the bejezzus out of me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Shall I count the ways I hate Jack Edwards? It was nearly quitting time Monday at work, and all day long, I swear, Jack had been hovering over me.

He wouldn't let me out of his sight. Every time I turned around, he was watching. I swear, if I didn't known better, he had X-ray vision and was looking at me through the cubicle wall.

Though he didn't talk to me all day, he was always right there, shadowing me. I felt the only possible relief from him when I went to pee. I considered taking my desk into the bathroom stall just to get away from him.

Not that I think it would help.

And to make matters worse, Tina Smith and her over-inflated ego seemed to grin bigger than ever every time I walked down a hall, as though she knew something that I didn't.

Boy I wanted to smack her.

But first, I must kill Jack. I couldn't stand the egocentric bastard he was being today. Seriously, the man had a complex.

I stared at the clock on my desk, willing the minute hand to move faster so I could get out of here. I had to get out of here, to get away from Jack before I went "postal" on him.

Even the thought of writing more fan fiction seemed like a sucky way to try and cheer myself up, and that's never a good sign.

I spent as much of the day as I could with my locker door open to inspire, but not even Angel and Spike could take the depression out of me. The depression stemmed from the fright Jack had given me about this Fan Fiction Killer. If I had any doubt before that it had been a hoax, that doubt was smashed into a thousand pieces.

Even though Jack was irritating the snot out of me with the hovering, I finally got what he was worried about.

Which made me wonder if there was some way we could reach a compromise.

And you need to apologize to him, squeaked that inner voice, which I immediately silenced. I didn't want to hear that he's right and I'm wrong. Because, really, I had no proof that I was wrong—what are the odds that Rugby was the Fan Fiction Killer? People met all the time through the Internet, why would this be any different?

A knock broke my chain of concentration, and I looked up, wondering, and that tiny girly part of me hoping, that it was Jack, ready to take me home and make my bed squeak.

However, instead of Jack, I found myself face to face with none other than Tina Smith.

She eyed the inside of my locker, staring at the poster, and her disgusting red fingernails scraped across it, and I just wanted to throw my monitor at her.

"So this is what you're doing in here, with the door closed. And everyone thinks you're working hard," Tina said with a sadistic grin.

“Well, I have to improve the view.” I leaned back and crossed my arms over my chest. “What do you want?”

Her eyebrow only moved a fraction of an inch, but it was enough to make the painted-on line crawl up her forehead like a spider’s leg. “What makes you think I want anything in particular? Can’t a co-worker stop in and say hi?” She took a seat in the chair across from my desk, and I wondered what her skirt must have been made of, to be painted on like it was and still bend to her needs of sitting down.

I felt Hush building in the background, and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from lashing out at the tart.

Wait a minute, why am I repressing anything?

“I don’t have a dick, so what do you want?” My mouth moved faster than my brain registered the comment.

Tina’s eyebrows went up and her mouth formed into a perfect “O” for about a second, then she broke into a smile, and a laugh gurgled out from her as though I told a joke. Only looking at Tina proved that I didn’t just think that comment.

“You are funny,” Tina said, letting the laugh die out as though it was merely a casualty of the conversation. “There is something I need from you.”

I leaned forward in my desk. “Name it, and I’ll make sure you don’t get it.”

Tina balked at me, her hand touching her chest, as though I’d slapped her. “This hostility is completely uncalled for.”

“You might as well make your demands, so we can be done with this exchange, because frankly, I’m bored.” I picked up a pen and tapped it on my desk.

Tina shrugged. “Just so you know, I’ll be spending a lot of time with Jack Edwards since we’ll be working on the Staples project together for the next few weeks.”

From the outside I was the perfect picture of calm. Inside, however, the world had turned red, and my toes started curling in my tennis shoes.

Granted, his attention focused away from me would seem like a divine intervention, but I didn’t really want any of that attention to be focused on Tina.

“And this is important to me how?” I kept my tone light, acting like I didn’t care at all. It didn’t matter that I really did care a lot.

She stood up, putting her hands on the edge of my desk. “A lot of time,” she said, a wicked grin on her face. “So you needn’t bother about helping him anymore.”

My jaw was locked together, and I’m sure I just wore off another layer of my canine teeth. A vampire, I’ll never be, what with ground-flat canines. “That’s a relief. The man is an idiot.” I looked down at my desk, shuffling papers around. “Are you finished?”

Tina stood, the eyebrow spider crawling again. "You should be nicer to me. I have influence with promotions and raises."

I kept my attention minimal, not even looking at her. "Sleeping with the boss will only get you so far." I waved my hand for her to leave.

"Why you!"

I raised my head just enough to see her take a step forward, as though she was about to strike me, her fist clenched, lips set in a grim line.

"Lynn?" a male voice said from outside. No sweeter sound could have ever been heard to my ears. I might not have been able to defend myself, but I might have been able to get a stain of ink on her face...

"Come in," I said, watching Tina. Her hand relaxed and it fell to her side as Jack Edwards walked in.

I smiled at him, letting my genuine relief wash over my face.

Tina spun around, her biggest slut smile on. "Jacky!" She stepped over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so glad I caught you, I wanted to take you out to dinner tonight, we need to talk about this Staples project."

Jack rolled his eyes, and I couldn't help but laugh when he removed her hand from his shoulder as though it was diseased.

"I don't work after hours."

"Well, we don't have to talk about work." Tina licked her lips, trying to be all kinds of suggestive, but it just came out looking desperate.

"I have plans." Then those cerulean eyes met mine, and my heart started pounding in my chest. "Are you ready to go?"

I blinked, grinding my teeth again. Still ticked off that he felt like he had to be my dang babysitter, I wanted to yell at him, but on the flip side, any sign to Tina that Jack was available would put her even more on the prowl.

And let's face it, though Jack wasn't my favorite person right now, even I wouldn't do anything to make him have to spend more time with Tina if I could avoid it. Even if we didn't like each other, we seemed to have an understanding about minimizing contact with Tina.

"Well, I have a few more things to do, but I'll be ready in a few minutes."

Jack nodded his head and turned to leave. "I have a couple of phone calls to make." He glanced long enough at Tina to nod to her, then he was gone.

Thank God Tina didn't have laser vision, because I'm pretty sure I would have been a carved Lynn right then. She took two strides to the edge of my desk and glared down at me.

"This is not over."

“Get lost, Tina.”

She turned and started to walk out of my cubicle, and stopped next to my locker door. Grabbing the top of the poster, she ripped it down the center, tearing off a strip right through Angel’s face.

“You evil bitch.” And I would have leaped across my desk to attack her, but my foot got stuck under the edge of my chair, and I almost fell on my desk. Tears welled in my eyes, and I bit my cheek hard enough to draw blood.

Tina just laughed as she dropped the piece of poster on the floor and walked out. Untangling myself from my chair, I shoved it against the wall hard enough to rattle the cubicle, mumbling obscenities.

I dashed over to the fallen piece of paper and picked it up, and grabbed my tape off my desk. Looking at the torn face on the picture, tears poured out of my eyes. How could she do that? How could she rip him like that? Tear him in pieces? The torn edge cut off part of Angel’s face. I reached up and ran my finger down the edge.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to the poster, to the image of the man who’d kept me company in my fantasies and kept me from losing my mind when a guy rejected me. Angel always had something good to say. Not necessarily the most politically correct thing, but he was always there for me.

And she tore him.

Just as I started trying to reattach the piece, Jack came in.

“Are you alright?”

“Fine.”

He saw the paper, the tape in my hand and the tears on my face. “What the hell?”

I sucked in a sob. “Tina,” I managed to get out, and I dropped to one of the chairs, and the sobs just poured out of me.

Jack knelt in front of me, his big arms wrapping around me, and he held me close to him, stroking my hair. “It’s okay, we’ll fix it.” He sounded a lot like my father at that moment, and in the recesses of my mind, I wondered if this was a sign I was falling for him. Most women usually fall for some kind of deviation of their father.

He managed to pull the tattered piece of paper out of my hand and moved to the locker, tape at the ready, and carefully started surgery on my Angel poster.

The tears continued to pour out of me, but I watched his exacting detail in fixing the poster with a kind of awe. Any other person would have just said, “it’s a poster, calm down.” Not Jack.

’Course, no one else really understood my whole *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* thing, either. And I didn’t really know if Jack truly got it, but he was trying, and that counted for a lot. At least he had somewhat of a clue why it means so much to me.

In a few minutes, he managed to get the poster taped together. He turned to face me, and handed me a tissue from Grandma’s neon blue crocheted Kleenex cozy I kept on my desk.

He ran his finger down my cheek, and a smile slipped across his lips. "There should be something rather pathetic about a woman crying over a poster, but I'll be damned if I can think of anything."

I shoved him in the shoulder, not enough to hurt him, but enough to make him laugh a bit. Not that I forgave him for the whole sudden overprotective bit he's been up to, but still, I couldn't help feeling some of my anger recede. Especially now that he fixed my poster.

Jack grinned and grabbed my wrist, and his thumb started caressing my hand. "So, I guess you're not mad at me anymore?"

I pulled my hand away, "I am mad at you." I crossed my arms over my chest.

Jack stood up and leaned against my locker. "But at least now you're talking to me."

I turned my head the other way, refusing to look at him. "I still don't like being treated like a child."

Jack smirked. "This from the girl who was just crying over a poster."

I stuck my tongue out at him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

If our last outing could be called swanky, this one could be called cheap. Well, not really, because pizza isn't exactly cheap, but still, here we were, sitting at Pizza Hut, splitting a supreme pizza and a plate of buffalo wings.

Not that I minded. Pizza Hut hadn't changed its motif in years, and I rather liked the red plaid tablecloths and the dim lighting in the place. It made me think I could have really been in a real Italian pizzeria if there wasn't a zit-faced teen behind the counter who I prayed didn't actually fix the pizza. I had a craving for pizza (again, I swear I can eat pizza seven days a week) and Jack had obliged me.

We hadn't really talked on the way, considering I had to dump my car off at the apartment before we came here, but even in the same car we didn't really talk about Jack's ultimatum.

Which gave me time to think about it at least a little bit rationally.

Really, he was still being an ass, but his argument did have merit. I couldn't help remembering the email I'd gotten from Sunshine a while back about that online stalker guy. Not to mention the comments Will had made...

Neither seemed legit, but still, the fact that two separate people brought it to my attention made me pause long enough to give Jack the benefit of the doubt.

Oh, and that web page he'd showed me about the Fan Fiction Killer. That was kinda hard to ignore.

Jack sipped a Coors Light, and I drank a Diet Pepsi. And he didn't say a word as I scraped the toppings off my pizza and ate them first.

However, his brow remained pretty much furrowed as we ate, and from the tough set of his jaw, something was on his mind. I figured he was beginning to see just how insane I really was, what with

crying over a poster being ripped. Come on, it was Angel. And it was an exclusive poster. Any *Buffy* fan would empathize.

Well, that or the whole meeting with Rugby, which I still hadn't completely confirmed anyway. There were still so many variables—his flight could be delayed, his transfer canceled, or he might even decide he didn't want to meet after all.

I rocked to the side, shifting in my chair. Might as well get this conversation going. After all, we were in a public place that might keep us both calm. Though Pizza Hut was rather empty of dine-in customers, so we probably could shout at each other if we wanted to.

I set down my fork, rubbed my hands on my napkin and cocked my head to the side in what I hoped was an intimidating look.

"So we gonna get this out on the table?"

"There's nothing to discuss," he said, sipping off his beer.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Nothing, huh? The silent treatment won't make a disagreement go away, you know."

"Nothing's bothering me."

Jack just looked at me like I'd lost my mind as he took a bite of pizza. Oh well. Here goes. "Look, I know you don't like the idea of me meeting Rugby."

"Rugby?"

"That's his handle. Just listen to me for a moment."

"There's nothing to discuss."

"Wait, I think there might be," I said, plowing full speed ahead into my plan.

"You're not seeing him, that's all there is to it."

I let out a sigh. "Jack, please, let me finish."

Jack leaned back, his arms crossing over his chest. "Two minutes."

"Two? Not five? Not seven? That's not a lot of time."

Jack glanced at his watch. "One minute fifty-two seconds."

"Brat," I muttered. "Here's the thing. I will be meeting Rugby, when I say." Jack merely raised a challenging brow at me, ready to speak, but I held my finger up to stop him. This was my two minutes here. "But what if I didn't go alone?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if you came with me?"

Jack's head tilted slightly to the right, his eyes sparkling with something akin to enthusiasm, but a reserved, almost cold professional enthusiasm. He liked the idea, but in his head, he mulled it over from a thousand directions, figuring every in and out of the possibility before agreeing to anything.

Michael Douglas had that same look on his face in the movie *Wall Street*.

"That, I would be much more comfortable with." He took another sip off his beer.

I nodded my head. The compromise may not have been exactly what I would have wanted, but Jack's attitude was from a caring place. Arrogant and stupid, but from a caring place.

And didn't all guys operate that way?

When we got back to my apartment, Jack came in and stuck the remainder of the pizza in the fridge, and we sat on the couch.

I patted his leg. "You're so lucky."

"Why is that?" He took my hand. I couldn't help marveling at how his fingers met mine, taking mine in and enveloping them, like they were made to go in his.

I let my thumb run over the side of his hand. Mentally, I imagined his hand aged fifty years and still sitting like this, holding hands, two old farts in love.

Love...

Was I falling in love with Jack Edwards?

I glanced at his profile, the set of his jaw, the way his hair fell down over his ear, like he needed a haircut. My tummy started turning to goo. I had it so bad for this guy, there was no way I could deny it.

Even if I wanted to.

Which made the whole thing with Tina Smith even more upsetting. Gah, she was going to have to work with him.

"You get to work with the notorious Tina Smith..." I let my words trail off, feeling my stomach start to roll.

I knew I had nothing to worry about, really, but still, the idea of her, well, being her—trying to press against my man...

It just made me nauseous.

"So how are we going to get her back for the poster?"

"We?" I raised my eyebrow and twisted so I could see his face. "Since when am I one to exact revenge on anyone?"

He laughed. "Oh please. Don't tell me in that pretty little head of yours you haven't concocted some hair-brained scheme to piss Tina off."

The truth be told, I really hadn't. Hadn't even considered it. I must still be in shock from the fact that she went so far as to tear my poster.

Jack cupped my chin. "Personally, I think we should make out in front of her." He kissed my cheek, but not a sweet, chaste type kiss. This was the kind to get my motor running.

My tummy started to vibrate in anticipation. How was he able to kiss me like that, something so simple, and make my insides burn?

I rolled my eyes at the absurdity of his idea, but that gesture was ruled out by his plundering kisses. My God, this man was a horny guy. His hand went rampant over my shirt, untucking the blouse and sliding up my stomach, creating ripples of excitement in me that no one in their right mind should be able to do with their clothes on.

So I lay back and let the electricity flow between us as he ran kisses up and down me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Benne checked his email for the thirteenth time since he logged onto the Internet fifteen minutes ago.

Not a word from Hush.

Nothing.

He knew she was home, he knew what her schedule was, it wasn't like she didn't have time to answer his emails.

She was never one to reject him like this.

Logging off the Internet, Benne opened his monitoring systems. It was hard to not watch Hush every second of every day. She was so incredible, so beautiful, so perfect.

Everything he'd ever wanted. Hush was his exact fantasy girl.

It had taken months to get close enough to her to confirm his suspicions, but he had been certain with her, just like he had been with every one of his past experiences.

Though unlike his past attempts, Hush would be perfect. He could feel it, this would be his finest hour.

He checked the monitors. She wasn't in the bedroom, her bed laid in a rumpled mess. He didn't remember the last time he'd seen her change her sheets. He'd have to educate her about the necessity of cleanliness.

Flipping to the camera in her living room, he spotted her.

Lost in the throws of passion, Lynn was on her hands and knees in her living room, and that man knelt behind her, pounding into her.

Benne clenched his fists. How could Hush do this to him again? How could she desecrate herself with a man who treated her so horribly?

He'd seen her crying, no doubt from this scum's horrid treatment of her. Why does she do this? She had no idea of her goddess stature. How could she not see it?

She was everything.

Yet she allowed herself to be desecrated.

Benne's stomach started to roll, and he ran from the room, throwing up his dinner in the bathroom.

As he scrubbed the bathroom from his eruption, he considered his options for preparing Hush.

She would need to be thoroughly cleaned and prepared. His hands shook as he scrubbed the floor, digging the scrub brush into the tile floor, scraping off the wax finish.

He paused long enough to look at the gouge he'd made in the tile's finish.

Hush would need to have everything removed to properly purify her.

There was so much that needed to be done.

Walt's on Central and Rock Road was not a typical karaoke bar, as in it didn't have a stage for singers, or even a really spacious area for the emcee to set up, but it did have the televisions.

A big screen dominated the wall to the right of the door, with four smaller televisions around it. More televisions hung in numerous corners of the room, and several of the booths had small TVs in them for additional viewing pleasures.

Walt's was pretty much a small sports bar that had karaoke twice a week. The crowd was young and rather college and white-collar oriented. How or why my little circle of karaoke friends found it, I'll never know.

To the left of the door was a raised area with a bunch of tables, where we usually sat. It was spacious and fairly private, separated from most of the crowd. I headed straight for the raised area, where I saw Bella and Stuart sitting, along with Soundman and a couple of other guys I didn't know.

I was kinda glad to get out of the house. As soon as I got home from work, I'd hopped on the Internet, and got bombarded by Will and Rugby—Will wanting to know about Jack, whether I talked to him again, and Rugby wanting me to let him know where in town to look for a house.

Everything was still on for Rugby's arrival in town, and I was getting excited about it. I thought he had said he'd be in town this weekend.

Though I wasn't looking forward to telling Jack about his arrival so soon. I knew Jack would go all ballistic about it.

So tonight, a drink sounded really, really good.

Bella and Stuart were halfway through their first pitcher of beer, and Soundman was on his second whiskey and seven. I shrugged out of my coat and stowed my purse under the table. Stuart and Bella smiled at me, but kept their attention focused on the karaoke books in front of them. Both held slips in their hands and pens ready to write.

“Hey, Soundman,” I said, smiling.

“Hey.” He reached one of his thick hands toward me. It amazed me how someone as large and intimidating as Soundman could have such a gentle touch. Very few people in the world made me feel protected like Soundman did.

I glanced around the bar, seeing the stream of twenty to thirty-something’s filtering in, scanning the room, and looking for a table. I couldn’t help watching the door for Jack. I’d invited him this morning, on a whim, and he said he’d meet me here. ’Course, actually coming out on a weeknight was a huge deal for me in general.

What was going on with me? Usually I was at home on the computer, now here I was out and about, being social, with a quasi-boyfriend. I say quasi, only because I didn’t consider him a boyfriend when he was being a butthead.

“Glad you decided to come,” Bella said, smiling at me.

“Well, it’s Wednesday,” I said, grinning.

“Thank God you’re not stuck in your house.”

“Why is that?” I asked as the waitress arrived with my drink.

“Well, you’ve been hiding in your house for months. We were considering doing an intervention between you and that computer.” She leaned toward me. “Though if, uh, you’ve not been alone, I think we could hold off on the intervention...”

I couldn’t help laughing.

Bella glanced at Stuart. “Look, Lynn’s smitten.”

“Looks like she’s finally gotten laid,” Soundman said.

I about choked on my drink.

“It’s not that serious,” I said with a shrug.

Bella started coughing, covering her mutterings of “whatever”. I elbowed her.

“It’s multiple orgasms serious.” Bella grinned at Soundman, referring to the phone call where she’d drilled me about Jack last weekend. It’s amazing how we girlfriends can dig that info out of each other when we want to.

Soundman raised a pierced eyebrow. “Interesting.”

Bella stared at the karaoke book. "Well, that's what she said."

"Good going. That guy from the Chalet?" Soundman smirked, and I wondered if that facial motion hurt the piercing in the side of his lip.

"Yeah."

Soundman's approval was written all over his Native American features. He looked over at the door, watching the people come in, and he raised his arm, waving at some guys I didn't recognize.

The guys, both either late twenties or early thirties approached the table, both dressed like they walked out of the Eddie Bauer catalog. Me and my black T-shirt from Target and jeans from Wal-Mart felt a bit intimidated.

Soundman started talking to them, and all I could tell was that the guys were laughing with him, and there was a lot of male handshaking and arm smacking going on.

Stupid male rituals. I stuck my nose in the air and ignored them, even when Soundman introduced them as they took a seat. I shook both their hands, but I'll be damned if I could remember who they were after they were seated.

Bella stared at the karaoke book like a deer in headlights. The woman could sing anything, but she could never decide what she wanted to sing. It was like putting a child in a candy store, they couldn't decide what candy was right that day.

"So what am I going to sing?" Bella asked.

"I don't know." I grabbed a blank slip and wrote my name on the paper, and the songs I wanted to sing. This was a No Doubt night. At least I was starting with No Doubt. "I'm singing 'It's My Life', and then I think I'll try some Madonna."

"I wanted to sing No Doubt," Bella said.

"Then write it down. Winner gets a free drink."

Bella shook her head. "You know I'd blow you out of the water. So I'll do some Bonnie Raitt."

I shook my head and looked at the door. When who happens to walk in, but the one and only Jack Edwards.

"Whoa. How can one man look that good all the time?" Bella said, leaning over to me.

Jack looked around after pocketing his ID, and I saw quite a few women turn their heads to see the tall, broad-shouldered man who had just walked through the door.

Mine, all mine, ladies, keep your mitts to yourself. A gal I knew only as "Walt's Slut Number Three" walked right up to him and introduced herself. Jack, ever the gentleman, shook her hand, but saw me over her shoulder, mumbled something to her and walked straight to me.

"Hey. Have I missed anything?" He took the chair next to me, glancing at the guys that were sitting

across from me.

“Not yet, I was just about to turn in my slip.”

After greeting everyone at the table, and meeting the newcomers, Jack looked around, taking in the darkened atmosphere and the crowd. He stared for a bit at the weathered American flag that hung on the wall behind our table.

“This is an okay place,” Jack said. “Kinda small.”

“I know, but they have free chips and salsa after ten.”

“Oh, well, free is always good.”

About that time, Luke reached the table, his hair gelled up perfectly, his black shirt with blue flames over his nice T-shirt, and he looked ever so much the fashion plate.

“Luke!” I shook his hand across the table.

“Hey, all,” Luke said with the half wave reserved for pageant contestants. He scooted in next to Soundman, and he tossed his green enveloped karaoke CD on the table.

“Twice in a month? Lynn, what’s wrong with you? I shoulda brought your CD. Good to see you out again.”

“Woulda, shoulda, coulda.”

Luke laughed. “Hey, I got my new lightsaber in the car. I’ll show you after we go,” he said with a grin. Luke collected the Star Wars replica lightsabers, and I thought he had about six now. “It’s really cool. It makes noises.”

I stood, grabbing my slip. “Taking my slip down, anyone else?”

Bella and Stuart madly started writing on theirs and handed them to me. I weaved in and out of the crowd to the karaoke host. The host, named John, was a guy in his mid-forties who looked like when he wasn’t singing karaoke he spent a lot of time outside. He smiled and we mumbled pleasantries at each other as I gave him the slips. He said he was glad to see me, and stuck us in the rotation.

When I got back to the table, Jack was flipping through a karaoke book.

“I thought you didn’t sing.”

“Oh, this isn’t for me. It’s for you.” The table rocked a bit as he turned the pages. Our long table consisted of three small square ones, butted up next to each other, of slightly varying height. I grabbed a couple of coasters and crawled down to shimmy them under the legs.

I wasn’t about to lose my tequila sunrise because of a rocking table.

As I started to climb up, Jack leaned down. “You know, there are other things you can do while you’re down there.” His blue eyes sparkled with desire, and I felt my cheeks blush.

“Not here,” I said, trying to keep my composure.

Bella glanced over at me as I got comfortable in my chair again. “He may need some work, if it’s that easy to get him off.”

I shot her a dirty look. She just laughed, as well as the rest at the table.

About that time, John started the karaoke. He launched into his spiel about being sure to tip the wait staff and bartender as he launched into “Hush” by Deep Purple.

Which only made me and Jack snicker.

Jack and I both sang along with the lyrics, and his hand ran up and down my leg under the table. The karaoke host worked his way around the room, singing to the crowd, and even came up to our little section. Everyone at the table smiled at him, and he came around behind me, and put his hand on my shoulder.

I didn’t think anything about the gesture, but Jack did. I swear on my computer that I saw Jack’s eyes turn to red devils, like Anakin Skywalker in the *Revenge of the Sith* movie. For a second, I thought he was going to knock John down for touching me.

Jack’s fingers laced through mine, and he glared up at John, who jerked his hand away from me and left our little nook at the bar.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jack scanning the room, that furrow in his brow back again with a vengeance.

“Calm down, he’s just a friend.”

“Interesting song choice.” Why it was funny when the dee jay was on the floor, and not funny now, I didn’t know.

“He always sings that song. It’s his opener. We’d probably wonder what was wrong with him if he sang something else to start the show.”

The furrow in his brow eased back a bit. But not much.

Frustration started building inside me. If he was going to be all macho worrywart on me, then he wouldn’t be coming to Walt’s again anytime soon.

Bella saw the exchange, and asked me with that silent, quasi-psychic ability of hers if I was okay. I nodded at her, trying to brush off her worries.

I don’t think she believed me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Benne scanned the crowd and finally, he saw her. Hush was here, a wry smile on her face as she heard the lyrics to the Deep Purple song. The karaoke deejay was good to sing it as his first song of the night. Of course, he’d come here for the last few weeks, and knew the man would sing it, especially if it was requested.

However, he wasn't pleased that the man from her apartment was sitting with Hush. And he wore his jealousy on his sleeve.

Tsk tsk, he thought. He would never show that kind of jealousy over a man who could be Hush's father. The deejay was old enough, but he certainly did not have the interest in Hush that way. Jealousy tended to bring out the worst in men. There was a certain prudence to jealousy, and then there was control.

Men who showed that sort of jealousy, they used it for control to stifle the beauty of the weak women they possessed.

They had no right to touch a goddess like Hush.

As Benne moved forward in his designs, he'd make certain that Hush understood what she deserved, that she was a pure goddess, a light of completion that he would achieve.

Of course, there would be certain elements of control, that was a given in the beginning.

She would just need to understand that, and when she accepted, because he was certain that she would, then the true nature of their relationship would begin.

He would show her every possible thing that made a woman feel true desire, true worship and true freedom. The freedom of pure surrender.

By God, he was going to make her feel all the pleasure that she deserved, that she wrote about, that she needed. Her writings screamed for it.

And he was going to give it to her.

Benne licked his lips.

One lick at a time.

When John called my name to sing my first song, I casually stood and headed toward the big screen, however, the way the tables were scooted together, I really couldn't get next to it, so I had to stand in the center of the main walkway to sing and read the monitor.

As I sang my rendition of No Doubt's remake of "It's My Life", I scanned the crowd, only occasionally glancing at the screen to read the words.

Typical groups, only about twenty percent of the room even taking the time to look at me, which was fine by me, but there were a lot of heads bobbing to the music, and that was always a good sign.

Some people screamed out the words with me, and I smiled, meaning I was doing well early in the evening, and people were still somewhat paying attention.

As the song reached the bridge, I swayed with the music, checking out the crowd.

And my vision stopped cold.

In the far corner of the bar, a man, probably mid-thirties, dark hair, and eyes that looked like they were made of coal stared back at me. A shiver ran through my body, and every hair on me stood up.

His head nodded to the beat, and he sipped on his drink, but his gaze never left me. I looked away, flipping my attention toward the big screen. The intensity made me shiver again, and I missed a cue on the song.

This wasn't like the way Jack psychoanalyzed me, this was more. Intense and desperate, primal, yet cold and calculating—like I was staring death in the face.

I struggled to get through the end of the song and I could feel those coal eyes staring at me. I almost ran back to my chair.

As soon as I sat, Jack took my hand. "What, what is it?"

I started shaking my head.

Bella must have missed my slight freak out, because she grabbed my arm. "I win, you missed a cue."

I pried her fingers off my arm. "Not now."

This of course made Bella scoot closer, and lean in. "What's wrong?"

"That guy over there, he gave me the willies." I tried to shake off the horribly bad vibes that filled me. My gut instinct was to run, to get the hell out of there, but I didn't want to cause a scene.

"What guy, where?" Bella asked.

I described him to Bella and Jack, and now the rest of the group was listening as intently as they could with the karaoke emcee introducing a new singer. Luke leaned in as well as Soundman.

Jack's gaze darted across the room, and he relayed to me the color of the scary guy's shirt. I nodded at him. I looked back at Bella.

"I can't stay. I don't know what it is, but I gotta go. I'm so freaked out; I don't think I could sing again." I drained my glass.

I tried to focus on something not related to the guy and his eyes. My stylist, Sydney, took the mic and started to sing her own song. She could make my lame hair look awesome, so she had to be pretty good. Tonight she was dressed in a Happy Bunny T-shirt that said "You suck and that's so sad".

I swore she looked thinner than she used to. Not that she was ever fat, but her elbows looked bonier than I remembered. And the way she belted out the Alanis Morissette song made me wonder if all wasn't grand in her world.

I risked a glance to the guy with the eyes, just to see if he was staring at Sydney with as much intensity as he stared at me.

Nope. He was still focused on me, and another wave of fear ran through me.

Sydney finished her song, and I clapped for her, if only to hide my shaking hands.

As Sydney walked away, she glanced at me, and gave me a thumbs up and a wave. Normally, she would come over and say hi, but tonight, she headed for her table of friends, but she didn't look quite right.

I made a note to ask her about it when I saw her again.

Bella stood, pulling my attention away from Sydney. Bella was a woman on a mission, and I wondered what that mission was.

"I have to pee," she said, smiling innocence. And her innocent smile was usually the sign of her about to do something incredibly stupid.

Like go talk to that guy in the corner.

I motioned her to me. "Don't go over there, Bella. There's something not right with that guy. Don't, please? Promise me you won't?"

She smiled like she was going to anyway, but my expression must have changed her mind. Her face sobered, and she nodded her head. "I promise, I won't."

I watched her walk to the main level, past the U-shaped bar, and weave through the crowd. I couldn't see her go into the bathroom because of the crowd, but she didn't head toward the man in the corner.

Soundman raised his eyebrow at me. "Do you need some help?"

I shook my head, but Jack leaned over the table to Soundman. I didn't hear what they said, but I saw Jack motion toward the scary guy and Soundman glanced over at him. Soundman nodded his head in a curt nod, and Jack did the same.

Had I not been so freaked out, I would have laughed at the male communication rituals. Especially considering how they'd both been at the Chalet.

Jack grabbed my coat off the back of my chair and helped me into it. "Are you going to be okay to drive?"

I nodded. He took my hands, and they were still shaking.

"Forget it, you're riding with me. We'll swing by tomorrow and get your car, okay?"

I couldn't say anything. "I feel like I've been drained by a vamp," was all I could muster.

"Trust your gut. Has this ever happened before?"

"No."

He nodded.

I didn't pay much attention, Jack settled our bills, but I didn't even register that I needed to get out some money. I was too busy trying not to look at the guy across the bar. My head felt empty.

And I was cold.

So cold.

I tried one more glance at the man across the bar. His eyes were still on me, and they drilled into my brain. I wondered if he was some kind of psychic vampire, trying to suck my soul out of my eyes, because I couldn't look away, even as Jack grabbed my hands and pulled me up out of the chair, I couldn't look away.

All I knew for sure was that his attention was not that of a man in lust.

It was a man interested in far more than a one-night stand.

And whatever that was, it wasn't good.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jack and I hardly spoke in the car. I just sat there humming songs and staring out the windows at the nightlife of Wichita. Buildings that had been around as long as I remembered were trying to make room for the new expansions of Kellogg, which was going half-underground and half up over the roads. It would take probably a whole decade to get the conversions done.

Lost in the stare of that man, I tried to block the image out of my mind. It was not a pretty place to be. Every hair on my arms still stood on end, no matter how hard I tried to focus on the music in the car, or even the scenery.

I really didn't pay any attention to our location until I realized we weren't going to my house. And when Jack got off at Meridian and started heading north, I glanced around, but not much of the buildings around me registered.

We pulled into a small, fairly quiet looking street off Second Street.

"Where are we?"

Jack whipped into a small ranch house made of brick, standing out in the neighborhood because the mason work was done with golden brick instead of the typical red.

"My house," he said, parking the Tahoe in the drive, under the narrow carport. I went to open the door, and looked around, realizing that the neighbor's house was almost on top of Jack's. The carport was separated from the other side by a short concrete wall, which looked like it could have been taken off the Kansas Turnpike median.

"Got enough room to get out over there?"

"I think so." I tried not to fall over the concrete. Not only would I have to parachute out of the truck, I had to avoid a piece of highway separator.

Landing only with a minor bump against the median, I squeezed my way around the SUV and toward the side door that Jack already had open.

“Sorry, I don’t usually have company.”

Inside was a small, surprisingly warm kitchen. White appliances and counter tops contrasted with the warm wood paneling on the walls, matching the woodwork on the cabinets. In my head, I started imagining the cabinet handles that I loved at Lowe’s placed on his pretty cabinets.

A stifled giggle came out of me, and I shook my head. Jack glanced at me for a second, but shrugged off my giggle.

A small table sat to my left, one of those ones that had a corner bench and two chairs. The table being a heavy light wood, oak I imagined, was covered with papers and oddities that only a man would have on his kitchen table—tools, empty coffee cup, USA Today news—a novelty in Wichita—a gun belt and the guts of a gun lying out on a towel.

“I feel all kinds of safe with a broken gun on the table,” I muttered, though I couldn’t help noticing the organized way the parts were laid on the towel.

“It’s a field stripped SIG. I can put that back together in four seconds.”

Like I cared what kind of gun it was. “That’s not faster than a bullet can fly.” The sheer masculinity of his comment, not to mention that he had actually timed himself made me giggle a bit more.

And as bizarre as this evening had been, laughter seemed the only way to vent. I wanted to collapse in fits of giggles. Jack’s field stripped gun sent me over the edge. What good would it do if that guy from the bar had decided to follow? I imagined Jack throwing the parts at him to defend us, and that sent me into more laughter.

Jack didn’t notice my soft laughter, or if he did, he paid it no mind. Didn’t matter, at this point, I felt far beyond normal. Delirious came to mind.

“Do you want something to drink?” Jack’s shoes made soft thumps on the wood floor.

I shook my head. A drink might calm me down, but I was too far gone for even the most potent alcohol to soothe my mind.

Time had frozen when that man stared at me. I had been sucked into a vortex and I had lost my mind in the process.

Jack pulled a beer out of the fridge and headed out of the kitchen down a short hall. I kept my arms around myself, trying to warm up, the coldness of that man’s stare still haunting me.

“Come on in here,” Jack said, and a yellow light flipped on around a corner as he disappeared. I followed into a small living room, with a couple of rather new-looking overstuffed plaid couches. Even though I wasn’t a big fan of plaid, I had to admit I liked them. Throw pillows in navy blue, red, hunter green and plum matched the colors in the plaid. I noticed the walls had been painted an off-white, which set off the open oak entertainment center. Inside, a large collection of movies, a game system and numerous games, all neatly organized, and a cable box and VCR/DVD combo finished out the entertainment.

On the wall, Jack had a few pictures hung, nothing spectacular, one print of the Chrysler building, and another of black and white dice in a maroon frame. No pictures of family or friends, still the room was

warm and inviting.

A throw rug that looked like an old patchwork quilt lay at an angle in the center of the room, matching the colors in the couches perfectly. Jack decorated well. Which kinda scared me about him.

As Jack got comfortable, I noticed the monster remote—a touch screen.

“For someone who has a hard time with computers, that’s an awfully complicated remote you got there.”

His head snapped around to me, almost like he’d been slapped, then he turned his head back to the remote. “This is for TV.”

I nodded my head. “A man and his remote.” Then I started to giggle.

“A relationship no woman will ever understand,” he said as he started scanning through the channels.

“I imagine.” I leaned back into the couch. And my giggles started to graduate into hysterical laughter. A man and his remote ran through my mind, my dad and his remote, index finger poised and ready to flip at a second’s notice—my brother’s similar need for television control, and I started shaking my head. It seemed so funny, I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

“Lynn?” One glance at Jack showed that he didn’t appreciate the humor in the thoughts. And why couldn’t he read my thoughts to appreciate the laughter?

He stared at me like I was losing my mind.

Too late, pal, my mind’s already gone. I couldn’t stop laughing. My life had been in mortal danger, of that I had no doubt. That man had stared at me like I was some kind of prey and he was the predator.

“Lynn!” His hands were on my face, how they got there, I didn’t know, but they were there, holding my face. Cerulean eyes stared at me, panic washing through them.

Tears welled in my eyes. God, how close was I? How close was I to becoming a statistic? The tears burned down my face, and I started to lose it. Right there, on Jack’s plaid couch, I started to wail.

Jack pulled me to him, held me tight and ran his fingers through my hair. Words of comfort filled me, and I curled up on his chest.

“It was probably nothing, Lynn.” He kissed the top of my head.

I could have died tonight! I know I could have! “You didn’t see the way he looked at me.”

“Yes, I did.”

I sniffed, crawling out of the vortex of my lost mind, trying to reach the warm tethers of Jack that held me close.

“If I had come any earlier.”

“You would have been safe. I doubt that waitress or anyone else would have let anything happen to

you.”

I shook my head. “I never leave there with anyone, I always go outside alone. If you hadn’t been there...” I hated even to comprehend what might have happened. That man might have followed me... He might have come after me...

God Almighty, I might have died.

I raised my head and looked at Jack. “You might have very well saved me.”

He smiled. “Isn’t that what a man’s supposed to do? Save a damsel in distress?”

“That only happens in bad movies.”

He grinned and placed a kiss on my forehead. “I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you.” His sincerity leaked through the words, chipping into my soul.

I couldn’t help but smile I felt so safe, so good, so right. I knew he spoke the truth. There was more than one reason I knew this, but I couldn’t see the logic before. Was this what Mom used to talk about as knowing whom you’re supposed to be with? What she referred to when everything felt right?

And this felt so right. Lost in the warm masculine smell of Jack, I held on tight.

I had never cried in a man’s arms like this—this trusting, this open. This was more vulnerable than I’d ever felt before, and instead of laughing at me, Jack just held me.

And it hit me.

Not only did I have feelings for Jack Edwards, I trusted him. A feat in itself considering my past dating record. It was like I’d known him forever. I connected with him in a way that I couldn’t explain, nor did I want to. It was just there, he fit.

And I would have kept dwelling on this, but Jack suddenly jerked back, and I started looking around, as though I expected his mother to walk in the door or something.

“Hey, I have a question for you.” He hopped up off the couch. “You’ve gotten me hooked on this whole fan fiction thing, and I wanted to know something about it.”

“I have you hooked?”

“It’s nice to have references to know what women want.”

I raised my eyebrow. “And you need help in that department?”

“Well, not with you I don’t.”

“So you think.”

He smirked, leaned down and kissed me on the lips. Not one of the searing, oh-my-God-I’m-on-fire kisses, but enough to prove that if I was a good girl, there’d be more to come later.

"I'll be right back." He stepped out of the room, and I could hear his footsteps into one of the rooms, and he reemerged with a stack of papers in his hands.

He seated himself next to me. "Can you tell me the difference between these stories? Or what they have in common?" He handed me a stack of four fan fiction stories, and none of them were mine.

"What's this? Cheating on me?"

"I've been checking out all kinds of genres lately. Just seeing what's out there."

I nodded my head. It didn't take me long to figure out what I was reading.

"This one's a *Star Wars* fan fic, this one's a *Phantom of the Opera*, this one *Batman*. Man, I didn't even know they wrote *Batman* fics, and this one is *Final Fantasy*. Another genre I didn't know about."

"So what do they have in common?"

"All are rated NC-17, but that's about it."

His face fell. "I thought for sure you'd have more than that."

"What, are you taking a poll?"

"It just seemed like there was something else they all had in common, but I couldn't put my finger on it."

"It's because you're a man, dork." I tossed the pages at him. "Only a man would not get it."

"What?"

"They're goddess fics."

"Huh?" Jack's eyes widened.

"Goddess fics. Hero rushes in, saves the damsel in distress from her problems, then treats her like a goddess for the first time in her life, screwing her like no other." I shrugged as I spoke. It was a typical type of fan fiction theme—original character gets saved by a character from some genre.

"See," I said, holding one up, "This *Batman* one? It's about a gal being saved by Batman," I started thumbing through the pages, "And for reasons the author establishes, he seduces her."

"That the author establishes?"

"It's a writing thing. Create their own, shall we say, version of an established character, like Batman. The canon characters—"

"Canon characters?"

"The characters from a genre, like Batman, Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker, the characters that are established in the story."

"How do you know that?" Jack's eyes showed a kind of relief, like I'd unlocked some great mystery for

him.

I shook my head. "I run an archive. Of course I know this stuff. These are probably all series of stories, where there's serious buildup between the protag male and female. There are tons of stories out there like this. Many done in multiple parts, raising the sexual tension between the characters until, *boom*, the goddess thing happens. And the original characters get their brains bonked out. Where's your computer, I'll show you. They're like my Angel/Rennati series."

"What do you mean, like it?" His eyes went cold again. For a second, I shivered at his expression.

"It's a series of stories about a character and an OC. Pretty common in fan fiction. I have the Angel/Rennati series. He's a vamp, she's a new Slayer. They shouldn't be together, but they are. This one," I grabbed the papers from him. "I've heard of it. It's a story about a gal who lives next door to the Jedi Temple. It's a whole series."

"So these stories are parts of series?"

I nodded my head and he showed me to his computer, to prove my theory. I noticed that the computer was on, ready to roll, and he held the chair out for me. I started typing in the web addresses of the stories he gave me.

One after another, I showed him every one was a goddess story, and part of a series.

"Holy shit. I can't believe we missed that."

As I finished I wondered what in the world would make a man want to know about this stuff. It was freaky. Freakier than his concern in the living room.

Most of the people I deal with are female. At least ninety-five percent of them, anyway. I couldn't understand why Jack would be so interested in this. He just didn't seem the type.

He was in a gun club.

He had a home, a nice one at that.

Very attractive man.

He had a life.

So what was the fascination?

It wasn't female research. I would bet my computer that he's never had trouble in the pleasing females department.

As I considered this, I looked around his room. For someone who had trouble with computers, he had a really nice Dell. And the extra stuff he had around the room surprised me—printer, fax, copier combo, digital camera, huge desk to hold everything, along with three bookshelves packed full of books.

Books about true crime, forensics, web crimes and psychology books about serial killers.

Good Lord, who was this guy? The guy I knew from work didn't have all kinds of high-tech gadgets.

He wasn't even the best accountant I've ever seen, and seemed fairly computer illiterate. At least that's the excuse he always gave when he couldn't make his computer work.

"So," I said, spinning around and facing Jack. "You going to tell me the truth now?"

"Huh?" He smiled, but it didn't meet his eyes. He was stalling, probably trying to think of a convincing lie.

Which only got my hackles up.

"The truth, Jack. Who in the hell are you?" My voice rose at him, I didn't mean to yell, but I couldn't help it. After all, I was trapped here with him, and I was thinking there's nothing about Jack Edwards aside from the shape of his body that I really knew about him.

"I'm Jack."

"Bullshit." I gestured to the books all around the room. "You seem to have a morbid reading fascination." I looked at the spine of a book on the shelf. "Web Crimes and Misdemeanors? FBI Forensics? Come on, Jack!" I shook my head. "I'm not an idiot. I think you owe me a few explanations before I go running out of here screaming that you're some lunatic serial killer." A thought that had crossed my mind with all the psychology books on the shelves.

"Oh come on, Lynn, that's the dumbest thing you've ever said!" He jumped out of the chair.

"Is it?" I stood up, keeping my eyes on his. "Then explain things to me." When he didn't speak, I crossed my arms over my chest. "I'm waiting." My foot started tapping on the hardwood floor.

"You find it hard to believe that I'm interested in true crime and fan fiction? You, of all people don't think that's possible?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You, a fan fic writer, who writes smut story after smut story, you can't believe that I might be interested in you, so you try to find something wrong with me, so you don't have to trust me?"

Oh no, he did not. "And what am I supposed to think, Jack? You tell me virtually nothing about your life before you came to Kansas, you read fan fiction, you're in a gun club and you're into true crime? That's just a wee bit weird!"

"And you think if I'm not an insane *Buffy* fan like you that I'm weird?"

"At least there's a basis for all my hobbies."

"Your basis is your butt in a chair night after night, staring at a screen. You talk with people you don't even know. And you say I'm strange!"

"That's it! I'm outta here." I headed for the door. I grabbed my purse off the table and had my hand on the kitchen door when Jack grabbed my shoulder and turned me around.

"Now you wait a minute. That guy could have followed you, and what are you going to do? Just walk out of here and let him take you? Are you out of your mind?"

“I’d rather have him take me, at least with a stalker I’d know what to expect.” For once in my life, my mouth ran ahead of my brain, and I had a snappy comeback.

Jack fisted his hands in his hair, grumbling curses. “Go ahead and get yourself killed. I don’t give a shit.” He muttered something about being in over his head as he stalked out of the kitchen.

I jerked the kitchen door open. I stormed out of the house, running into the Tahoe in my dash to prove to Jack that I wasn’t an idiot. I’m sure I looked so glamorous trying to squeeze between the massive...

“Stupid*truck*.” I grumbled, loud enough that I hoped Jack could hear me. Then I took a swing at the thing.

I didn’t damage it, at least not that I could tell in the dark, but hurting something that belonged to Jack felt good. As I slid past the SUV, Jack flipped on his front porch light.

What, so he was going to watch me? Make sure I was safe?

Damn chivalrous jerk. His shadow passed over the front window and I let a profanity bird fly.

What’s up with him anyway? I mean, talk about being all kinds of nuts. Fan fiction and true crime? There was just something weird about that. And all those genres, so strange too. What a random selection.

The chill of the Kansas early spring night bit into me, the wind howled, making the trees bend at odd angles. My hair whipped around my face, and I turned to face the southbound wind in order to get the hair out of my face.

In the chilled air, I scanned the street, looking for a car to start up, something suspicious. Not that I’d know a suspicious car if it rolled over my toe.

I grabbed my cell phone out of my purse to call Bella.

“So stupid.” How dumb could I be to let Jack drive me here? And leave my car? How many times have I been in a similar situation like this and had to call for a ride from someone because I wanted to leave before my ride did?

More times than I could count.

Sighing as my phone connected with Bella’s, I waited for her to answer. But of course, there was no answer. I didn’t figure there would be. Bella was either singing or talking to someone, and didn’t see her phone go off. She’d call me back in a little bit, though.

She always did.

“So how long are you going to stand out here?” Jack appeared, walking past the Tahoe to meet me at the foot of the drive.

“I’m waiting on my ride.”

A strong gust of wind blew me off balance, and Jack mumbled a curse.

“For spring, you have fucked up weather here.” Jack stuck his hands in his pockets and pressed his arms against his body to block the wind.

I inhaled a deep breath of the cold night air, spinning around and basking in the wind. “We love having more than one season here in the Great Plains.”

Jack scanned up and down the street. The wind blew his shirt tight against him, and for a second, I swore I saw a gun in the front of his shirt.

I stared for a second, but he moved, and the indentation that might have been a gun disappeared. I hoped I was imagining things.

“So who’s picking you up?”

“Bella.” *Please don’t take this instant to call me back, please Bella*, I willed psychically to her across town.

Which meant she would be calling just any...

Brring, brring, brring.

Damnit.

“Hello.”

“Hey,” Bella said, the karaoke in the background overpowering everything, and I was shocked she could hear me.

Jack just stared, and from his posture, he couldn’t wait to hear what I was about to say.

“I need a ride.”

“What?”

“I need a ride,” I said again, annunciating every word.

“What? You had a good drive?”

I rolled my eyes. “Pick me up.”

“He picked you up? Stu, you have to add that to your list...carry me to bed.” Bella yelled at her boyfriend, and laughed when I assumed he either flipped her off or rolled his eyes.

Jack smirked at me.

I flipped him the bird and tried one more time. “I need you to pick me up.”

“What?” Bella said. “I can’t carry you. What are you drinking over there?”

I rubbed my head, feeling another headache coming on. “Never mind.” I hung up the phone.

Jack couldn't cover his laughter, even though he had a hand over his mouth. "Great friend you got there."

"Bite me. I'll just call a cab."

Jack shook his head. "No, you won't. I'll take you back to your car." His keys rattled in his hand.

"Fine." I walked around to the side of the Tahoe.

"What, no smart-assed remarks?"

"Shut up and take me back to Walt's." I got in the SUV.

Chapter Twenty-nine

The ride back to Walt's was quiet and tension filled as Jack maneuvered through the somewhat silent streets of Wichita.

He just sat there, facing straight ahead, driving like a man on a mission. His window was open and let in enough of a breeze to flutter his hair around as he drove, but he didn't acknowledge it. His fingers remained tight on the steering wheel, and his jaw locked—like he was on his way to a funeral.

I hoped he didn't think it was mine.

We pulled into the parking lot, and still not a word was said as Jack found my car. He parked the SUV, blocking me in.

I realized that because of his parking job, no one would see me getting into my car, and I was pretty sure Jack wouldn't move until I was locked safely in it, and had the engine running.

I pulled my keys out of my denim jacket and reached for the door handle.

Jack grabbed my arm. Turning to look at him, a softness lingered in his eyes, something I'd never seen before, and my heart lurched in my chest.

"Come back to my house."

So much more showed in his expression. Still, I shook my head. I would not follow him home like an obedient child. Thirty-year-old women didn't buckle to childish needs.

That damn look he gave me melted any pissed-off feelings that I had toward him. I really, really, really wanted to go back to his house, but I couldn't. I wouldn't be swayed by blue puppy-dog eyes.

Remember, you're mad at him. You don't know who Jack Edwards is. And he's freaked you out almost as much as the guy in the bar did.

"No, Jack." Probably one of the hardest things I'd ever said to a guy. Especially Jack. But I refused to buckle.

His brow got that furrow again, and he let go of my arm. A slight nod of his head was enough.

I pulled the door handle and it cast a harsh light on us both. The furrows in his brow defined his forehead and hard lines crossed his face.

"I'll see you tomorrow." I started to get out of the SUV.

Jack shook his head, grabbed my neck and pulled me to him.

I almost fought back as he brought his lips to mine.

Almost.

'Course there's not much one can do when Jack Edwards kisses you.

My hormones took over and I grabbed his hair, pulling him closer to me.

Jack moaned as I pulled on his hair a bit more. I didn't mean to, but it just kinda happened as I savored our dueling kiss filled with tongues on a rampage. His hand caressed my cheek, sliding down my arm and threading in my hair.

We held on to each other for dear life, as though everything in the world depended on this kiss—it was almost like if I got out of this car, we'd never see each other again. The desperation burned in both of us. Our tongues fought and battled, intending to take no prisoners, and we both clung to each other, our hands running over each other as we kissed.

Finally, we had to recede, we both needed to breathe.

Jack's eyes remained closed. "Come home with me. Not for safety." He tipped his head to the side. "But because you want to spend the night with me."

I shook my head. "I shouldn't." Our noses brushed and my resolve started collapsing.

I really have to get out of the truck now. Let go, step out of the car. Remember why he worried me.

Remember the fan fic, the true crime, the weirdness.

The kissing, the touching, the feel of his lips on mine, my girly parts started calling out their favorite things about Jack, blurring the line of resolve I'd drawn for myself.

There had to be a reasonable explanation for his wild interests.

Jack's lips met mine again in another searing kiss, and whatever icy resolve I had melted under the Jack-induced fire.

"Follow me back," he said, breathing against my lips.

I didn't want to look at him. One look at those blue eyes and I knew I would be done.

Still, my stupid eyes fluttered open. The desperation and lust residing in those cerulean jewels made my breath catch in my throat.

Stick a fork in me. I'm done.

I nodded my head.

Lust and relief filled his face. A soft baby kiss met me, and Jack let go.

"I'll drive fast."

Nodding like a lovesick fool, I mentally berated myself, but my loins had other plans.

Benne sipped his drink slowly in Walt's. It had been at least an hour since Hush had left the bar, but he wasn't about to go after her. The table she'd been sitting at seemed oblivious to him. At first, Hush had gestured to him, and all eyes were on him. But now that she'd gone, they seemed to care very little about him, probably assuming he was just another drunk who had admired Hush's voice.

Benne knew that she would be suspicious if he identified himself to her early. He didn't want to scare her off.

Their meeting had to be perfect. Everything had to be perfect, and he wasn't ready yet to meet her. There were still a few things to make ready.

He considered sending her an email tonight, telling her he'd made it into town. He'd found her, and she was perfect. The temptation to see her, meet her and touch her almost overwhelmed him. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. Unlike many of the other women he'd met, she was striking. Fluttery brown hair, soft but intelligent eyes, sweet hands that only caressed the microphone, not like some who held it and screamed at it in order to make themselves heard, all a beautiful combination. She knew how to own that phallic stick.

His member ached as she had sung. How he couldn't wait to do all the things she wanted him to do. Watching her fingers, the way her mouth moved, he knew she would be the one to correct all past mistakes.

It was only a matter of time now. He would have her, and everything would be perfect.

The others had been mere warm-ups for Hush.

He'd been looking for her for years, and he had finally found her.

Chapter Thirty

Having decided to return to Jack's house, I never bothered getting out of the SUV. Sure I tried, but damn, if he didn't turn those cerulean eyes on me and make my heart melt again.

How did he do that?

Jack zipped through the city streets driving like a maniac, and I held on for dear life.

I shook my head as we merged into traffic. "I shouldn't be doing this." And I knew I shouldn't.

"Yes, you should." Jack watched the traffic as he drove with the true speed of a NASCAR enthusiast.

There were things about Jack that didn't add up. I opened my mouth to say just that, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I needed time to analyze, to figure out what it was that bothered me. Lurking behind the shadows, something about him wasn't quite right. After all, why would a guy who professes to hate computers and email have such a fancy setup in his home office? All the bells and whistles to boot, including a web cam.

I didn't get it, but I was going to find out what it meant.

Jack's hand grazed my thigh. "There are much worse things in this world to be afraid of than me." In the sparkling light of the Wichita night, his face said incredible words that not either of us could explain.

I tried to smile, to express anything but the lingering doubts in my head. "I'm not afraid of you, Jack."

"You're trembling."

"I'm not trembling." At least I didn't think I was.

As we pulled up in Jack's drive, he leaned over and kissed my cheek. "You were trembling."

Trying to form a rebuttal that wouldn't sound completely stupid, I hesitated in getting out of the car. Jack, however, decided to play gentleman and opened my car door. Something primal in his eyes made my insides scream, and I grabbed my purse and almost leaped into his arms.

A satisfied grin filled Jack's face as he escorted me into the house.

Inside the door, he took me in his arms and pushed me up against the door, attacking me with a desperate kiss. My knees turned to Jell-O and I thought I would fall to the floor, but Jack didn't allow that.

He scooped me up and walked me through the house to his bedroom. In the dark, I could see a bed with a bookcase headboard. I didn't care. Jack was too busy laying me down and taking off my shoes. Then he started a slow, lazy massage up and down my calf.

His hands were soon followed by his tongue, slipping around the top of my foot, my ankle, up and down my calf, sending off wildfires through my body. A tiny part of my brain reflected the fact that he was finding erogenous zones in areas I had no idea there were erogenous zones.

Jack peppered my skin with soft kisses that sent me into shivers and bucks of pleasure. When I bothered to look at him, a feral passion had descended into his eyes, and I swore he'd set me on fire if I stared too long. Not that I had much control over my eyes. They kept rolling back into my head at almost every caress he administered.

Removing my pants with the utmost care, he placed more feather kisses all over my lower stomach and the tops of my thighs, avoiding my most sensitive areas, but that only made me buck more as he slipped his fingers under my underwear strap and rolled the thong off. A breeze of cool air hit me and I shuddered, realizing that Jack had blown softly on my nether regions.

Once again, my eyes did that roll back into my head.

He covered me with more kisses, working his way up my body until his clothed groin pressed against me in just the right way, so I arched into him. His hands ran up my body, stroking my breasts in ways that I know had to be illegal. One hand nipped at a throbbing nipple, and I thought I would scream, but Jack met me in another kiss, and I swore the man was erotica incarnate.

Still, it remained rather unfair that he was still clothed and I was pretty much not, so I started pulling at his shirt, and he broke away from our tongue dance to remove it. When he settled back down on me, I swore my skin would melt, his hot, magma-like skin conforming to mine, and light-headedness took over.

Now the only thing separating us was his pants, and frankly, I decided it was my mission to remove that level of separation. Not in my whole life had the feeling of one man's skin on mine felt this good, this amazing, this...

Oh yeah...

I grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him over onto his back as I attacked his pants, kissing over the broad chest that was littered with a small amount of dusky red-brown hair in between his pecks and a little down his chest, sliding down like an unworn path to the area of extreme pleasure. Unfastening his Levi's, I shucked them off his hips, revealing boxer briefs that would rip had he been any harder.

I smiled wickedly. "What is this?" I stroked his hardness through the cloth, and Jack let out a groan.

From somewhere in his chest, he growled my name, but I only grinned at him as I slipped the underwear off and just squatted between his knees, looking at his wonder stick for a while.

For a man's privates, it really was pretty stunning. At the moment, it throbbed as I exhaled a breath on it. Another strange sound emanated from Jack, and I took it upon myself to continue observing this strange life form that bobbed in front of me as I applied only my breath.

Such a wonder! I blow a kiss, and it bobs! I grazed my finger just under the rock hard tip, and even more cardinal sounds come out of Jack. Delicate touches up and down the shaft brought out even more guttural sounds. I leaned closer, my lips mere millimeters from it as I ran my fingers along the length.

Without my command, my tongue snaked out and brushed the tip.

"God, Lynn."

I grinned up at him, but he didn't see me, his eyes were tightly sealed and his hands gripped the pillows with white knuckles.

That was my cue. I took him in my mouth, and I swore, he almost came off the bed.

"Woman," he cried out as I continued my exquisite torture of him. One of his hands grabbed the back of my head, and I thought I would lose it right then. Pulling my hair, he urged me away from my toy, so I regretfully crawled up, but not without nibbling and licking my way back to him.

When I reached his mouth, less than a second passed before he had me in another magma-hot kiss and he rolled me over, ready to take me. He paused at my entrance only for a second, then let out a muffled curse as he climbed off the bed and disappeared.

I blinked. “Jack?”

He reappeared, rolling on a condom. “Sorry.” He apologized with kisses as he worked his way from my feet up to my lips.

“Apology... My God, that has got to be prohibited somewhere.” I moaned as he did something to my breasts that had me burning with desire all over again.

“In most states.” He paused, now fully armed at my entrance. This time, he didn’t position me any particular way, he just plunged in. The connection of our bodies as he started a slow pump sent me rocking my head back and forth, and I looked for something to hold on to.

Grabbing the edge of the headboard, I held on for all I was worth. Jack picked up the pace and brought me to the floating moment, and as the orgasm crashed over me, I fell and fell and fell, until I landed safely on Jack’s bed, in his arms, his head nuzzling my ear.

He placed a few more kisses on my cheek and rolled off, I assumed to dispose of the condom, because he was back in a moment, and he crashed on the bed next to me. Only then did I realize the bed really wasn’t made, the covers smashed at the end of the bed, and Jack grabbed them, pulling a thick white comforter over us, then wrapped his arm around me and pulled me to him. Not much remained in my brain as I tumbled off to sleep, only some soft murmurs from Jack.

“My dear sweet beautiful, Hush,” Jack whispered in my ear as I tumbled off to sleep.

The morning came in a rush, Jack up and about, taking me back to my apartment and waiting for me to change my clothes—I had showered with him before we left his place, and that was awesome—then on to the office. He stopped at a Starbuck’s downtown and got us both coffee. Though I don’t usually drink the stuff, it tasted good this morning.

The day went pretty smooth too, nothing terrible, no contact with the fake boob gal Tina Smith, but that didn’t mean anything. ’Course it didn’t help that my allergies were acting up. Being outside in the wind last night at Jack’s was enough to send my allergies into overdrive today.

I didn’t have any of my allergy pills to take since I’d been in such a hurry to change before going to work, I hadn’t even thought about the things.

Hmm, maybe I should get an extra box of them to keep at Jack’s place, just in case...

I had to grin at that thought—leaving something at Jack’s place. *Tee hee hee*. It made me giddy. That was all domestic and stuff.

Maybe this dating thing with Jack really did have some potential after all.

When I headed to the break room to get a bite to eat, a couple of people whispered to themselves, but shut up as I looked at them, the sign of being the object of gossip.

One of the gals, Tricia, watched me as I grabbed a sandwich from the vending machine, and gestured for me to join her and a gal I didn’t know personally, but had seen around.

I knew Tricia well enough to know what was up. I was about to be confronted about the gossip headlong. Tricia was never one to spread anything unless she got it from the horse's mouth.

Today I got to be the horse.

I set my Diet Coke and ham sandwich on the table and started to open them.

"Lynn." She had a smile that showed off her good caps. I couldn't help but like Tricia, she reminded me of my mom and some of my aunts. Brown hair to her chin, layered and highlighted with golden tones, she always looked kind and still professional. I hope I age that well.

"You do know Sara, from Overhead, right?"

I shook my head. That's why I didn't know this gal, she worked in the Overhead department. People from Overhead rarely came down to my lowly area of accounting. Sara shook my hand and smiled warmly. She looked to be about the same age as Tricia, but I saw a rather large wedding ring on her hand, and her lips were slightly indented from those "smoker wrinkles".

We finished the pleasantries, and Tricia drank a bit of water, then cleared her throat.

"So what's this I hear about you banging Jack Edwards?"

I knew it was coming, really I did, so I shouldn't have choked on my sandwich, but I did. "Wh-Where'd you hear that?"

Tricia's eyebrow went up. "Are you?"

My shoulders sagged. I couldn't lie to save my soul. At least not to Tricia. "We've had a few dates."

Tricia glanced at Sara, and Sara nodded her head, a quirk of a smile picking up the corner of her mouth.

Tricia glanced back at me. "You walk like a gal that's been getting laid."

"Thanks."

"I wondered about Tina Smith's reasons for spreading such things, but..." Tricia glanced at Sara, as if asking permission to say something. Sara nodded her head.

"What?"

"...reviews are coming up. A surprise review of employees in our department. I imagine Tina's trying to get you fired."

I let out a sigh. "Consider the source."

"Which is why I am bringing it up with you. Watch your back with that one, Lynn, she's not one to piss off. And it's pretty obvious she wants to put her hooks into Jack Edwards."

"This I know, she came into my cubicle and ripped one of my posters in my locker in half."

Tricia's eyes widened, as well as Sara's. "She did what?"

“Ripped a poster I have in there in half.”

Tricia and Sara glanced at each other again, then back at me. “She’s also saying things about you not working while you’re here, that you’re doing personal projects while working.”

Oh shit. “What?”

Tricia bit her lip, then leaned across the table to me. “Do yourself a favor, Lynn, clean up your hard drive. And keep anything personal outside of work.” With that, Tricia stood, as did Sara, and they walked out of the break room.

I blinked for a second at this information. Letting the data process, I realized what Tricia was saying.

Tina has been screwing around on my computer. That witch! My appetite left me as I made a beeline for my desk and opened my computer. In a matter of five minutes I had all evidence of my fan fiction off the hard drive, as well as any record of the external flash drive that I used to store my stories on.

This was all I needed. Tina Smith poking around my computer. My head started to throb at the thought of what kind of damage that bitch could have done.

My email icon blinked on my desktop. Clicking it open, I saw an email from Rugby.

I hesitated opening it, Tricia’s warning strong in my head, but I figured it’s just an email. I can’t control what others send me, right?

Hush,

I have made it to Wichita and just got settled. Here is my phone number—555-1574—call and we can meet for coffee.

Rugby

I nodded, jotting the number down on a piece of paper and stuffing it in the back pocket of my jeans. With everything going on, I had forgotten about him coming to town. I popped off an email to him, telling him I’d call him later then deleted the email.

Sneezing a couple of times, I grabbed a tissue and blotted my nose. I hoped I was just having a bad allergy day and not actually coming down with anything. My head swam for a moment after sneezing, and a thought came to me.

Jack.

I’d have to tell him about Rugby coming to town, that he still wanted to meet me. Ugh, Jack wouldn’t be happy. I could tell, even though he was more open to the idea of me not going alone, he still wouldn’t be happy about this new development.

Another sneezing fit attacked me, and after my recovery, I glanced at the repaired poster in my locker, and a new seething rage flooded me. God, how I hated Tina. If only there was a way to get her back...

Jack came around the corner into my cubicle and winked at me. "I was planning on taking you back to your car tonight. Do you want me to come over to your place, or do you want to hang out at mine tonight?"

I really didn't care whose house we spent the evening at, as long as there was gratuitous sex involved.

However, I'd been neglecting my website something fierce the last week. I really needed to put in an appearance at the forum, just to let everyone know that I was still alive and kicking. If I didn't post daily, people started worrying about me.

"I would love to come over but I really need to do some computer work tonight. I hope you don't mind." I wanted to berate myself. What was this, asking his approval? Hoping that he's not mad at me because I have things to do that don't involve him? What is the matter with me?

Then I started sneezing. Four times in a row. Jack reached up handing me a tissue, and I mumbled a thanks.

"You okay?"

"Allergies, I think. Being outside in the wind last night."

"Do you need some medicine?"

I shrugged. "I'll be fine after I get my pills. Probably getting a full night's sleep would help as well."

Jack's brow went up. "Now that's not my fault."

"Uh huh," I said, grinning at him. "Think you were the one who is insatiable."

"You like it."

We were interrupted by Douglas Wilmont coming into my cubicle. My face froze. Douglas's short-cropped hair and brown suit didn't disguise his middle-aged beer gut, or his intimidating personality. Instantly I prayed he didn't hear that comment about last night.

"Lynn Broadmore?" He glared at Jack, like he couldn't figure out why Jack was there, then focused his attention on me.

"I'll see you later, Lynn," Jack said, exiting the cubicle. As he walked behind Wilmont, he raised his eyebrows, questioning the appearance of the supervisor.

"Thanks, Jack," I replied with a pleasant smile. "What can I do for you Mister Wilmont?" Wilmont had been my supervisor during my entire tenure at this firm, and as far as I knew, he never made personal calls to cubicles unless something was seriously wrong.

Could Tricia's prediction be coming true so soon?

"We need to talk," his gruff voice low enough to make my stomach drop. Oh, this was such a bad sign.

He took a seat across from me.

“Of course.” I painted a perfect smile on my face. “What do you need?” I prayed that my panic wasn’t showing through my face.

“This is about your work ethics, Lynn,” he said, his face stone.

My heart stopped beating in my chest. I hoped that Jack knew CPR, because I was going to need it in a few seconds.

“What about them? Have there been errors on my reports?”

“No, nothing like that.” He held up a manila file folder and laid it on my desk. “It is your other activities at work that are the problem.”

I blinked, faking surprise as much as I could. “What are you talking about?”

He flipped open the file folder. Inside was a stack of white paper with what looked like a story on it. My hands started shaking under the desk.

“Do you know what these are?” He handed me the papers, and as I looked at them, I knew exactly what they were. Pages from some of my fan fiction stories. The juicier pages, at that. I scanned through the stack, knowing exactly which stories they came from, and when I’d worked on them.

I considered for a second denying any knowledge about them. I could claim that I’ve never seen them before. Behind Mister Wilmont’s shoulder, I could see the edge of my storage closet partly closed. One look in there and he’d know I knew exactly what was in those files.

My shoulders slumped. “Yes, I do.”

He nodded his head. “What exactly is this?”

I couldn’t look at him as I spoke, instead, my eyes focused on the stack of papers, remembering writing every single scene, how the parts pertained to the whole story collection. “Fan fiction, sir.”

He took the pile of papers and tapped them in a neat stack on the desk before returning them into the manila folder. “Reads like pornography to me.”

I shook my head. “It’s not, sir, it’s really not.”

He leaned across my desk. “You’ve been here, in this building writing pornography for how long, and you expect me to believe you?”

“It’s not pornography.”

“On company time.” His voice still remained deep, but the cubicle echoed with his words, and I swore that all noise stopped outside my cubicle.

“On breaks, sir.” My eyes welled with tears.

He shook his head. “Pack your things. You need to be gone in thirty minutes.”

“What?”

He stood and didn't look at me, his shoulders squared with a damnable hatred that seethed through him and filled the cubicle with the feeling of total death.

“Thirty minutes.”

I buried my head in my hands and wept.

Chapter Thirty-One

Bella was kind enough to come get me, take me to my car and follow me home. It was amazing how little stuff I actually had at work—most people accumulated tons of things at their jobs. Evidently not me.

Maybe that was a sign.

I walked around my apartment after Bella helped me carry everything inside, and promised her I was fine. Between my hazy brain from my allergy flare-up and the shock of being fired from work, I was lost in a daze.

I didn't even get a chance to say good-bye to Jack—Tina had been in his cubicle, “working” on something with him.

Personally, I think she was listening to me pack.

Bitch.

Jack did catch my eye when I walked by his cubicle. The grim line his lips were pressed into screamed that someone was going to get reamed soon. Since Tina was in the cubicle, she was probably going to be first in his line of fire. And she didn't have a clue, flipping her shellacked hair like she was a kid. For a brief second, I felt sorry for her. Well, maybe only a nanosecond.

My cell phone rang.

“ello?”

“It's me,” Jack said. “Are you okay?”

I sneezed. “I'm fine, Jack. Really.” I tried to sound okay, but really I wasn't. Looking at my apartment, all the stuff I had there, I felt the dwelling doom of impending eviction if I didn't come up with my rent in a couple of weeks.

“Get some rest, I'll be over after work. I'll bring pizza.”

“Really, that's not necessary, Jack. I think I'll be fine. I need a day or two to wallow, so I can go look for something on Monday.”

“Lynn.”

“Jack, I really need to be alone.” A sneeze erupted from me, and I tried to hold the phone away so he

didn't get the full-blown effect of my sneeze. "And I'm all congested and stuffy. I'll just take it easy today, okay?"

"Well, call me later, and we'll talk. You know I'm here if you need me."

"I know." I hung up the phone and went and collapsed on my couch.

The tears came out then, partially from Jack's concern, and partially from the shock of everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

How could everything swing through such extremes so fast?

"Rugby?" I managed to squeak out into my phone. I barely knew what day it was, but I was pretty sure, since it was daylight and the clock said a.m. that I'd made it to Friday.

"Hush?" came his voice, which was surprisingly warm and caring.

"Yeah." That damn DayQuil had knocked me out and made me feel like a balloon disconnected from my body. My allergy attack had bloomed into a cold of sorts, and I felt like I'd been hit by a truck.

"My, are you all right?"

"Cold," I managed to say. "That's why I'm calling. I'm sick. Didn't want you to think I was blowing you off."

"Of course, I understand. Do you need anything? Soup? Some medicine? I do not officially start my job until Monday. I could bring you something."

I lay down against the couch. "Yeah, that would be nice." Some soup would be really really nice.

I told him how to get to my apartment, then I lay down again.

Cathy Donaldson walked into Rodriguez Accounting Friday morning, and headed right for supervisor Wilmont's office.

Her partner met her at the door, and together they walked in, not bothering to even speak to the secretary outside the door. For a second, the secretary tried to stop them, but one look from Cathy, and she froze.

Wilmont was sitting at his desk, engaged in a conversation, and Cathy walked over and yanked the phone cord out of the wall.

"What the—?" Wilmont snapped, and looked up at Cathy.

Cathy and Jack Edwards flashed their FBI badges. "You fired Lynn Broadmore?" Cathy said, glaring at him.

“Yes, I did.”

Cathy leaned down, putting her fists on his desk, getting in his face. “Did you forget about the arrangement?”

“I won’t allow anyone to produce porn in my office! I really don’t care if you are the FBI.”

Cathy glanced at Jack, and Jack shrugged. Then Cathy looked at Wilmont, who was already sweating. “We had a deal. Your boss had a deal with us.”

“And I don’t think your boss would like to know exactly why you fired Lynn Broadmore,” Jack added.

“Oh, and why is that?”

Jack’s brow went up. “Screwing Tina Smith?”

“How dare you!”

Jack glanced at Cathy. “He doesn’t think I’m telling the truth.”

Cathy dropped papers on Wilmont’s desk. Pictures of Wilmont and Tina Smith on his desk. Wilmont glanced at them, his face white as a ghost.

“Admit it, Wilmont. You fired Lynn because Tina told you to.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

Cathy’s and Jack’s gazes met. “Guess we should go talk to Juan.”

“No,” Wilmont said. “No, you don’t need to go see Juan Rodriguez.”

Cathy crossed her arms over her chest. “Monday morning, Lynn Broadmore will get reinstated, and her record will be expunged. Or I will be having a meeting with Mister Rodriguez and talking to him about your ethics.”

Wilmont gritted his teeth.

Cathy and Jack turned, walking out of the office. Cathy followed Jack into his cubicle.

“How is she?” she asked, sitting across from him.

“She’s got a cold. Sounded miserable on the phone earlier.”

Cathy nodded. “Good, she won’t be out meeting anyone then.”

“Nope.” He met Cathy’s gaze. “Have we got a lead on where he’s operating?”

“I’ve almost got it pinpointed.”

“What’s taking so long?”

"I think he's bugged her computer, too, maybe even her apartment. The data's coming in very slowly."

"That's not good."

"No, it isn't," Cathy said. "I'm going to check a few things out tomorrow, see what I can find."

"I'll go with you."

"No, I've got it. You go over and check on her. Make sure she's not meeting anyone she shouldn't be meeting."

"Aye aye, boss," Jack said, saluting her.

Cathy shook her head. "Get over it, you friggin' love it."

"It's an assignment." She couldn't help noticing the bullshit twinkle in his eyes though. She'd worked with him far too long not to be able to read him like a kid's book.

"Your eyes are brown they're so full of shit."

"I don't fall for my assignments."

"And you also don't spend the night with your assignments either." She held up a finger to stop him from saying anymore. "You've been in love with Lynn Broadmore since before you laid eyes on her."

Jack grumbled, a few curses coming out of his mouth as he started going through his desk drawers. Cathy left him to his work, smirking to herself.

He had it so bad for Lynn...

She let out a sigh. Maybe someday, she'd be so lucky. She shook off the thought, she had work to do.

If all went well, they'd have Benne by Sunday, and then Lynn would be able to go back to her life.

Without even knowing she had been in danger.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Benne pounded on Hush's door, waiting for her to answer. After a couple more knocks, she came to the door, her nose red, and eyes bleary. Not exactly how he wanted to meet his Hush, but nonetheless, it would do.

"Yeah?" She sneezed as she answered the door.

Benne jerked backwards, avoiding the sneeze. "Hush?" He reached up and brushed off his sunglasses from the sneeze, though he didn't bother taking them off.

She looked him up and down. "Rugby? What are you doing here?"

"You wanted soup." He held up the paper sack that held the chicken noodle soup he'd bought on his way over.

“Oh, yeah.” Lynn stepped away from the door. “Come in, I guess.”

He stepped inside, looking at all her *Buffy* things. “The posters are wonderful. He smiled at the one of Angel that hung near the door.

“Thanks.” She headed to the couch and dropped on it. Benne sat down next to her.

She sneezed again, but this time managed to get a tissue before sneezing all over him.

Benne tried not to be sick. “Let me get you a bowl.” He headed into the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out. “This isn’t exactly how I expected us to meet.”

“It is fine. After all, what are friends for?” he asked, emerging with the bowl of soup as he came back around the corner. The heat from the soup steamed his sunglasses, and he pulled them off.

Hush stared at him, concentrating. “I know you.”

“Of course you do. I am Rugby.”

She shook her head, taking the soup. “No, I know you from somewhere else.”

“Here, eat your soup, it will make you feel better.”

She took a couple of bites, then turned to face him again. “I do, I know I know you,” and as she did, her eyes widened as she looked at him.

“You’re the guy! From Walt’s on Wednesday!”

Benne smiled. “You remembered.”

She dropped her bowl, spilling the soup everywhere, and she tried to scoot away from him, but as she stood, she wobbled.

Hush collapsed in a heap on the floor.

“See, now you know, my darling Hush, even illness cannot keep us apart.”

“Damn,” Cathy muttered as she stood in the living room of the house she’d tracked the computer ID to. The clouds overcast the mid-morning sky this Saturday morning, and Cathy gritted her teeth. Not only had she been on the edge of a storm driving out to this old house forty-five minutes east of Wichita, but now the storm dumped on her location.

There was nothing there. No one home, no signs of computer stuff anywhere. A crack of thunder outside punctuated her irritation at the situation. She knew this was the place. It had to be.

The signal tracked to this location.

Yet the house was empty—every room was empty. No appliances in the kitchen except an avocado green fridge. Even the water seemed to be turned off. She'd flipped a few light switches, and there was no power.

She pulled out her cell phone to call her partner and find out how Lynn was doing. Jack was supposed to be going to see Lynn today, make sure she was feeling better.

Perhaps Lynn had made arrangements to meet Benne—hell, Jack could have the guy by now.

Cathy held up her phone, and glanced at the signal bars. Nothing.

She stepped to the front porch, and still got nothing.

“Lord, this is pathetic.” She headed for her car. As she shut the door a new wave of rain hit. It had been raining all day, and she'd had to drive through some rather shallow areas to get here.

She wondered if her Camry would get through the low roads so she could get back to Wichita.

The car started, and she drove out of the drive. As she did, she glanced in the rear-view mirror. She slammed on her breaks. One of the wires that connected to the house hung, like it had been broken.

Sparks flew off it.

“What the hell?” She pulled out on the road and turned around. Why would there be sparks if the power was off?

She headed back inside and checked a second time, this time hitting all the lights, but nothing came on. She stood in the small kitchen, staring at the floor. It didn't make any sense. There shouldn't be any power on, yet the wires were live.

Then she saw it.

A hatch, just barely visible inside the mudroom off the kitchen.

Prying it open, she found a ladder that led down to a partial basement under the house.

Here in the godforsaken basement, there was power.

The far wall had a computer that was on, and she glanced at the multiple screens. Putting her hands on the desktop, she jerked, realizing she'd stuck her hands into something soft.

Feathers. A pile of feathers lay on the table.

This had to be his place, she thought. She picked one up, touching the feather along the spine. Sitting next to them was a black jar.

What in the Hell did he mean with them? She rolled it in her hand, and the hard end pointed down at the ground, as though it was a pen to write with.

“Jesus.” She stared at the feather, then at the black jar. “A quill.” She touched the end of the quill against the jar, and black ink covered the tip.

Why hadn't she put that together before? She let out a sigh, resisting the urge to smack herself upside the head.

She focused on the computer screens.

They showed empty rooms, and as the images scrolled through, Cathy realized she was looking at Lynn's apartment. One other display blinked in the corner of the screen.

Panic filled her.

A silent alarm had been tripped as soon as she entered the house, almost an hour ago.

She turned, climbing the ladder. Just as her head came up, she saw a pair of muddy boots. Attached to a wet man.

"Hello." His foot shot forward, hitting her in the face.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Certain smells always bring certain memories. Like being transported to Grandma's kitchen when you smell the wonderful aroma of baked cookies, or that party in your high school days when you smell marijuana. Then there's that memory of your tonsils being removed when you smell the sterile smell of alcohol. The smells make the memories almost tangible.

Which is why I knew even before I opened my eyes that I had to be in a hospital. The bitter smell of the alcohol permeated my pores. I felt like I'd been bathed in the stuff. My skin had that dry, tight, cold feeling as if I'd been swabbed from head to toe in antiseptic.

I flexed my body, stretching, arching my back and I pulled my arms down.

My arms wouldn't move.

I jerked my hands, and I felt the tug of skin against metal. I snapped my eyes open and let out a silent scream of pain at the bright white that surrounded me. Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried to force the panic that threatened to overtake me back down into my chest. At least that's what my logical side was trying to do.

The more maniacal, emotional side, on the other hand, was flipping out.

What was going on? I had been eating soup with Rugby.

What happened?

I opened my eyes just a little bit, turning my head as best I could away from the blinding whiteness. I winced and shut them as the assault of white refused to ebb. Behind my eyelids, I could still see the brightness of the white room I was in.

Twisting my hands around, I could feel metal handcuffs, but the chain in between attached me to...what?

I opened my hands and felt some kind of metal headboard. Not smooth like brass, but certainly cold. I

tried to twist up a little to see, but my feet wouldn't budge. Jerking my leg, I felt a similar tug of metal against skin, and I realized I was attached to the foot of the bed as well.

Don't freak out, don't freak out, don't freak out.

I can get out of this. There has to be a way.

Even though I tried to keep myself calm, panic still flooded me.

Breathe, I commanded myself.

Deep breath.

Hold it in.

Exhale.

Stay calm.

Only being calm and rational will get me out of this. Panic will not.

Slowly I opened my eyes, trying to make sure the blinding whiteness didn't completely overtake me. The white filled my slits, but I managed to let my eyes become used to it, and I was able to make out a few things.

I stretched to look up as best I could, but I couldn't see anything. The shocking white didn't affect me quite as much this time, but I did flinch. It was everywhere. I wore only a white hospital gown. The bed linens were cold and starched. My shackles gave me very little room to move my body, and the light seemed to keep whatever was around me shrouded.

The white ceiling glared down at me, and I closed my eyes.

Logic evaded me, or maybe I just began to realize what truly was going on.

I was going to die in this room, this white, sterile room. Someone was going to kill me.

And that somebody was Rugby.

I started to shake. My cuffs rattled against the headboard as I shook, and tears filled my eyes. My chest felt like someone sat on it, and I couldn't get any air.

Every breath was too short, every effort to get oxygen too hard. The air thickened and it felt like I couldn't get anything into my lungs.

I'm going to die, I'm going to die! How could this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this? How come this is happening? What did I do so wrong?

But Rugby wouldn't do this to me. We were friends. I mean, we talked about everything. He knew everything about me. He was just another Buffy fan. We talked all the time. I read his stories, I knew him. Didn't I?

What exactly do I *know* about him?

Oh my God. My heart started slamming in my chest, even harder than before. I knew that Rugby was male, but that was about it. I didn't know where he was from, really. I didn't even know what he did.

How could I be so stupid? Meet someone online who I didn't even know? I didn't even know what had brought him to Kansas.

I looked at myself. "Obviously he has some hobbies that should have been mentioned."

Well, I still had my sense of humor. Either that, or I was hysterical.

"Ahh, good. You are awake," Rugby's voice surrounded me.

A curse slipped out of my mouth as I tried to see where the voice came from, but my restraints kept me still.

"Wh-what happened?"

"I apologize for this rather crude way of bringing you here, but I needed to make sure you would not argue."

"Argue? Try fight for my life. What do you want with me?"

Rugby's shadow, a hazy line in the whiteness of the room closed in on me. I still couldn't make out any details, as though someone had put the wrong strength of contacts in my eyes.

I tried to focus and his face started to solidify. He stared down at me with coal eyes. I had seen his eyes earlier, and I was scared. I did remember that. Not much after that. I had been scared because he was the man who was staring at me at Walt's the other night. Now I was petrified because he was far worse than I imagined.

My chest couldn't get enough air into it.

A tight smile clipped his lips. He brought a gloved hand to my cheek. "Simply to remind you of the goddess you are."

"I'm no goddess."

He stroked my cheek again. "Of course you are. My Goddess Hush, of Buffy."

"Get away from me, you wacko!" I struggled against the sheets, trying to find some kind of break, something to cover me, but no amount of wiggling allowed me any protection.

Rugby tossed back his head and laughed. "You silly woman, you have no idea what I am, do you?"

A cold shiver ran through me. "What are you?" My brain screamed at my mouth to shut up. The last thing I needed was to egg this monster on while I lay strapped here to this bed.

He held his arms out, as if presenting himself to me. "Why, I am your savior. Angel to your Rennati. The one who can show you all that you dream of, all that you desire."

“What do you know of my desires?” What on earth was he talking about? He didn’t know me. He had no idea what I desired. I can guarantee you it wasn’t being strapped to a sterile bed with a psycho staring down at me.

He leaned in closer, his breath hot on my face. “Why, my dear, sweet, Hush, I have read your stories. Everything one needs to know about you is there.”

I shook my head. “They’re just stupid stories, just fan fiction. They’re not windows to my soul.”

“But, Hush, all stories are windows to the author’s soul.”

I shook my head feverishly. The stories couldn’t tell this mad man who I was. How could they? I mean, I just made them up, didn’t I? They aren’t real descriptions of what I want, are they? They’re not. It’s all for fun. That’s it. Nothing real or connecting to me at all, is there?

The other morning with Jack came back to me, and how I commented that he’d been reading my stories. How did Rugby have me on the bed...my hands bound over my head...

Oh God.

Rugby made *atsk* noise a couple of times and shook his head. “You bare your soul every time you write. Did you not know that?”

“And what about your soul? What do you bare?” Was there something in his stories, something that should have clued me in to his mindset?

He laughed. “I bare only what I want the world to see.”

I raised my eyebrow. “So this is your private side? Kidnapping women and cuffing them to beds?”

Rugby stared at me as though I’d offended him. “I did not kidnap you. I am only freeing you from the people who do not appreciate you.”

Has this guy been following me? What does he know about who I spend my time with? How long has he been here? I shook my head, trying to make sense of the new information. He’s been around for how long, and I didn’t have a clue.

This new piece of information terrified me more than I could begin to describe. My stomach knotted, bile rising up in my throat, begging for release. Had he been in my apartment? Did he know where my parents lived? Did he know about Bella and everyone?

He must, he was at Walt’s last night. He must know everything. Oh God. What if he goes after my family? After Bella?

Tears formed in the corner of my eyes, and I couldn’t control the downpour of emotions, the feeling of destruction, that everyone in my life was now in jeopardy because I was stupid enough to meet some guy from the Internet. What is wrong with me? My body shook with the tears, and I couldn’t breath.

How could I have been so stupid?

Pressure built up in my chest, and I thought Rugby had climbed up on top of me.

“*Shh*, now, Hush, do not cry,” Rugby’s voice came back. I could hear a strange sound of metal, along with footsteps as he came back toward me. A glint of metal shined in his hand.

I blinked to focus on his hand.

Oh shit, a needle.

“Wait!”

Rugby paused in his movement. “Yes, my dove?”

Resisting the urge to gag at that comment, I pleaded my case to him. “If I do whatever it is you want, if I promise to be compliant, will you do one thing for me?”

“I plan on doing many things for you, my darling Hush.”

“Promise not to kill my family or my friends?”

Rugby threw back his head and laughed. “I have no desire to harm either your family or your friends. They mean nothing to me. It is you that I want. No one else.”

“Promise me.”

He laughed again, but he nodded his head. “I promise you, Hush. I will not kill your family or your friends.”

I relaxed against the bed. “Do what you will.”

A sharp stab in my upper thigh, followed by the burning sensation of something being pumped into my body flooded me. I wanted to scream out, to yell at him for violating me. To beat him senseless for what he was doing to me.

But I knew my family would be safe, so I didn’t speak.

Blackness engulfed me, and I prayed to God as I started to lose consciousness that I wouldn’t feel the pain as he killed me.

Jack Edwards walked into Lynn’s apartment with a thermos of tea and some DayQuil. After the lock-picking incident, Lynn had given him a key, citing if he was going to just come in, he’d better have one so no one called the police.

Everything felt wrong.

No Lynn.

On the floor, near the couch was an overturned bowl, and what looked like chicken noodle soup on the floor, or rather the dried remains of soup spread out across the floor.

“Lynn?” He headed for the bedroom.

The bathroom returned the same results. She wasn’t home. Her car, however, had been in its usual spot outside. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed her cell. Immediately, he heard it ringing, and found it laying on the kitchen cabinet, plugged into the charger.

Two calls were missed on it, and he read the names—both Bella. Jack headed down to the main office of the complex.

The manager wasn’t in, it was Saturday. Instead, a young twenty-something woman sat at the desk, playing with her cell phone.

“Hi.” She grinned at him with flirtatious eyes.

Jack so didn’t have time for this. He pulled out his FBI badge and flipped it open in her face. “I need to speak to your security head immediately.”

The girl’s face paled, and she nodded her head, dialing the phone to get security. Within minutes, a man in his early forties walked in, and from his crew cut hair and stern expression, Jack knew he had a somewhat competent man at his side.

Flashing his badge at the man, he quickly explained that Lynn had been kidnapped.

“In here.” The man led Jack into a side office. “It’ll just take me a few minutes to find Broadmore’s security code.”

Jack rattled it off to the man, and the guard quickly found the last few times the code had been used in the system.

“We have two cameras on the entrance.” He found the tapes that had recorded yesterday’s entrance and exits.

Jack nodded, and the two of them started going through the tapes, looking for the vehicle.

“This vehicle came in and left shortly.” The man wrote down the tag number for the white van that had pulled out of the complex.

Jack thanked him and headed to Lynn’s apartment.

Bella stood just inside the door, her face pale, and her hands trembling. “I just came by to check on her. She wasn’t answering her phone...”

“Bella.” He pulled out his badge.

She glanced at it. “Oh my God. You’re FBI?”

“Someone’s taken Lynn. I need you to call everyone who knows Lynn and see if any of them have talked to her, called her, emailed her, whatever you can.”

Bella nodded, pulling out her cell phone.

“And don’t touch anything.” Jack started making his own phone calls. Though he knew Bella’s assistance would be helpful, he was pretty sure that Lynn was not out with someone.

His gut screamed that Lynn had met Rugby without him being there.

He was going to kill her.

If he found her in time.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Cold, so cold.

Water everywhere.

Drowning.

Filling everywhere. So cold.

I started to gag, and my eyes flickered open as water filled my mouth. I was drowning. I shook my head, or at least tried to as I felt the pounding of water on my face.

I wasn’t drowning but being hosed down with water. I sat inside an old bathtub. I tried to stand, but my body wouldn’t cooperate. My limbs felt heavy, like broken machinery. They wouldn’t function, nor could my head. I couldn’t turn my face away from the water, the best I could do was blow it out my slacked mouth as I sat, stunned in the rabid overflow of cold water.

I couldn’t feel the metal around my wrists or my ankles, but I didn’t imagine that did me any good. Whatever Rugby had drugged me with made me pretty much paralyzed.

If I ever get out of here, I’m going to kill this bastard.

’Course, getting him to stop shoving needles in me would be an improvement.

A gloved hand grabbed my arm. The latex squeaked against my skin as the hand pulled me up by my upper arm. I tried to turn my face to see who it was, but I didn’t need to.

“Ahh, Hush, you are washed.” Rugby snapped off the water, and pulled me up out of the tub. He hoisted me up and into a wheelchair that smelled horrifically of alcohol, and I tried not to gag.

*God, oh God, forgive me whatever sins I have committed in past lives to deserve this now.
Please, oh please God, forgive me...*

The wheelchair rattled across the floor, through a door and back to the white room. My body remained lifeless as I was hoisted out of the wheelchair and onto the bed.

Rugby whistled to himself, spreading me out on the bed. I tried to focus on something, anything around me, but I couldn’t control my body. He had me laying spread eagle on the bed, and I could smell more alcohol.

Chills ran through me as he started swabbing me with the frigid liquid. My skin didn't feel quite so numb, and I focused all my energy on moving some part of my body. Through the corner of my eye, I tried to use my peripheral vision to see if anything would move.

Right hand... Any finger. Thumb, index, middle, ring, pinky.

Left hand... Thumb, index, middle, ring, pinky.

Nothing.

Cold alcohol filled my nose as Rugby hummed something attune to "Hush" by Deep Purple. The notes sent a chill through me, and I felt bile rising up in my stomach.

His hands worked up and down my right leg, and then my left, lifting each one as he swabbed the underneath.

At least I could see them.

Right foot... Big piggy, index piggy, middle, ring, pinky piggy...

Nothing

Left foot... Big piggy, index, middle, ring, pinky...

Rugby placed my left leg down, and I hoped for a split second that he was done, but I should have known better.

He swabbed over my hips, stomach, and all my lower extremities, and I forced down the need to scream and cry. I hated myself at this moment for promising to cooperate with him. *I am so stupid.*

I would not cry. I wouldn't give Rugby the satisfaction.

I swear on my grandfather's grave, I will get through this.

As he worked his way up my torso, I tried to distance myself from what he was doing. Anything to make this nightmare go away. Still, the scent of the alcohol brought it back strong and horrific.

His latex covered hands stopped once they finished my chest, just below my breast line.

Oh thank you God, he's done... He's done...

I heard him step away from me, still humming the Deep Purple song. More nausea filled my stomach, but I refused to move.

Not that I had much choice.

His humming got closer, and he reappeared in my peripheral, holding what looked like a bedpan.

Rolling me over on my side, he placed something cold underneath me, then rolled me back on top of it. The chill of the bedpan made me instantly want to pee, but I didn't know if I did or not. I tried to listen for any tinkling sounds, but clanking from the foot of the bed covered any other sound. Then the metal

reappeared on my ankles as he re-shackled me to the bed. He reached for my hands, and I moved my eyes so I could look him in the face.

His evil eyes stared down at me.

“Please,” I managed to whisper. The sound didn’t remind me of what I was trying to say, more garbled than anything, but it was enough, he paused in his shackling of me.

A latex hand caressed my cheek, and I resisted the urge to vomit. Rugby’s breath caressed my cheek.

“Darling, sweet Hush...” He smiled at me, almost like I was his girlfriend, and not his prisoner. “You will be with me for a while, my sweet...please relax, and consider this a vacation from your life.”

I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, to yell at this freak, but all that would emerge were tears. His finger wiped away some of the tears, and he smiled at me again with that wicked grin, and the sobs came harder.

I vaguely registered the sound of his footsteps walking away as I continued my silent sobbing.

Benne nodded to himself as he started to remove his coverings. He quite enjoyed hospital gowns, they were so easy to cover one’s clothes and not get them damaged in the cleansing process.

Removing the paper booties from his shoes, he headed into the observation room. Inside sat a long wall of monitors, a couple of computers and all the feeds and things required to keep up a strong surveillance throughout his home and his other house.

One monitor showed Lynn in her bed downstairs, and her body shaking in silent sobs. The other monitor showed the woman, one Cathy Donaldson, from the FBI, strapped similarly to a bed at the lake house.

He leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh. It would have been much nicer if he could have secured a secondary location in Wichita, instead of the house he’d found at the small lake east of the city.

Still, he needed a secondary location to route everything from. Yet it seemed that Cathy Donaldson was smarter than the average FBI agent he’d run across. She had been able to find his secondary house. No one usually got that far, at least not until after.

He shook his head. Hush would be different. She was more special than any previous attempt. Her beauty knew no bounds, and even though he’d filled her with large doses of medication, she still seemed somewhat aware of what he was doing.

That surprised him.

Although it shouldn’t. Her stories always depicted wise women, strong willed and opinionated. And wasn’t it not so long ago that Rennati had displayed a strong will to live in “Dark Knight?” She’d been near death, but she managed to pull back just at the end.

Interesting thought, for certain.

If Hush had a similar will to live, it could prove very fascinating how her passion would come through

when he finished this purification process.

He had only just begun.

In one of the monitors, he saw Hush's head shaking as she wept.

Well, they all do that at some point, do they not? He mused. After all, she did not yet understand what was truly going on.

Soon, she would understand.

Soon, he would give her the pleasure she so desired.

He would save her from the world of passionless living.

Chapter Thirty-Five

From somewhere, off in the distance, I could hear rain pounding. I turned my head...

Hey, I could move it.

This amazing piece of joy overwhelmed me. Fresh tears filled my eyes, but unlike the ones of fear, these were of joy that I had some control. I pulled my arm over, even more amazed that I had a small amount of movement, and brushed at the tears on my face. A huge smile creased my face, almost hurting my cheeks, it had been so long since I had tried to smile.

Scanning around, I could just make out a doorway, and a flickering light beyond it. What time it was, I had no idea, but it was dark in the room, and I assumed it must have been nighttime. From the open doorway, I could see the instant shadows of lightning.

Bad storm.

At least I was in a basement.

Wasn't I? I have never been a big fan of storms, and the thought of being on the third floor somewhere was not pleasant.

A loud*thunk* scared me so much, I bridged up on the table. My heart started racing.

Oh God, what now? What now?

I listened even harder, and I wanted to kick myself when more lightning flashed in the windows. It must have just been thunder. Muffled enough to not sound right, but loud enough to scare me.

I wanted to laugh at myself, but I had other things to do.

I scanned around my surroundings again. The faint bursts of light from the lightning were enough to allow me to see I was in a pretty-good-sized room. Just off to my side, I could see the vague outlines of a bathroom. As the lightning crashed, it gleamed off the toilet and shower stall, just enough so I could make it out. Must have been where I had had my cold shower earlier.

Never had I been so happy to see lightning.

My arms ached, as did my back and my legs. How long had I been like this? It seemed like eternity.

I wondered if Jack was worried about me. Did he know something was wrong? Or did he think I had just forgotten about him? I really wanted to ask him, but I was more concerned that I'd make it out of here alive.

Yet behind my eyes, all I could see was Rugby's eyes—those coal eyes watching me.

What about my parents, did they know something was wrong? Had they even noticed I was gone? Since I only see them on the weekends, had they even bothered to call me and find out where I was, or anything?

God, I'd been fired from my job.

Bella was probably going nuts. I was certain that wherever my cell phone was, it probably had fifteen calls on it by now from Bella. She was probably freaking out.

Had it been a day? I imagined that at least thirty-six hours had passed since he had taken me. Maybe. Who knew how long that drug he had injected kept me out. It may have only been about twelve hours. Maybe that's why he kept giving it to me.

I should ask the next time he comes around. Maybe if I'm good, he'll tell me.

Shifting around, I felt something warm and metal under my butt. I rocked my hips. It was the bedpan. Inside I could hear a slight swishing of liquid. Taking a sniff, I realized exactly what it was, and I wanted to gag. I prayed the thing wasn't very full.

And of course, my bladder screamed for release. I closed my eyes, held my breath, and let loose. The tinkling sounds on the metal made me gag, and I tried to think of anything but what I was doing.

The room seemed extra quiet, and I realized there were no more thunderclaps. The only remaining sound was dripping water, and I imagined it must have been a sump pump hole somewhere. I figured a pump should be coming on eventually.

I tried flexing and stretching my fingers, seeing just how much movement the cuffs allowed.

Not a lot, but I was able to move each hand a few inches. That was nice.

The leg restraints seemed to have more movement allowed in them, I could almost stretch them off the bed, or pull my knees up part way to my chest.

Careful of the bedpan, I started doing just that. I couldn't remember what it was called, but I know astronauts get it when they've been in space for a while. Something about their muscles losing their strength when they don't use them. So if these quasi-sit-ups kept me strong while I lay here, then so be it.

I wasn't about to become a weakling so that Rugby could do whatever it was that he wanted to me.

My resolve was much stronger than my actual ability to do anything. I could only pull my legs up about ten times before they burned with fatigue. Still, I did the same with my arms, flexing and stretching them

as far as I could with my limited movement. I also started doing butt squeezes, arching myself up over the bedpan to do them. Anything to try and keep myself sharp and focused.

There had to be a way to get out of here. I started timing my butt squeezes with the drops of water in the sump pump, squeezing with all my might with my legs. As the water-metronome counted my squeezes, I tried focusing in the dark, to see anything that would show me a way out of here.

Scanning around, I saw a flicker of red light in one, no wait, two corners of the room.

Surveillance cameras.

Oh, that's just perfect.

Even if I could find a way to break my bonds, Rugby'd see me. He's probably upstairs right now, watching me on some close-monitored system. I dropped myself back on the bed and the now cold bedpan, and watched the cameras.

In a few minutes, the lights went off.

Oh... Motion sensitive. I smiled. This could be fun. I shifted my arm over my head. The light didn't come back on.

I shifted my legs a little.

Still nothing.

This is good, right? I can move a little and it doesn't set them off. I arched my back up.

Bingo, the lights came back on.

So that's too much movement, but the small movements were okay. Good to know.

Not that I knew what I'd be able to accomplish, but it was a start.

I yawned.

Damn. I could feel myself starting to drift to sleep. The last thing I thought about was Jack's blue eyes and his intense stare. Would I ever see that stare again?

A stab awoke me, and I jerked up, screaming. The sharp pain burned as it spilled heat into my body. Oh God, what was this? Oh God, what now?

My eyes flicked open, and Rugby stood over me, a needle in my arm, and holding me steady in his death grip.

"It will be over soon."

I shook as the drug entered my system, but in an instant, my body started to feel sluggish. I didn't have to test anything to see if I could move any of my appendages, they were turning into boneless masses.

Rugby smiled down at me as he pulled the needle out. "Now, my sweet, I need you to drink something."

I tried to shake my head, but I couldn't move it. His hands, again coated in the latex gloves, grabbed my cheeks and opened my mouth just enough. He inserted a funnel into my lips and started pouring liquid into it.

The taste was repulsive, and I gagged a little, my eyes popping open as I tried to resist the fluid, but he just kept pouring it into me.

"Shhh, Hush, darling, just swallow, it will be all better soon."

Can't breathe. Drowning.

I tried to force my lips open so I could let the fluid out of my mouth, but they wouldn't cooperate.

My only option was to swallow, and my body decided that before my mind could agree. The fluid rushed through my mouth and down my throat. The wretched taste made me want to barf, but I couldn't do it.

Everything started to go dark again as the fluid filled me up. Whatever it was, I could already tell my stomach didn't like it, it started churning, cramping and aching.

At some point Rugby pulled the funnel out, but I didn't hear him leave. All I knew was the horrid pain in my stomach.

In the back of my mind, I could feel the bedpan being changed, the cold only making me want to pee even more. Still, all that consumed me was my aching stomach.

Tears welled up in my eyes, I blinked, looking for Rugby.

Why, I pleaded with my eyes.

Why do this to me?

His hand ran over my head. The smell of the latex nauseated me.

"My darling, we must purify your body, flush all the toxins out. . . This part will be done soon. Just rest, let your body do what it wants to do, and then we will move on to the next level of the cleansing process."

A cramp rumbled in my stomach, and all I wanted to do was push my bowels. I groaned as I pushed.

"Good, good, my dear."

If I had any control over my body, I would have spit on him.

Another cramp ran through me. God, what did he feed me?

There were very few prayers I could really say that I knew by heart and would answer this situation, all except one. I closed my eyes and started chanting the prayer with every ounce of my being.

Now I lay me down to sleep,

I pray the Lord my soul to keep;

If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord my soul to take....

Chapter Thirty-Six

Benne covered his tracks so well, Jack couldn't find Lynn. The man had used multiple aliases and false addresses for his registrations.

The only thing Jack had found that might possibly be a lead was on Lynn's cell phone. One number linked up to an address that had been recently rented. Still, it took until the wee hours of Sunday morning to find the house.

Already dawn was starting to creep in, a line of orange on the horizon. Jack felt relatively safe—on a Sunday morning, he doubted anyone would be awake at this hour to see him.

As he snuck around the house, he noticed the normalness of it. Although it was a bland house, no landscaping of any sort, nothing about it made it stick out from any other house on the road.

Well, except for the fact that an insane man owned the place.

One window in the kitchen was open, just a little bit, and it was enough so that Jack could slide it up and shimmy inside. He carefully crawled over the shiny sink and perfectly clean countertops, landing with as much stealth as he possibly could.

He clenched his gun, his heart pounding as he made his search through the house. Most of the upstairs was typical, scarcely furnished, but somewhat livable. Every inch of the house was immaculate. Counters shined, floors gleamed and carpets outlined every footprint.

The carpet tracks showed the most traffic between the kitchen and a couple of rooms in the back. Jack stepped in the previous imprints, creeping along the hall.

But no Benne.

Where ever he was, he wasn't on the main floor.

In a back bedroom, Jack's grip tightened on his gun. The room was filled with monitors and keyboards. A couple of the screens were focused on beds.

Several were on Lynn—bound to a bed, dressed in only a hospital gown, and from what he could tell in the black and white monitors, she looked ravaged. Deep within him, every fiber of rage, anger, disgust and revulsion threatened to boil up. He made a fist, the only outward sign of his internal seething.

He forced himself to pause.

Seeing Lynn, his Lynn, bound like that, he wanted to barrel through the house, save her and kill the bad

guy without thinking twice.

His chest grew and contracted from the deep breaths he forced into himself to stay calm. Barreling downstairs and playing superhero wouldn't save Lynn.

Benne was probably waiting for him, somewhere here in the house.

Jack ground his teeth.

Caution. He had to be cautious.

Repressing the protective issues, he clamped down his emotions. Lynn was all that mattered.

Jack turned to leave the room when something made him stop and look at one of the other monitors.

He tipped his head to the side.

"Cathy?" He saw his partner, spread out on a bed similar to Lynn's. His stomach dropped.

What? How?

He'd just talked to her! She'd been—

It just dawned on him that he hadn't spoken to her. While he'd been on his rampage to find Lynn, he'd never bothered to check in. He'd left messages, but she'd never gotten back to him.

Benne had the two women who meant everything to him.

He was going to kill Benne.

There would be no trial.

Benne heard the footfalls upstairs and his temper flared. He glanced down at Hush, still semi-conscious from her latest steps in the purifying process. One more good cleansing and she would be ready, every element of the previous degradation she'd been forced to endure by that other man would be gone.

How her skin gleamed in the white room. He reached down, stroking her arm, the flesh pink and pure like a newborn baby's skin. She'd fallen asleep during the last process, and she slept soundly now, her body glowing and shining in the light.

He grimaced as the footfalls started again through the house.

He couldn't have these interruptions.

Benne listened to the approaching footfalls and stepped underneath the open stairwell, waiting.

The intruder, a man, came down a couple more steps. Benne waited, a knife in his hand.

"Lynn," the intruder said, starting to hurry down the stairs. He carried a gun, shifting it from side to side

as he came down each step. Even though his steps were cautious, urgency flowed through him.

Hush jerked on the table at her name, and her eyes flickered open. She tried to move her arm, but couldn't from the restraints. They clattered against the headboard.

"Lynn, I'm coming."

Benne struck. He reached through the open stairs, plunging a knife in the man's calf. The man stumbled, falling down the remaining stairs, and Benne came out from behind them, kicking the gun out of the hand of the man.

One look and Benne knew the man. It was the one that had been at Hush's home. Her boyfriend.

Ex-boyfriend.

"Welcome, Jack Edwards." He kicked him in the head, rendering Jack unconscious. "What an interesting plot twist this is," he muttered as he attended to the unconscious man.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

A groan came from somewhere, jerking me out of whatever vague consciousness I'd been in. Terror filled me, considering the only other person in the house had to be Rugby, and I didn't make that noise, did I?

My mouth was dry, and my insides still crawled with cramping and aches, but there wasn't anything left inside me to come out. The smell was gone, at least for the moment, so I assumed my bedpan had been changed.

The moan came again, but it wasn't me, it was someone else. What was Rugby doing now? Why was he crying?

I heard footsteps, and I shifted on my bed, trying to see what was going on. I could see a shadow of a man coming through the doorway, but it didn't come my way. I strained to hear what was going on.

All I could hear was muffled voices and the ripping sound of duct tape.

Oh my God. How many people does he have down here?

A crunch that sounded a lot like a foot meeting a body echoed in the room, I muffled my own scream, as I repressed what little bile was left in my stomach from coming up.

Then the steps started coming closer, and I heard the sound of latex being snapped on.

I tried to move my body, but I was too weak. My toes would move, as well as my fingers, but I couldn't do much else, every ounce of energy I had in me was gone.

Then I saw Rugby, standing near my bed. God, how did he get in here so quick?

"It is time for your next treatment." He started working on the restraints. Within seconds, my hands and feet were free of the cuffs. Then I was being carried. I hung limp in his arms while he carried me to the bathroom again.

Placing me in the tub, he started the water. Cold against my feet until the heat reached the faucet. I started screaming as he ran the scalding water over my body. He didn't stop with a surface rinse either. Some kind of scrubbing loofa, but horridly coarse... it could have been a dried starfish it was so rough, and some kind of grainy concoction to scrub into my skin.

"Please, no," I tried to say. "Don't." My head rocked from side to side as he scrubbed me down, water, then the starfish, then the water again. My skin was falling off, it burned so badly. It had to be.

"There, there, we are almost done." He turned off the water.

I wanted to thank every divine deity for stopping the pain. At this rate, I'd be happy to thank them personally.

Rugby stepped away from the tub, and I considered my options... I could run, get out of this house... If I could stand, that is...

I tried to push myself up, but the slick tub didn't let me move too much, and I only wound up slipping deeper down into the bathtub.

Then Rugby was back, holding a rubber water bottle. Terror filled me. This couldn't possibly be good. He hung the bottle on the shower spout, and a long white hose stuck out of it. At the end, it looked like a douche applicator.

I pushed myself up as much as I could in the tub, trying to get away from the end of the hose. Pressing my legs together, I curled up into a ball, but my body didn't want to cooperate. Everything was slick and raw, and my skin ached beyond belief.

Rugby grabbed my ankles and pulled them away from my body. I jerked out of his latex hands, and kept crawling back to the rear of the tub, but I couldn't get away.

He didn't appreciate my resistance, and before I could stop him, he'd shoved my legs apart. Hanging on a hook over the tub, were several different shaped loofas of varying coarseness. He snagged one from the wall and I screamed.

Pain unlike anything I had ever imagined ripped through my insides as he worked, and my eyes rolled back in my head, relieving me of consciousness.

Awareness returned after a bit, and diluted blue liquid sat in the bottom of the tub, the water bottle now gone. The loofas, however, hung on the wall, back in place, all dripping with water.

Everything burned like fire, pain far beyond anything I could have ever comprehended.

In the background of my pain, I could hear the voice of another person, whoever they were, sobbing a bit through what I assumed was duct tape.

The voice gave me something to focus on.

Groans emanated from it, but I couldn't understand what was being said. That voice, whoever it was, was keeping me sane, and I had to focus on it. Something not connected to this horror. My lifeline groaned again, and I tried to make out words... anything to connect me to the life, which was hidden

beyond the thin walls.

Help me, save me, I pleaded with my mind to him. *Help me! Rescue me!*

Rugby started whistling, and I knew I could never watch *Snow White* ever again.

Rugby ran the water again, and the steam started filling the room.

Then a smell I'd know anywhere assaulted my nose.

Comet.

I screamed as Rugby raised the can into my line of sight.

My stomach roiled and vomit exploded out of me, all the remnants of what I'd been fed covered me and Rugby.

He cried out in rage, and I felt water hit me in the face. Scalding water. I screamed.

A slam against my face was the last thing I felt before the darkness took me this time.

Now I lay me down to sleep...

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Heavy clomping against the stairs woke me, and for a moment I was pissed that I wasn't dead. Every inch of me was raw and sticky, though I didn't want to open my eyes to see. At least I was alive.

Alive and burned in a way I never thought possible, but alive.

Hell has got nothing on this horror, I thought as my body burned, and I could feel sap coming out of God only knew how many open wounds. How could I still be alive? Shouldn't I be dead?

Why couldn't I be graced with death? Death would be easier than living through this torture.

Why doesn't he just kill me?

Surely I'm not good now, all raw and bleeding. The itching, how horrible—my entire body ached.

I tried to find a reason, an answer to why I was alive but nothing came. The part of my soul that had been me had long since gone dormant and all that was left was the flesh. Ripping it off to start over seemed a minute point. The strength I'd had was gone.

I wished he'd come back, so I could ask him to finish this. There was nothing left for him to take. My will had faded into nothing but the pinpricks of itches and pain all over my body.

Everything itched, and I pulled my arm down and started scratching at my chest, I had to do something to relieve the pain...

God, the relief of the scratching. I started rubbing my legs together, not caring if the security cameras clicked on, seeing me. This felt like heaven as I scratched and rubbed against my skin, trying to relieve

the aches.

Wait a minute.

I can move my arms.

Holy shit! I can move.

I started moving my arms all around, feeling the total freedom of movement in a way I'd never expected. God, to move. To be able to. To be able to use my arms.

My legs weren't bound either. I started moving my body, trying to sit up. Sure enough, I was in no way tied down to the table. Oh my God. Something was going my way.

My mind immediately tried to think of a way to get out of here. The will that had been muddy and dormant returned with a fever; even the blood in my veins hammered harder through me.

My head throbbed as though pounded on by a rubber mallet. Worse than any migraine I'd ever had, I thought I would pass out, but I forced myself to stay awake.

I can't drift off, this may be my only chance to get out of here.

I desperately wanted some water. Looking around, I saw the bathroom was only a few feet away from me.

My need for water overpowered my throbbing head.

"I can do this, I can do this, I can do this," I repeated to myself over and over.

I forced myself up, every part of my body objecting to the movement, but I wasn't stopping. I couldn't. I needed to drink, and then to get out of here.

Sliding off the bed, I collapsed to the floor in a puddle of myself, everything jelly. I climbed to my hands and knees and started crawling toward the bathroom. There was no way I was going to be able to stand, but I had to get water.

Every movement screamed at me. My hands and knees ached with restive burning as I worked my way across the floor.

Still, I was going to make it. Only a few more feet. I scooted one hand, then the other across the floor, then pulled my knees behind me. I understood how paraplegics must feel when they fall out of their wheelchair. My legs were useless behind me, but I didn't care.

I could hear the groans from the other place in the basement, and I focused on that. I would get my water, free that person and then get out of here.

And right after that, I'd run the Boston Marathon. Who was I kidding anyway? I could hardly stand. How could I help someone else? Another sound came out of the back room, a groan with a thud.

Whoever was in there was trying to free himself. Maybe he's not as bad as I am and together we can get out of here.

Maybe it's a cop.

Maybe FBI or something—someone here to save me.

'Course if that's the case, he's not very good. How sad is it that the victim has to save the hero? I gritted my teeth. If this is how it played out, then so be it. We were getting out of here.

Together.

The only thing that progressed me forward was knowing that I had to do this, I had to fight, because if I didn't, not only would I die, someone else would too, and I *wasn't* going to let that happen.

Anger fueled me as I crawled, pushing me on my way toward the bathroom, what adrenalin I had left was pumping overtime through my body as I worked my way to the threshold of the bathroom. Sweat poured down my face, and my hands were starting to get slick, but I ignored it. I was almost there.

Once inside, I worked my way to the sink, but I couldn't get the strength to stand, so I twisted around toward the tub, and started the cold water. Resting my head on the edge of the tub, I panted, trying to catch my breath. The sweat seemed to run down my body, the sting of it hitting my open skin burned beyond belief.

I reached out a hand and held it under the water, pulling a tiny bit back to drink.

Again and again I repeated the movement, getting as much water in me as I could. After about a dozen small swigs of water, my stomach started to protest.

Leaning back against the side of the tub, I caught a few more handfuls of water and started dribbling it over my skin, the coolness soothing me a little. I rubbed it in my hair and over my face, and it felt more wonderful than I ever remember water feeling.

I could still hear the other voice. I saw another door in the bathroom, and the voice seemed to be behind it.

Weary, I plugged forward. Now, how I was going to get any cuffs off anyone, I had no idea, but maybe they had an idea.

My crawl speed, which was pretty slow before, had pretty much become snail paced now. I had to grab the wood frame of the door when I reached it and pull myself up enough to reach the handle and swing it open.

The door opened to reveal a concrete floor. Inside resided the furnace, the water softener and other storeroom things found in every basement, with an added bonus—a man was cuffed to some of the pipes that attached to the water softener.

I blinked a few times. God, I hope he's not dead. I couldn't handle seeing a dead body.

"Hello?"

The head moved, popping up in my direction.

A muffled reply came out.

“I’m here, it’s okay, we’re going to get out of here.” I eased myself across the floor. The adrenaline pumped through me even more now, and my legs were starting to cooperate more, because I scooted much faster across the floor. I couldn’t help but notice how the floor was meticulously swept clean, odd in an unfinished basement room.

I reached the man, and the first thing I did was grab the duct tape over his mouth, and rip it off with all my strength.

He muffled a curse, and worked his jaw for a second. “Oh, thank God, you’re not dead.”

“Nope.”

“Oh, my God, Lynn. Thought he’d already killed you. Get this tape off my eyes, and let me look at you.”

I hesitated. I knew that voice. “Jack?”

“Of course it’s me! Who the fuck did you think it was?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” My voice started to rise, but he shushed me, and I stopped. Jack? Was this some strange dream? I looked him up and down and saw a bit of something on his crumpled shoulder that looked a lot like FBI. Every part of me sagged, relief washing through me at the golden FBI letters.

I always loved gold.

“I came to get you.” He inhaled a breath to say more, but stopped. The floor creaked above us, and we both froze.

I grabbed the tape on his eyes. “Coming off.” I ripped it off, and Jack muffled another curse.

Blood covered his face, and from what I could tell, his nose looked broken. Pulling the tape off took the last of my strength, and I dropped to the cool concrete, pressing my face against it.

Not to mention the sight of his bloody face was a little more than I could stand at the moment.

“Oh God, Lynn, what did he do to you?”

“You don’t look so hot yourself,” I muttered, not looking at him. Blood lay on the concrete around my face, and I shuddered. I assume it was mine but I didn’t really want to know.

He leaned his head over, nuzzling my head, and the warm sensation made me smile. He was here, he was here. I wasn’t alone. Joy spread through my body as I lay against the cool concrete.

A thought came to me. “How did you find me?”

“Surveillance at your apartment.”

“Those cameras actually work?”

“We don’t,” his breath hitched, “have a lot of time, I have to get you out of here.”

“Dude, I think it’s me that’s got to get you out of here.” I didn’t move from the floor. “And I can’t move right now.” Ecstatic as I was to see Jack, movement seemed an impossibility at the moment.

Jack started wiggling around in his cuffs. The clank of metal grated against the concrete and I wished I could move my hands over my ears to muffle the sound.

“*Shh*, you idiot. He may hear you!”

“You know, some help would be appreciated.”

I raised an arm as much as I could, but it just dropped to the concrete again, limp and useless. I let out a yawn... “That’s about as much as you’re going to get out of me...” I was so tired. My body pretty much was finished, and I swore everything would be okay if I just could get a quick nap in.

“No, Lynn, stay with me.” He kept wiggling around in his cuffs, and it took me a minute to figure out he was trying to pop them off the pipe.

“God, do you have to be so noisy?” I rolled my head over so the other side could get the coolness of the concrete. I never knew concrete could be so comforting.

“Damnit, Lynn, wake up! Benne could be back down here in moments. We don’t have time for a nap.”

“Benne?”

Jack wiggled around again. “Are there any kinds of tools around here?”

“I don’t know...” I turned my head to look around. Not that I could see much in the dark, and I didn’t have the strength to get up and find a light switch. Light would probably set off the security cameras. Up till now, I didn’t see the telltale signs of red lights anywhere, but that didn’t mean there weren’t some hidden in the room.

“Benne is this guy’s name, at least it’s what he goes by when he does this stuff.”

“Benne, Rugby, it kinda rhymes.” Images flashed in my head, the ones that Jack had shown me on the FBI website. How many had there been? I couldn’t remember.

I didn’t want to remember.

I tried to get myself moving again, bringing myself up on my hands and knees, but that didn’t do much, and I wound up lying back down again.

“Coincidence. We’ve been trying to find him for a year.” Jack’s breath hitched as he worked himself up a bit more. His head had maybe risen about an inch in the last few minutes, but not much more than that.

“We? Who’s we?”

“FBI. Why didn’t you listen to me?”

“Listen to you?” I managed to get myself back up on my hands and knees, and was able to stay there

for a few minutes.

“I told you it wasn’t safe to meet people online.”

I shook my head. “No, you didn’t.”

“I told you about a serial killer stalking people online. Several times.”

I froze, remembering an online conversation. “Wait a minute. You only showed me the pictures. Will was the one who...”

Jack raised a bloody eyebrow at me.

If I had any strength, I would have reached out and slapped Jack across the face. All I had the energy for, though it was now fueled by a different kind of anger, was a good tongue lashing.

“Why didn’t you tell me who you were? You fucking dick! You’ve been talking to me for months. Learning everything about me, and you never said a thing.” I wanted to leave him chained to those pipes and get myself out without him.

“Under orders.” Jack pushed up again, this time a groan escaping from him.

“So all your attention was *afucking assignment*?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “At first.”

I reached up, wanting to punch him, but only managing to slap him. Jack’s head twisted from the smack, unable to block it, and the fire that spit from his eyes would have set me to flames had he been Superman.

“You fucking bastard. You are worse than Rugby...Benne...whatever his name is...”

I remembered the fan fiction the other night, the questions. All the strange things about Jack that didn’t make any sense.

“And you were trying to use me. To find out his MO, weren’t you? Trying to figure out where he’d strike next...” The image of all the forensic novels and all that stuff that lined his walls in his office. “You knew he was after me. You didn’t tell me that I was in danger.”

Oh God, I’m an idiot. It was right there in front of me, and I didn’t even realize it.

“Lynn... I wanted to tell you.”

“You wanted to tell me that I was an assignment? Frankly, I’m glad you didn’t. However, it would explain the attraction. I mean, I couldn’t figure out what in the world you’d want with me anyway. I’m frumpy, asinine and obviously not the smartest duck in the row, since I couldn’t figure it out. And I have to admit, knowing that I was an assignment makes things click into perspective a lot better.”

“Lynn, it wasn’t like that.”

“Okay, whatever, soldier boy.” I was able to pull myself up to my knees, and I knelt in front of him. His

body, his incredible Adonis physique mangled, blood pouring from his leg and his eye, I felt horrific. All this was my fault. All of it was. If I hadn't been so stupid... Guilt overwhelmed me, and tears started to escape out of my eyes.

"Lynn."

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter anymore." The realization of everything sunk into me. Not only Jack's deception, but Rugby's manipulation—all of it flooded me, tearing me up inside more than any of Rugby's treatments. I was a means to an end.

Jack's—to find Rugby.

Rugby's—to...to do whatever he planned on doing.

They both had used me.

And I was stupid enough to let them. I gritted my teeth and met Jack's gaze. "We have to get you out of here. It's my fault you're in there, so I have to do something."

"Lynn!"

I crossed my arms over my chest, and froze, pain shooting through me from the chafing of the scabs, but I also realized just how naked I was. Great, I'm naked, covered in oozing scabs, and I'm arguing with a guy chained to a pipe.

When exactly did I fall down the rabbit hole?

Another groaning of the ceiling signaled that it was very possible that Rugby was somewhere upstairs. Then the water heater started to run, water coming out of it. Rugby was taking a shower.

I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

So did Jack.

I tried to bring myself up on both my feet, ready to stand, and with a rebelling body, I managed to hold myself up, but I wound up bracing myself against the wall for support.

Jack wiggled around again, a moan escaping from his lips. My head swam as I stood up against the wall, but I didn't care.

"Wh-what can I do?"

I tried not to dwell on the new information he'd given me. He was FBI, I was an assignment. The surrealness of it wasn't right, that's for sure, and I didn't know how I felt about it. I mean, here we were stuck in this nightmare, and all that time, I had kept wondering. Did Jack love me? Did he care? Did he notice that I was gone?

And I was only an assignment.

I considered not waiting for his answer and marching myself out of there. If I could manage to walk up the stairs, that is.

“Finding something to break or cut these cuffs would be great.”

“I’ll get right on that,” I said as spots started to swim in my eyes. Blinking furiously seemed to lessen the problem, but that burst of energy made me yawn. Or maybe I was still needing that catnap from all the crawling.

Then I got an idea.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Benne’s feet slammed against the stairs as he ran toward his bathroom on the main floor. He cradled his arm to his chest as he tried not to drip any of the bile from Hush on the floor as he ran.

He had to clean it up, he had to re-sterilize himself. He had to get the germs off. He had to clean up. He couldn’t touch her like this.

Racing to the bathroom, he stripped out of his covers and clothes, turning on a hot shower. He scrubbed himself from top to bottom, removing the germs from his body.

Standing in the scalding water, he knew there wasn’t much time.

How disappointed he was—he would not be able to bring Hush to that perfect level of worship he’d dreamed of taking her to. She would have to be disposed of before he could attain perfection with her.

They were already looking—more were bound to come. He’d hoped the last session would be enough to purify her, but it was not.

She was not ready.

And wouldn’t ever be able to reach that level of perfect goddess.

Such a pity.

As he emerged from the shower, he used meticulous strokes to get all the water off. He would have to dispose of Hush, her boyfriend Jack and the woman at the lake house.

But to get rid of them all at once? That would be messy and difficult. How could three bodies be easy to dispose of properly?

It seemed the bomb he’d installed at the lake house would be needed after all.

Now all he would have to do would be to get Hush and Jack to the house.

The crawl back into the room with the bed was a total bitch, but I managed to get out of there and back as fast as I could. With the wire sunglasses that Rugby had worn before in my mouth, I managed to get back to Jack.

“That’s great, Lynn, we need wire cutters, and you bring me sunglasses.”

“Trust in me.” I popped off the arm of the glasses and stuck them in the handcuffs. After a few tries, I managed to release the cuffs.

Jack stared at me. “How in the hell did you do that?”

I shrugged. “I watched *U.S. Marshals* a few times.” True enough—I had been obsessed with that trick after I saw Wesley Snipes do it on the movie, and taught myself how to do it. Never had a real need to do it in the past, but it was fun at parties.

The few times I went to them.

I collapsed against the floor, my energy spent. Jack rubbed his wrists, wincing in pain. “Think I have a couple broken ribs, nothing serious.”

“Oh, yeah, well, okay.” ’Course, I would consider broken ribs serious, but that was just me.

“You’re bleeding.”

“Eh.”

My occupied mind didn’t register any new cuts. I raised my head up a bit, seeing the blood oozing from new gashes on my legs. Or were those old ones that just ruptured?

Who cared...nothing was pulsing.

I pushed myself up to my arms and legs. “Must be just any other assignment for you.” I started crawling through the storeroom. Broken or not, he was my only chance to get out of here, and I needed him. At least until we were safe.

After that though, I’d let my heart collapse.

“Don’t,” Jack snapped. He stood, and the stream of obscenities that came muffled under his voice should have been comical if he hadn’t sounded so evil and filled with hatred.

I snapped my head around to face him. “I’m sorry I got you into this mess. It’s not like I planned this out just to inconvenience you.”

“Lynn.”

“No, I’m not done.” I spun around to face him. “You used me. Made me think you... Made me think...” Damn heart started collapsing already, and I started to bawl. I could deal with being kidnapped, I could deal with this torture that Rugby was putting me through. The torture, I didn’t allow in, I didn’t open up and accept. Knowing that I’d opened my heart to this, this, this... *faker*...

How was I supposed to feel? He’d used me, he’d torn me up. He only wanted me to help him find Rugby. I was unnecessary. An inconsequential end to tie up now that everything was said and done.

“Lynn.” He groaned as he reached down to help me up.

“Look, just get me out of here, and we’ll go our separate ways, okay?”

My entire body felt like fire as I forced myself up, trying to focus on the rear door, the one that didn't lead back into the bathroom. That door lead somewhere else, and that's where I wanted to go. With or without Jack.

"Lynn, get back here."

Jack grabbed me, pulling me up against him, the stark fabric of his clothes making my skin burn.

"What are you, nuts?" I tried to jerk out of his embrace.

"Goddamn it, would you listen to me?"

"Doesn't matter what you have to say, we just have to get out of here."

"It does matter." His voice was a harsh whisper in my ear. "I'm not about to lose you too."

"What, you lose a lot of girlfriends on assignment?"

I swore, he would have head butted me if he was a mean person. "Listen, you were an assignment. *Were*. Do you get it? You were, for about forty-eight hours, after that I was hooked. I don't want anyone else, not in cyber life, not in real life. And when I finally saw you, saw that fucking smile of yours, I was gone. I never wanted to hurt you, and I wanted to tell you a thousand times who I was, but I couldn't. I couldn't compromise anything. I'm in love with you."

"Why should I believe anything you say? Everything you've ever told me was a lie."

Another stream of cuss words came out of Jack's mouth. "Fine, believe whatever you fucking want, I don't care. I'm telling you the truth. If you don't want to hear, then it's your problem." He let me go.

The pounding that had become a rhythmic metronome before ceased, and the only sounds were that of Jack and my breath.

Even though I was furious with him, I still needed him to get out of here, no matter how crippled we were.

And frankly, his words touched something very deep inside me, and it scared the hell out of me. It scared me more than Benne-Rugby.

Chapter Forty

Jack turned his back on me, leaned forward, and I saw his arms rise to his face. His arms and head jerked, and I heard a horrific cracking that made my guts roll around inside.

He spun around, the grin even broader on his face. "I can breathe."

"That was just sick," I muttered. I've seen people readjust their noses on TV before, but never did I ever think I'd have to see it in real life. The crunch on television is nothing compared to the real thing.

"Yeah, I hate doing that."

“That’s just even grosser to know you’ve had to do it before.”

“No one’s born with a sexy nose like this.”

Jack took a couple of steps toward me and pulled me close. My heart started to crack, and I wrapped my arms around him.

If I get no more than this, I’ll be okay, I thought to myself as I hugged him. He winced a bit, and I released my tight grip on his shoulders, and moved my hands to his hips, feeling his back as we held each other.

Feeling him against me made everything inside crumble, regardless of this horrible situation, I knew that this was where I belonged.

Which only made the pain of being an assignment even more horrific.

“God, Lynn, I’m sorry, I’m so very sorry,” Jack said, and I felt the warmth of a tear moistening my cheek. “I should have told you. I should have.”

I just held him. I didn’t know what to say. The part of me that agreed with him pretty much curled up in a ball and disappeared. What was left inside was thankful that we both were still alive, that we both could go on living.

That we could get out of here. That we had to get out of here. Another creak upstairs snapped me back into reality.

“Jack.”

He sniffed a bit, and winced as he did so. “Yeah?”

“We have to get out of here,” I whispered. And I had to smirk at myself.

“What’s so funny?”

“Shouldn’t you be telling me that? You’re the FBI guy, shouldn’t you be giving orders?”

“I suppose so.” He stood up to his full height and scanned around. Then he looked at me. “Let me get you something to cover yourself with. Pretty soon this place is going to be crawling with agents.”

“You mean you don’t have a partner waiting in a car outside?”

He turned away from me and headed into the bathroom. “She is otherwise incapacitated.”

I really didn’t like the sound of that. Tears welled up in my eyes. And then something clicked over in my brain. The call from the friend at the gun club, the female.

“That’s who called you that night at my house. Not your sister, but your partner.”

Jack nodded his head. He winced as he pulled off his flack jacket and put it over me. I almost crumbled under the weight of the thing. I wanted to say something, tease him about the weight, but one look in his eyes and I knew this was not the time. This was soldier Jack—not goofy, fun Jack, so I repressed the

comment. He helped me tie a sheet into a makeshift toga that pretty much covered me up. So now I only looked a little like the walking dead.

His partner was indisposed? Did that mean that Rugby had gotten to her too? How many people had Rugby hurt in order to get to me? What could he possibly have done to Jack's partner? If she had to endure the same as me... Nausea overwhelmed me, and I spun away from Jack, throwing up the little bit of water I'd managed to ingest and whatever else was lurking around in my stomach. I wiped my face on the edge of the sheet, and as I looked back at Jack, my vision blurred as tears flooded me.

Jack's face remained impassive. His jaw locked, and that little wrinkle appeared in his brow. "You okay?"

I nodded my head.

He took a hold of my hands. "I don't know what's going to happen, Lynn, when we get upstairs. He may try to kill us. And he may try to just knock us out. He has a thing about being neat."

"He never touched me without rubber gloves on. I don't think I'll ever be able to handle latex again."

"What did you do to him earlier?"

"I think I vomited on him."

"That's my girl."

"Hey, I do what I can."

"Here's the plan."

Jack began outlining what he had in mind.

Chapter Forty-One

Never in all my days had I ever crept up a set of stairs so quietly. Jack was two steps in front of me, and we both worked our way up the narrow stairs in the back of Rugby's house together. Jack paused about every step, to listen and make sure that Rugby wasn't nearby. I prayed that the stairs didn't creak.

As Jack reached the top, I heard the sound of Rugby whistling. My stomach started churning again.

My body ached, but I ignored the pain. Adrenalin pumped through me, and my heart slammed in my chest harder than I'd ever thought possible. It was so loud, it practically rang in my ears. *Please don't let him hear my heart slamming in my chest.*

A clock started to chime, and I froze on the steps, as did Jack.

Seven chimes.

Was it seven in the morning? Whatever natural light might have come through the windows had been distilled by the Kansas rainstorm. I wanted to ask what day it was, but I was too scared to breathe, much less speak.

The hairs on my head tensed as Jack reached the top step. He flattened himself against the wall, and I had to give him credit, he had broken ribs, and a crudely replaced broken nose, and a stab in his leg, but he was still pounding away. The furrow locked into his brow, and his jaw was rigid and dangerous. He was not one to screw with at this moment.

Not that I would.

The room started spinning on me, and I took a deep breath. The over abundance of adrenalin and all the vomiting was about to knock me out, but I forced myself to keep standing.

All I had to do was stand by the stairs. Jack said he'd handle everything else. That's all I had to do. It seemed a daunting task, considering all I wanted to do was fall asleep.

I wanted to ask if I could just lie down at the top, but Jack pressed his fingers over his mouth and he stepped up onto the ground floor.

I gripped the tire iron I'd found hanging on the pegboard in the basement even tighter. I didn't want to carry it, but Jack had made me. He said just in case Rugby got away from him and came after me, I needed something to fight with.

I stepped up to the top step, and saw Jack disappear into one of the rooms just behind the stairs.

Rugby's feet stuck out from behind a couch, the opposite direction from where Jack went. His whistling echoed in the house, and I repressed a shiver. He looked like he was on his hands and knees scrubbing the floor.

Jack reappeared, silent in the hall, and held a gun in his hand, poised and ready. He took a couple of steps, and crossed the gun over his body. I heard a clicking sound.

Unfortunately, so did Rugby.

He rose, and Jack fired. Rugby managed to duck behind the couch, and Jack fired another shot at the couch. Stuffing flew everywhere, but no sounds of contact of the human variety.

Then more clicking, and Rugby rose, firing his own gun.

Jack darted back into a doorway for cover, as did I. Rugby fired off three more shots before ducking.

Jack rounded around and fired twice more and ducked again.

Rugby jerked out from behind the couch and did the same, firing two more shots.

If this was how this was going to go, we were going to be here for a while. I glanced behind me, looking for what, I didn't know.

Then I saw a gun. It looked like one of those six-shot guns with the spinning middle thing, a revolver—I thought was the name of it—lying on the desk near the computer monitor system. I gawked for a second at the serious setup Rugby had, and almost threw up all over again, realizing that one of the monitors was my apartment. Another showed a woman, a blond woman, tied to a bed, like I had been.

Holy shit, where was that at?

“Oh my God.” I watched her struggle on the bed. I turned away from the monitors, forcing down the bile again. And on the corner of the desk, in a neat pile, were feathers.

Quills.

Dozens of them, different colors and styles, but quills nonetheless. And one was perfectly smooth, lying to the side of the others—black and tan, and about eight inches long.

That one was supposed to be mine. My head started to spin, and I grabbed the revolver.

I entered the hallway as Jack jerked out and fired off a couple more shots. He glared at me as Rugby fired at him again. If he hadn’t been trying to hide my presence, he probably would have started screaming at me, he was that pissed.

I came out of the doorway, my gun up high in the air, my hands shaking. I’d never actually fired a gun, and for all I knew, the safety could have been on. But I didn’t plan on firing one now. At least I hoped to hell I didn’t have to. Jack reached up to grab me, but I stayed out of his arm’s reach. He took one step toward me, and I put my hand over my mouth to shush him.

In the back of my mind, that tiny rational voice started screaming that I had lost my mind, and I needed to get back into the shadows, hiding behind Jack.

But that was the problem. I didn’t want to hide anymore. I didn’t want to cower from Rugby. I glanced at my skin. It shined in the dim light, scrubbed raw.

A newfound rage flew through me. That bastard did this to me. He had tortured me. My bones and muscles protested the movements, but the adrenaline took over, and I ignored it. I was going to do this.

I just hoped that Jack could somewhat read my mind. *Trust me*, I willed to him. Because if this didn’t work, I was a dead woman.

“Rugby.” I screamed out.

“Hush?” he said from behind his couch.

“You’ve broken your promise, Rugby. You promised me you wouldn’t hurt my friends.”

I took a couple more steps down the hall. My hands shook with every step and my chest hammered so hard, I hoped no one confused the pounding for the clicking of the gun.

“I did not hurt your friends.”

“Jack is my friend. You stabbed him in the leg and chained him to some pipes. I’d call that hurting him.” I kept the gun trained as best I could on the couch. The gun vibrated in my hand as I walked.

“He tried to take you from me. You are a goddess, Hush. He tarnished you, he damaged you. He tried to stop you from experiencing the perfect bliss you deserve,” Rugby said, his voice almost choking with tears.

Another step. I was almost to the couch. I glanced over my shoulder. Jack stared at me like I’d lost my

mind. And maybe I had.

For all those women he'd already maimed and killed. For all the ones that wanted to fight back, but couldn't, I had to keep going. The rage kept pumping through my skin. Instantly, I saw an image of that woman—Jack's partner maybe?—strapped to another bed somewhere, waiting for him to start his next torture.

Jack came out from around the corner, his arm up, ready to grab me, I could hear his footfalls behind me. Still, I didn't break eye contact with Rugby.

I glared at Rugby, my gun drawn on him, and my hand shaking, not at this point from fear but from anger. Vibrant anger fueled me. This man had violated me. He'd burned my skin. He'd tried to destroy me.

And how many others had he done this to?

How dare he.

"And you were going to deliver that? By torturing me? By destroying my body?"

"Cleaning, purifying." Rugby rose up from behind the edge of the couch, his face and shoulders peaking over the edge, as if he didn't believe I was standing there. In one hand was the gun, but he didn't have his hand on the trigger. He held it as though it was nothing more than a child's toy.

"Wrong." For all the women he'd destroyed, I pulled the trigger.

Now, this would be the ultimate girl-power story if the bullet actually traveled the ten feet and hit him in the face like I wanted it to. Instead, my arm jerked from the shot and the bullet went wild, grazing his shoulder. Blood splattered across the wall behind him.

Rugby raised his gun, and he fired at me. He was a better shot.

A horrific pain hit my chest, and my hands came up to my chest, trying to yank off the ache as I fell backwards.

A cry came out of Jack as well as the sound of bullets flying, but all I could focus on was the prayer that had kept me alive thus far.

Now I lay me down to sleep...

Chapter Forty-Two

Wesley Medical Center stood tall over most of Wichita. A multitude of buildings connected in a vast array of randomness, the average person took a month to fully learn the ins and outs of all the towers. You had to admire the staff for their dedication to learn it all.

Myself, I'd been in it enough to know the glass hallways and curved buildings were too much for me to fully appreciate. When the EMS rushed me in and took me to the emergency room, I just held on for the ride.

At one point, I saw Jack on another gurney, being wheeled somewhere. He didn't say anything when

they went past. I doubted that he saw me.

And maybe he did, and he just didn't care. After all, the job was over. Vague shadows of people in sterile clothing peeled off the flak jacket, and I thought I heard a murmur about taking a shot in the chest.

The morbid part of me wanted to see the damage to the jacket, but no one would show me. 'Course, I think they thought I was unconscious.

In between pokes and prods that lost their sensation in flesh gone numb, a grim-set man along with another woman came in and drilled me about what Rugby did to me. Like I really wanted to go over that.

A nurse named Kelly, with long dark hair, a pleasant smile and a curvy carriage pretty much narrowed her eyes on the two FBI staff and told them to get the hell away from her patient.

When grim-set man argued, she hurled her girth at him, and I bit my lips trying not to laugh as the FBI guy reluctantly dropped the subject.

Kelly looked at me, her warm face smiling; I realized that she was about my age, and a competent nurse. She commanded the attention of everyone in the room, and all the other staff seemed reluctant to disagree with her.

Her hand touched my forehead, and I felt a warm caress as she spoke to me.

"You get some rest, honey, we'll take care of you."

I needed no more of an invitation than that for sleep to overtake me.

I managed to snooze a bit, until my first guests showed up.

Awaking with a start, my first breath met with horrid aching and a desperate need for water. I moved my arms, and I looked like I was in the *Matrix*, plugged in with more IVs and hoses and sticky things attached to me than I knew what to do with.

"Hey," I squawked, jerking at the sound of my voice. I sounded like I'd died.

In a flash, my mother was at my side. "She's awake." I wondered if she'd assaulted the nurse in order to get in here.

"Do you need anything, honey?" my mom asked.

"Water," I croaked.

My dad must have snuck in behind her, because he turned to the nurse, "Where's her water?"

"I'll get it," she said.

My dad took the pitcher from her. "I'll get it. You check her over."

The nurse, not the same one from the ER, fluttered around me, checking this and that. "How are you

feeling?” The nurse asked as she took my ear temperature and touched my chest in between the sticky monitors on my chest.

“Like I was washed in Comet and shot.”

My mom shuddered at my side and looked away. I thought I heard her sniff. The nurse made a strange sound in her throat, like she was repressing a sob herself, but she continued taking readings.

“Do you need more pain medicine?” she asked as she worked.

“No, I’m okay.” Whatever they were giving me was doing a good job, but a dull roar of pain lurked throughout my body—nothing I couldn’t ignore though.

My dad came back through the door, followed by my brother. I wanted to jump out of the bed and give him a hug, but the effort of actually moving seemed too taxing, so I just smiled.

Matt is well over six foot, and built like a WWE wrestler. Thick neck, broad shoulders, thin waist and the apple of many of my female acquaintance’s eyes, Matt lived in Dallas, and seeing him for any reason was a treat.

So when his pain-filled eyes looked me up and down, I didn’t quite know how to respond. He handed me my glass of water and I took a sip, quenching the horrid thirst in my throat.

“Thanks. This isn’t exactly how I wanted to get you to come up here, but it’s good to see you.”

“You couldn’t have called and just asked me to come up, could you? Everything has to be so dramatic with you,” he said with a wink as he hugged me as best he could around the monitors.

The nurse started messing with the sheets. She glanced at my mom and dad. “I have to check these dressings, it may be unpleasant...”

“Do what you have to do,” my mother said. Her jaw locked as she watched the nurse pull up the sheets.

I really couldn’t see what was going on, but by the startled expressions of my dad and brother, it wasn’t pretty.

I winced as she unwrapped one leg, added some lotion, and applied new gauze.

“The doctor says besides the burns and dehydration, you should be fine,” Mom said, sliding up to my side and taking my hand.

“Anything you need, we’ll take care of it,” my dad said.

I nodded my head at my dad, a tear leaking from my eye while the nurse worked on my other leg. My hand clenched in my mom’s.

“This is looking better,” the nurse said as she rewrapped the leg. She re-covered me with the sheet. The nurse said a few more things, adjusting my pain medication, telling me how to call if I needed anything, and then she was gone.

Dad remained just as tight-jawed as my mom, and Matt stared at the monitors, his attention flicking to

the turned off television. Dad followed his line of sight, and I waited for Dad to actually turn it on. Even in the most dire situations, Dad could be caught turning on any turned off television.

I reached up to scratch my brow, and my parents flinched like they expected me to scream out in pain. I felt the gauze in my hair, and it dawned on me that I had no idea what I looked like.

“Mom, can I have a mirror?”

Mom froze for a second, and out of the corner of my eye, Dad nodded his head at her. She grabbed her purse and started pulling out the contents until she found her compact.

“God, what’s the matter?” Do I look like I’m a demon or something?”

The person in the mirror hardly resembled me—if I hadn’t been smiling I would have thought it was a trick mirror.

My mousy hair stuck out on part of my head, gauze covering most of it. My face gleamed red, and I resembled a blotchy cooked lobster. Salve had been spread all over my face, and either salve or pus gave my face a surreal sheen. I reached up, touching the skin, and I winced as I examined my face from all angles. It didn’t even look like there were any pores left.

I glanced at my mom. “Are they going to have to graft anything?”

“Not as far as they can tell,” Mom said.

I handed her the compact. “Thank God I didn’t get through the whole cleansing process.” Every part of me that wanted to bawl locked up at the sight of my mother and father—Mom trying to look reassuring and Dad trying not to cry.

I shuddered, not trying to think about what I looked like.

No wonder Jack hasn’t come down to see me, I thought, then brushed the thought aside. I looked horrible, destroyed. My heart, which up until a few minutes ago was happy to be alive, now shuddered at what I had become because of this.

“How long was I there?” I asked, glancing from my mom to my dad, then at my brother. Eternity seemed a close representation, but no one had bothered to tell me.

“You don’t know?” Matt asked.

“No,” I said. I wanted to know how long he’d had me, how long I was down there.

“It’s Monday,” Matt said. “Monday,” he glanced at the clock on the wall behind him. “Almost four p.m.”

“So? How long?”

My mom took my hand. “Lynn, you were there since Friday, and the FBI found you early Sunday morning. Roughly thirty-six hours.”

I blinked. All this damage? All this torture, and he had only had me thirty-six hours? Thirty-six hours and

he almost destroyed me, my skin was almost gone. I closed my eyes, and this time the tears did flow out—I brought my hands to my face and cried, ignoring the stinging of the tears on my skin, the ache of the pressure against my face.

My mom tried to comfort me, as well as my dad and brother, Matt sliding to the opposite side of Mom and putting a hand on my shoulder. Dad stood at the foot of the bed, I could hear him sniffing as he tried to cover his sobs.

“If he wasn’t already dead, I’d kill him myself,” Matt said, his voice shallow and almost unrecognizable.

“My poor, poor baby,” Mom said, weaving in and out of the wires to get close to me.

“He’s not going anyplace pleasant,” my dad whispered behind his tears.

I glanced at him. “Damn skippy he’s not!” Mom handed me a tissue, and I took it, careful as I blew my nose.

“Yeah, that FBI guy took him out,” my brother said.

“I helped, you know.”

“Yes, we do know,” my dad replied, the sniffles gone. “Mr. Edwards told us everything.”

I raised my eyebrow at him. “Everything?”

My dad’s head jerked a short nod.

“Think you need some shooting training,” Matt said with a cocky grin.

“Oh, like you’d do better.”

“Damn straight I would,” Matt said, the instant brother-sister competition coming out.

“Dude, I was under a bit of duress.”

Matt laughed. “Oh, okay... I guess I’ll give you that one.”

“He said you were very brave,” my mom said, stroking my hand.

“That’s good to know. How is he?”

“The doctors were able to patch up the leg, but he had four cracked ribs, and then his nose. He’ll probably have to have surgery on the nose to fix it.”

“It was pretty gross when he relocated it” I shuddered again at the replay of the sound in my head.

“Tough guy,” Dad muttered.

A yawn took over, and I suddenly needed to go back to sleep. “You know, I’m really friggin’ tired.”

My mom jumped up, and Dad and Matt started shuffling their feet.

“Oh, yes, of course,” my mom said.

“Sure, you get some rest.”

“We’ll stay here if you need anything.”

I yawned again. “I just need some sleep. You all go on home. I’ll be fine. Come back tomorrow.” A random thought overtook my brain. “And don’t tell Grandma, she’ll probably freak out if she knows what happened. Tell her...uh...tell her I was in a car wreck.”

My mom nodded. “Already taken care of. And she does think you were in a car wreck.”

I nodded my head. “Better mention it to the nurses and stuff.”

“As you wish.”

I had images of *The Princess Bride*, one of my mom’s all time favorite movies. In it, Westley, the hero, tells Buttercup, his true love, “as you wish” whenever he wants to tell her he loves her.

And I knew when Mom said it, she meant I love you, as well. I smiled at her, a tear creeping in my eye.

“Now, get some rest,” my mom said.

“As you wish.”

Chapter Forty-Three

After being transferred out of ICU, I had a huge influx of visitors. Between Bella, my family and a few of the other karaoke group, I had someone in my room almost all the time. The hospital even sent in a shrink, and we talked a bit. I was surprised at how much I told her about Jack. She was surprised I wasn’t a bubbling mess of tears and despair.

And I really wasn’t—at least not yet. I think some part of me remained in shock, like I expected to wake up from this weird dream some day.

God knows when I did, I’d probably lose my mind.

Everything seemed clinical and sterile, like I’d been wiped clean of emotional connection to my experience. Ironically, Rugby’s goal worked. A void in my soul consumed what had once been emotion.

The shrink said that would pass soon enough.

I still hadn’t seen Jack. Seems the rest of the world had run into him, but not me. I had hoped, since I was out of ICU, Jack would find me here. Surely his injuries weren’t as bad as mine were.

Standing at the windowsill, I stared down at the parking lot below, and the trees that surrounded the hospital, cutting it off from the hustle and bustle of the city streets. The sky shone a bright blue with cotton ball puffy clouds gleaming white. The rain had ebbed for a few days, but that didn’t mean that tornado season was over. It was still mid-April. Any kind of storm could blow through.

A knock sounded at my door, and I grabbed a sip of water. I sat on the bed, knowing the nurses would probably yell at me for being up. The wall of balloons that hung near the door started to move, and I tried to see who was coming in.

"Hey," came a man's voice. My heart started to slam in my chest, the monitor beeping more intently as my hope of who it was came into view.

Jack sat in a wheelchair, leg in a cast, with a nurse pushing him. "Can I come in?"

I should have been angry, I should have said no. His mission was over. He didn't need to see me anymore. There was no bad guy to catch.

"Boy, you're a celebrity." Jack said, running a hand over some of the streamers.

"Yeah, well, I plan on holding off on that Playboy shoot for a while."

Jack smirked. "Got room for one more?" He held up a small brown teddy bear.

My heart flip-flopped in my chest, and a tear welled in my eye. "Well, I guess I can take that off your hands." I bit my lip to keep the tears from falling as I took the teddy bear out of his hand.

"That's good, because he needed a home, and he told me he was a big*Buffy* fan."

"I bet I can hook him up." I cuddled the soft teddy. "How are you?" I asked. His nose was covered with one of those metal thingies and he wore what looked like old man pajamas.

And still he looked hot.

Brat.

"Hanging in there. How are you doing?"

"Good, I haven't been forced to take a bath recently. I'm ecstatic."

Jack smiled, but tears filled his eyes. "I'm sorry, Lynn, I'm sorry we couldn't find him before... I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'm going to survive," I said with a smile. And on the outside, that was true. I was going to make it. Physically my body was doing well. The inside, however, my soul, was starting to crack. Just seeing Jack and all his pain was enough to stir up everything, to remind me that this all wasn't a dream brought on by pizza too late at night and a scary movie.

Knowing that his injuries were just as real as mine sent an ache of such horrific pain, that I almost wished I were back in the scalding shower, because it was more pleasant. I bit my lip and more tears welled in my eyes. I tried to force them down but I couldn't, and even behind my shut lids, they still emerged.

Jack saw the tears. He reached up and took my hand. I squeezed his fingers, feeling the warmth there, and my heart ached, knowing that at least for a little bit, he belonged to me, that those strong hands had held me.

Even if it was fake, he'd made me feel special. And it had been so long since a man had made me feel

really special, I owed him some thanks for that.

“How’s your chest?”

“Sore,” I replied. I let go of his fingers, and brought my hand to my chest, the spot still tender. That hit I had taken had left a nasty bruise. They always say that flak jackets save lives. No one mentions the bruises they can leave behind. ‘Course, that pain was inconsequential compared to the pain of my skin regrowing, or whatever it was doing.

“Don’t doubt it. Cathy...”

“Cathy?” He’d never mentioned a Cathy before.

“My partner.”

“Oh.”

He stared at his fingertips as he talked. “She took a hit like that once,” he said, pausing in his words, staring off into nothing for a moment. “She...uh...yeah, she said she couldn’t... uh...,” he smirked a bit, a strange, far away look on his face, “...she couldn’t put on a bra for a week.” He forced a smile but that crinkle appeared in his brow.

He’d flipped to that guy I had met in Rugby’s basement—the one who’d been all business. I wished I had made him stay on the other side of the balloons. I didn’t want the agent in my room, I wanted the Jack who fixed my poster.

“They’re sending me home tomorrow.” He didn’t quite look at me, but at the bandages on my legs instead, and I crossed my legs, trying to conceal them. “There’s a lot of things that need to be tied up.”

“Of course.” Inside, my heart ached, and I got my tears under control, though some rebelled and leaked out.

“Under the circumstances, standard procedure is for me to take some time off, to get healed, undergo new psycho evaluation and all that shit, and then determine if I’m in good enough shape to go back to field work.” That cold sound came out of him, like he was reading from a script again. The furrow in his brow got deeper, and his jaw locked.

“What do you want?”

He met my gaze. “I don’t know. Everything is a blur.”

I nodded my head. Inside, my heart broke into a thousand pieces. *Even if he does love me, it’s not enough to keep him here.* A tiny bit of hope that I didn’t realize I had curled up and died.

I wanted him to stay. I wanted my happily-ever-after storybook ending. And I wasn’t going to get it.

My lip quivered and I tried to stop the tears from falling, but it didn’t work. They poured down my face, and I looked away. I couldn’t see his eyes anymore. I couldn’t look at those cerulean gems and know that he didn’t love me enough to stay.

“Well,” I said flippantly, pushing the tears away, “keep in touch. You have my email.”

“Lynn,” he said, his voice hoarse.

I looked back at him. “I can’t expect you to stay. Your life is elsewhere. Mine is here.” I kept my face somber, and the look of understanding that passed over his eyes pained me more than the bullet in my chest.

“I would stay if I could.”

“What for?”

“There are things I need to take care of,” he said, as though he didn’t hear me. “This kind of thing doesn’t happen to me.”

“What kind of thing?”

Jack opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He just met my gaze, like he was trying to will his thoughts to me, the ones he couldn’t find the ability to say. Yet I wasn’t receiving his transmission, my receiver too damaged.

And I didn’t know if I wanted to hear...it was too much to take in at once.

“I’ll keep in touch,” he finally said, though his face swam with emotions that he fought to keep under control.

He flipped a lever on his wheelchair and started turning around, scooting it toward the door.

“Don’t talk to strangers,” he said as his wheelchair rolled out the door.

“You do the same,” I replied, unsure about what had just happened between us.

Chapter Forty-Four

Several days had passed since Jack left, and the hospital had grown even larger and more intimidating.

Knowing he was here, roaming around somewhere, made it seem less imposing. Less brick and mortar.

Yet now that he was gone, it was empty. I was empty.

He was gone, and back to his life, his world without me in it. I never realized how much he meant. At least not until now that he was gone. My heart split in two, I discovered how much I really missed him.

The asshole FBI man I had met in Rugby’s basement, Jack’s formal self, had imprinted on my brain, blocking the memories of the guy I watched TV with, who joked with me and who taped up my poster. I had lost the Jack I wanted. A fresh set of tears came. To know that laughter was him doing his job, that he’d been playing a part. How could I believe the rest? How could I know he wasn’t still doing it? Part of me wished Rugby would have finished the job, and I never would have known that Jack had only been working.

I was such a fool for loving him.

The door to my room opened, and a wheelchair was brought in. For a brief second, I thought maybe...

But this wasn't Jack.

Instead, a lovely blond woman with a cast on her arm and a thin robe came toward me. Her gaze roamed over me like Jack's had, the same analytical examination he seemed to always have. I realized this was Jack's partner, Cathy.

"Lynn? I thought it was time we met." This woman was the person who'd been on the other monitor at Rugby's, the blond hair was the same.

"Cathy Donaldson." She held up her healthy arm. I took it, shaking it properly as I gave her my surname. I couldn't help marveling at the normalness of her introduction. How normal we both were.

Normal women living in hell.

The shrink, who'd been in to chat with me a few times, took a seat on the empty bed next to me.

"Hi, Lynn."

"Group therapy?" I glanced from the woman in the chair to the shrink.

"Of a sort," the shrink said. "We both felt like the two of you needed to meet, considering your experiences."

I met Cathy's gaze.

"Yeah, our experiences," I muttered.

Cathy let out a sigh. "Lynn, it isn't your fault."

I glanced at the shrink. "How long did you have to coach her to say that?"

The shrink raised her hands, waving off any blame of Cathy's comment.

"She didn't coach me," Cathy said. "You didn't ask for Benne to choose you. You didn't ask him to do this to you."

"Doesn't matter now, anyway. It's happened, and now I have to go on."

I couldn't help thinking not just about Benne in that moment, but of Jack. "In a way, if it wasn't for Benne, I wouldn't have met Jack. And I think meeting Jack was good." I wanted to snort, since I didn't sound very convincing.

"It was certainly good for him," Cathy said.

"Why?"

Cathy shrugged, as best she could, anyway. "He's a dick. Always has been. It was nice to see him laugh."

I raised my brow to her. “Well, now you can say you’ve actually seen him laugh.” I couldn’t imagine the man Cathy described—Jack always laughed around me. “And you removed a bad guy from the world.”

“You helped with that, you know. Even if you didn’t know you were helping.”

“And what about that? Why didn’t you come to me and talk to me? Why all this secret stuff?”

“We’re the FBI.”

“That’s a bullshit answer.”

Cathy let out a sigh. “It was my call. The decision to keep you in the dark helped flush Benne out into the open.”

“And into my living room.”

“If we had come to you in February, told you what was going on, would you have continued to talk to him online?”

“Of course not.”

“Then Benne would have just retreated, pulled back and gone after someone else.”

“So you used me as bait.” The thought sickened me. If she wasn’t already in a wheelchair, I might have smacked her.

“If you knew, and even if you had agreed to help us, it would have been so easy for you to slip. Would you have known that Benne was Rugby? Would you have ever suspected him?”

“No.”

“So odds were, you would have told him,” Cathy said. “And then we would have lost him again. And some other woman would have been in that bed, being tortured.”

“I wasn’t given the choice!”

“And what would you have done? Told me that you suspected who?”

“Willowrocks.”

“Who was Jack and me. Then we would have been back at square one.”

I shook my head. “I really don’t have time for this.” My head started to swim.

“What, you gotta go play racquetball?” Cathy snapped.

I made a fist. “I was fine. I was friggin’ normal. I was a boring person, happy in my little corner of the Internet, and then...and then...” Tears started to pour out of me. “Why did this happen to me?”

Cathy reached out and touched my leg, and I jerked at the contact. “Benne did this. Not me. Not Jack. Not you. He forced himself into your life, stalking you like you were an animal, manipulating you, toying

with your mind, forcing you to think he was a good person. He did this. Not you.”

“But I invited him into my home.”

“And you were, what, high on DayQuil? It wasn’t like you were thinking very clearly when he took you. He manipulated you, convinced you that you could invite him over. Sociopaths do this. Serial killers do this. They work on your weaknesses, find them and attack. That’s what they do, Lynn. You didn’t make this happen.”

I didn’t believe her. If only I had listened to Jack. If only I had waited... None of this would have happened. It was still my fault.

“How do you think I feel?” Cathy asked, coughing a bit as she spoke. “I walked right into his trap. I went alone, one of the cardinal sins of being an FBI agent, trying to find him. And he found me, tied me up and kept me out in the middle of nowhere, so I could scream my head off, and no one knew I was there.”

“But you weren’t his target,” I replied.

“I was just a bonus,” Cathy said. “And Jack would have been too, if you hadn’t intervened.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You saved both of us. Jack was able to get agents out and find me.”

“Oh, I did a great job,” I said, gesturing to her bandages.

“This is because a mistake was made. Nothing more. Just like you inviting him over. That was a mistake.”

“A mistake that almost cost me my life.”

“But it didn’t. You’re alive, Lynn. You, Jack and me, we’re all alive. We get tomorrow. It may be hard, but we can move forward. That’s more than the others got.”

I closed my eyes. “Jack didn’t seem very alive when I saw him.”

“He isn’t. And he won’t be for a while. It’ll take a lot to get him back to what he was before. He had to open himself up to you, Lynn, something Jack doesn’t do very well.”

“And what makes him any different than any other guy?”

“Because he’s your guy.”

A week later on the nose, I was released.

Cathy’s words still rang in my head. That Jack was my guy.

If he were, I would have heard from him.

Or so I thought.

Instead, I heard from my friends, who pretty much didn't leave me alone, whether it was on the phone or in person. And let's not talk about the acquaintances who wanted to know the scoop, just so they could say they talked to me personally.

I quit taking phone calls for a while.

My parents moved me to their house, and somewhere along the line, packed up all my stuff at my apartment and put it in storage for me. Mom didn't really want me alone right now.

'Course, I couldn't blame her. I wasn't exactly in the best mental state. There was a lot of crying, a lot of general blues, but that was to be expected—that whole kidnapping and attempted murder thing would do that to a person.

My days consisted of going to therapy for an hour every day, and then spending my afternoons watching too much talk show television, and trying not to think about Rugby, the kidnapping or Jack.

Not that it worked very well. My shrink had me journal writing to help get the angry and upset thoughts out of my head. Most of the time, though, the pages were written out on legal pads and thrown into the fire pit in Mom and Dad's backyard.

I have to admit, I liked this shrink a lot more than the one who'd talked to me in the hospital.

This lady, Dr. Polk, had a penchant for huge hats and voluminous clothing, which entertained me ever so much. She looked no bigger than a size ten under her colorful layers, but the clothing and the huge hats added another dimension to her. She would dominate any room she entered without saying a word.

She was a nice lady, a bit boisterous at times, but fun nonetheless. Even when I cried, I still had to laugh while I was there—it kept me from crying at home.

We would talk about Jack, about Rugby, about the Internet and my life online, as well as my friends and whatever else came up. Surprisingly enough, she didn't have me on a handful of pills every day, just valium when I felt the need for it—said it was better for the grief.

After a week of daily therapy, I found I had the strength to check my email and see what was going on in the online world.

Shock upon shock, I had literally a thousand emails to go through. Most were from others in the fan fiction world, checking on me, some because they'd heard I was kidnapped, and others because they just hadn't seen me around. I shook my head at the audacity of people after reading the tenth email that asked "what was going on" because I hadn't been online.

After all, it was all over the news—surely they would have heard about the Fan Fiction Killer by now.

'Course, staring at the emails, I couldn't help wondering if I had been just as dense, so stuck on a life that existed online that the real world just didn't matter to me.

And if any of this had taught me anything, it was that maybe I was too dependant on the world that existed between the pixels, seeing it as a utopian society, where everything was perfect. And didn't want

to see the dirty back alley when I found it.

I scanned through the letters, and one popped out at me.

JEdwards2597@FBI.com.

My hands started to shake.

Clicking on the entry, the email popped open.

Dear Miss Broadmore,

Just checking to see if you are doing okay.

Special Agent J. Edwards, FBI

I blinked.

What the hell did I say to that? That I was fine, and everything was peachy keen? It was so clinical, so...so unemotional.

So not the Jack I knew.

And since when was he “Special Agent J. Edwards”? What was this formal shit all about?

Part of me wanted to scream at the screen, scream about how angry I was about everything, including him leaving, but I didn’t. My mother would have freaked out if I just randomly started screaming.

God knew she already had more gray hair than she’d had a month ago.

Before I knew it, I was typing off a reply. Words, phrases, everything I wanted to say rambled around in my brain, but I couldn’t bring myself to type any of it in the response. The anger at what happened, the rage at being hurt, the frustration at feeling so out of control of my life—all of it rattled around in my head, but none of it dared erupt through my fingers.

Instead, I went for a similar type letter to what he sent to me. If he wanted to know more, he should ask.

I read it over a couple of times, hesitating on the “send” button, after all, it was just as formal as his letter to me, but eventually, I found the guts to reply.

Let him chew on that for a while, I mused.

I wanted more from him. More than a casual “how are you” letter. But maybe that was all he was able to give. Maybe he had no more inside him except a formal detachment.

Probably the way of an FBI guy.

Jack opened his email, far too excited to see what Lynn had said—she'd finally replied, he'd mailed that letter off to her about a week ago, and had become obsessive about checking his mail to see whether or not she'd answered him.

After all, email was pretty instant—surely she would have seen it by now. After a couple of days, he'd wondered if she just didn't want to talk to him at all.

At least until he saw the reply from her today.

He greedily opened the letter, clicking far too many times to get the thing open, he was surprised the computer didn't lock down at his incessant clicking.

Dear Agent J. Edwards,

I'm doing well. No one has decided to commit me to an asylum, so I assume that is a good sign.

The burns are starting to heal, and physically I should be fine. There'll probably be some scarring, but the doctors tell me that can probably be fixed with surgery. Lasers or something.

Though not too sure I want laser beams all over me.

Hope you are healing up as well. I thank you for rescuing me from that serial killer.

Miss Broadmore

"What in the hell is that?" Jack shouted at the screen. Did he mean that little to her? His side hurt where his ribs were still healing at his sudden jerk.

"What's wrong?" Cathy asked, her head popping up from her own computer across from him.

"Look at this." Jack pointed to the screen.

Cathy came to his side and scanned the email. "Good Lord, what'd you send her?"

"I just asked how she was."

Cathy grabbed his mouse and scrolled down, seeing Jack's original letter. "You bonehead." She reached up and popped him upside the head.

"What?" He rubbed his head, glaring up at Cathy.

"If you don't know, then I'm not telling you." Cathy went back to her desk.

What the hell? What'd he do to deserve such a brush-off email? He glared at Cathy for another minute, then figured it had to be a girl thing. He hit the reply button and started typing off his response.

“Oh no, he did not.” I saw a reply from Jack a few hours after I had mailed off his email. I had forced myself to not check the email for a good three hours—an impressive feat for me.

Part of me hoped and prayed that he would answer with a lovey-dovey reply, something that explained his calloused email from before.

Boy was I wrong.

Dear Miss Broadmore,

I am glad to learn that your physical wounds are healing, and from the tone of your letter, I also see that your mental state is returning to its usual argumentative form.

My broken ribs are slowly healing, though it will be some time before I am back in top form.

Also, for your information, my title is “SPECIAL Agent Jack Edwards,” a title I worked very hard to attain.

Special Agent J. Edwards—FBI

This of course, couldn’t go unanswered by me.

Dear SPECIAL Agent J. Edwards, FBI

Kudos for you, for attaining a “SPECIAL” in front of your name. You must feel so SPECIAL.

Lynn Broadmore—SPECIAL Webmistress of slayerdomain

“Who pissed in her Cheerios?” Jack glared at the screen.

“Another email from Lynn?” Cathy was packing her stuff to head out for the day.

“She’s such a brat.” Jack glared at his computer screen. “Now look what she did.”

“You’re still wrong.”

“How can I be wrong? I asked her how she was, for Christ’s sake.”

“You’re a guy. You’re wrong.” Cathy let out a sigh. “You know, it’s almost time to go home, Jack. I’m leaving. I have a date with my Labrador, and I can’t be late. He tends to eat the furniture.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Jack replied, opening a blank email.

“Don’t spend all night arguing with her.”

“We’ll see.”

“Check these out.” I handed a pile of emails to my therapist.

“What is this?” Dr Polk asked, today she wore a huge black and red hat with a robin on the brim.

“Emails from Jack.”

“Wow.” she took the twenty or so pieces of paper. “Guess you two have been talking?”

“If you want to call that talking, then by all means, yep, we have been.” I waited as she scanned through the emails, a strange look on her face, like she was both aghast and ready to burst out laughing.

Jack and I, or SPECIAL Agent J. Edwards, as I liked to call him now, had been exchanging emails like crazy people for the last week. Though none of them had been terribly friendly and none really said anything, other than us calling each other assholes. I mouthed off in one about him running home to find his latest conquest, and he replied that I must have a ton of “first dates” now that I was famous and all.

The little reservation I held back was because I was sending the emails to a government facility. I didn’t want to be put on some “watched” list or something because I called an agent an ass.

’Course, I probably was by now. They most likely had me stereotyped as some kind of obsessive victim who clung to her rescuer.

Dr Polk glanced up at me. “So let me see...” she started reading one of the latest ones.

“Dear Miss Broadmore—SPECIAL Webmistress of slayerdomain.” She glanced at me. “What is the deal with “special” in all capital letters?”

“That’s his fault for being all politically correct and shit.”

Dr Polk raised a brow at me, and from the way her hat bobbed, it looked like the robin might actually eat the arched brow.

“So let’s see, you’ve been a smart ass, you’ve made fun of his title, and I see you’ve also managed to inform him of your friend Bella’s breakup with her boyfriend Stuart. But I don’t see anything in here about how you feel, or even how he feels about you.”

“I know how he feels about me.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “He’s an arrogant ass who used me as part of an FBI investigation.”

“Would he be sending you emails like this if he didn’t care about you?” Polk shifted in her wingback chair, her dress ballooning over the edges and ruffling like she wore ten petticoats underneath.

“Well, you care about your pets, I’m sure there’s some part of him that appreciates what I went through.”

“Now, Lynn.”

“Oh come on, Dr. Polk. If he cared even half as much about me as I do about him, wouldn’t he have stayed?”

She tipped her head to the side. “Now you’re being selfish, Lynn. Surely he has a life, a home, things that would have to be taken care of. Even you said that he had to undergo therapy after this mission as part of his job.”

I started staring at the wall to my left, not looking at her stare that was far too much like my mother’s.

“I think you need to write him a long letter, telling him how you feel. Tell him everything—how you are hurt, how much you miss him, everything. And see what he has to say about that.”

“I won’t grovel to him.”

“This isn’t groveling, Lynn, this is giving him a chance to understand that you do have feelings for him beyond this asinine banter you two have going on.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Then, you get what you deserve, Lynn.”

I didn’t like Dr Polk’s assignment. Not one little bit.

So instead of doing what she told me, I focused on other things.

Like my hair.

Some of the sections were ripped and cut, something I wasn’t aware of until my mom commented about the crazy way my hair laid. Evidently, Rugby had taken some locks for a keepsake.

Sydney came to Mom’s with three bright green streaks in her bangs and two bright blue ones behind those. With Sydney, you never could tell what she would do to her hair. Fortunately, neither Mom or Dad were home when she came in—I’m sure there would have been words.

Maybe not words, precisely, but snorts of “hmmm” and “huh” from them, which only would have made me want to pull out the pictures of my dad with his long hippy hair.

Sydney greeted me with a hug, though gentle enough not to hurt me. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay.” In a weird way, I kinda was, too. After our last “asinine banter” letter, I hadn’t bothered replying to Jack, simply because every time I tried, I couldn’t think of something smart-assed to say.

And he hadn’t sent anything new either.

Probably a good thing.

The urge to do what Dr Polk recommended was getting far too overwhelming, though, which didn't help things.

"This hair needs something, but otherwise, I'm healing."

She ran her fingers through my hair. "Boy, I'd say so. But it's always a good sign when people start being concerned about their appearance. Shows they are feeling better."

"True. Where do you want to set up?"

"The kitchen should be fine."

I sat down in a chair and she started assessing the damage.

"The only thing I can do with this mess is cut it all off. I'm sorry." She patted me on the shoulder.

"If you have to shave it, that's fine. Just do what you must."

Sydney nodded her head. "You got it." She wrapped a cape around me and got to work.

A clump of hair fell in my lap. I was rather disappointed that all my highlights were now completely gone, and I stared at the bundle, remembering I'd done that to "pretty" myself up for Jack.

It seemed fitting that she was cutting it all off.

Couldn't help wondering if Jack would like a short haircut like this...

And then I berated myself for such a dumb thought. Who cares what he thinks, really? He's not here, and likely wouldn't see it anyway.

Sydney finished the cut, and even offered to put some color on, but I decided against it. I paid her double what I normally would have paid her, because she came out to the house. She only asked for her normal rate, but I felt she deserved some extra compensation for the trip.

We parted, and I checked out my new cut in the mirror. I looked like Sharon Stone in Sphere, if Sharon had been boiled like a lobster. Okay, maybe I didn't look so much like a lobster anymore, my skin was healing rather nicely. Nonetheless, sunlight was still not my friend. Too much of it, and I felt like I'd been burned all over again.

My aunt Sara and my grandmother showed up not long after that, carrying bags of food from Rib Crib. The barbecue smelled amazing, and I would have dove right into it, if Sara hadn't gone ballistic over my haircut.

"Oh Lynn, it's adorable! You look so sexy!"

"I do not."

"You do! Your skin's starting to heal, and that cut looks so good on you!" Sara ran her fingers through my hair. "You just need some makeup. Should I call Melissa and have her come over and do your

colors?”

Sara’s daughter Melissa, my cousin, sold Mary Kay. “Now is not the time for a makeup consultation.”

“Well, when your skin gets better, you should. Nothing feels quite as good as new makeup.”

I laughed at her. She was right, though. “And maybe all the new skin will be more youthful.”

Grandma just grinned. “I wish I could wear my hair that short.” She pulled her thin silvery locks. “This stuff *pbtttht* ... It wouldn’t do anything like that.” She thought I was in a bad car wreck, and I wasn’t about to tell my eighty-three-year-old grandmother what kind of an idiot she had for a granddaughter.

I laughed at her. “You never know, Grandma.”

We sat down and had our lunch, gossiping about family, life and anything we could think of. Anything but what happened to me.

Which I was just fine with.

Chapter Forty-Five

June

As summer started to heat up, so did the pressing social engagements. At least in Bella’s mind.

She’d been trying to get me out of the house for the last couple of weeks, but I just hadn’t been ready. I was still pretty scarred up, though at least my face didn’t look horrific.

The closest I would get to leaving the house was gazing through my parent’s backyard, letting the grass smooch under my toes. Which was weird in itself, because I’d never been one for the outdoors, yet now I went outside at least for a few minutes every day.

Though I couldn’t stay out too long—the sun was killer on my regrowing skin. I was officially an SPF 50 gal now.

My cousin had come over to do my makeup colors last week, but I wound up buying more of the skin rejuvenating stuff than actual makeup. ’Course, I think the skin stuff was more expensive.

Oh well, at least she’s got extra money to spend.

Something I didn’t have.

Rodriguez Accounting had called, offering my job back not long after I got out of the hospital. Evidently, there was some big shake up, and my boss, Wilmont, as well as Tina Smith had been fired.

They were having an affair, which had led, partially to my firing. Though Mr. Rodriguez, however apologetic about my circumstances and all, did say that if I came back and continued to work on “personal projects” at work, I would be terminated.

I told him I’d have to think about it.

And I still was, in a roundabout way. I mean, I knew eventually I'd have to reenter the work force, because I couldn't live with my parents much longer. As cool as they were being about me being there, it was still cramping their style.

They'd never admit it, of course, but aside from the occasional family member, no one came by the house, and that's an unusual thing for them. Usually, their house always had people over on the weekends, even if it was just another couple or two, sitting around and gabbing.

I know they told everyone for my privacy to stay away, but I could tell Mom was missing the visitors.

'Course, I didn't know what was sadder, the fact that I was cramping their style, or the fact that I had no pressing social engagements to cramp.

I meandered around in the grass, my toes squishing the manicured-to-death lawn into little clumpy spots that I knew drove my dad nuts. He hadn't actually done it, but I kept expecting to see him emerge from the shed with a rake to smooth out the lawn after I walked around in it.

The house faced west, so in the afternoon, the backyard was fairly shady, the deck and patio completely in shade. I was about ready to go sit on the black metal rocker on the patio when I froze in my tracks.

Contrasting with the perfect Kelly green of the grass was a lone feather of tan and brown, like it probably fell off the ducks that swam in the man-made hole the developers called a pond just out beyond the backyard.

I stared at the feather, and before I knew what I was doing, I leaned over and picked it up. Holding it up, I smoothed the plumes down to make the feather perfect again.

"He had one of these for me." Benne was going to purify me, rape me, and if I didn't die before, then he would have killed me.

And would have left a feather, not too dissimilar to this one, on my chest.

Because I wrote.

He was going to leave a fucking quill on my chest because of words on a screen.

I turned to walk up onto the deck.

My mother stared, one hand on the door, the other on her glass of Chardonnay, and her face ashen.

I walked over to the rocker. "Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

I glanced down, realizing I was still holding the feather. "I fucking hate feathers." I dropped it in the trash can before sitting in the rocker.

Mom took two more steps toward me, the color returning to her face. "Do you need anything?" Her voice was so tender, I realized what her beef was—she thought I was going to lose it over the feather.

It had been too long though—I'd already cried those tears.

I shrugged. “Winning lottery ticket?” In the shade, it was fairly cool, what with the breeze blowing. Clouds littered the sky, sliding around like cotton balls.

“Well, I don’t have a winning lottery ticket, but this did come for you,” my mom said, sipping on her wine. She handed me an envelope.

The postmark was Washington DC, and I hesitated opening it. Email from Jack was one thing, but a physical letter? That was something entirely different. Mom knew all about Jack—she’d listened to enough of my mooning over him to probably last herself a lifetime.

And it’s terribly irritating when your mom agrees with your shrink. Especially when you live with your mom. Then she can really hound you about writing letters to men who were “SPECIAL”.

I shook my head. “I don’t think I can open it.”

Mom snorted at me, then proceeded to rip it open and read the top page.

“Well, it’s not from Jack Edwards. It’s from some woman named Cathy Donaldson.”

I blinked. “What?” I motioned for the letter.

She handed me the papers. Scanning them over, I had to read it twice to get the gist of it.

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“She’s recommending me for some web designing program at Newman University here in town. If I’m reading this right, all I have to do is fill out the paperwork and send it in.”

My mother blinked. “And why would she do that?”

“She thinks I’m wasting my time as an accountant.”

“I could have told you that.”

I stuck my tongue out at her, then scanned the program schedule. “Classes would start this fall. It’s a two-year program. With the schooling I already have with accounting, I can pretty much jump right in and take the web stuff and let my other classes carry over.”

My mom took a sip of her wine. “You should do it,” she said after a minute. “Hell, you do what I do at work with no training. Imagine what you could do if you had some.” Mom did web work and created pitch presentations for one of the major aircraft companies here in town. She’d been doing it for years, and was due to retire in three or four years. When she first started doing the web stuff, she would ask me questions about how to do certain things, and eventually, we both learned a lot from each other.

“I don’t know.” Web design—that was a whole other type of work. I could work for some company here doing it, but I could also work independently. Which was an incentive, but how could I make any money at it? I mean, I just goof around at home with it.

To make it a job, though?

“Well, at least think about it.”

“I will.”

“So, tell me, how was Kansas?” Agent Rick Weaver asked Jack Edwards. They sat down for a beer at a little bar a few blocks from work called Sleuths, done in dark colors and heavy woodwork, reminding Jack of a study. The clientele was a lot of the staff at his office, and he had recognized most of them when he walked in.

“It was flat,” Jack replied, savoring his beer, glad to be home and get real beer.

“And the girl?”

“A stubborn, smart-assed shit.” It had been almost three weeks since his last letter to Lynn, and she hadn’t bothered answering him.

Cathy said he deserved it.

Jack figured this was just life slapping him in the face, qualifying the fact that Lynn really didn’t want any kind of relationship with him.

Even friendship.

“Oh, that’s just perfect for you,” Weaver said, grinning at him. The two of them had gone to the Academy together, and even though Weaver worked with white-collar criminals, they still managed to grab a beer every so often.

When their schedules put them in the same state at the same time, that is.

Jack didn’t dignify Weaver’s comment with a reply.

“Cathy said you fell hard for her.”

“Cathy is a romantic, deep down under her stilettos.”

“I find that hard to believe.” He took a tug off his beer, then set the glass down a little hard, making it echo on the bar. “I can’t believe you, man. Break the cardinal rule—never fall for a case.”

“Well, I can’t exactly be like you.” Weaver’s reputation for wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am relationships was legendary.

“You should try it. I guarantee it’ll get this chick...”

“Lynn. Her name is Lynn,” Jack ground out, his hand tensing around his beer glass.

“Lynn, whatever, out of your system.”

Jack shook his head. "I find that hard to believe." Lynn wasn't just some gal who needed to be vanquished from his mind. She was like a virus that attacked him from all angles. Every time he thought he'd distanced himself enough from her, something would bring her back into his mind—a rerun of *Buffy* on television, the smell of a good pizza, even a whiff of the same bath soap she used would flood his senses with memories.

Weaver shrugged, unaware of Jack's raging thoughts. "I bet I could find several willing women, right here in this bar, that would love to help you forget." He glanced around, smiling at females scattered around the bar.

"I don't need your help." But he didn't add that he wasn't sure he wanted to forget Lynn Broadmore just yet.

Even now, six weeks after the whole incident, one thing stained his brain—Lynn. Her laugh echoed in his mind at the oddest times. Sometimes he could almost feel her hand on his shoulder or smell her, and he'd jerk, looking around for her.

Then he would realize he'd imagined it.

How could one woman do that to anyone? How could she stain him so completely, that all he wanted to do was get back to Kansas tomorrow. Tonight.

Right now.

He'd go back right now, if he knew she wanted him there.

It's amazing how quiet a place can seem at two in the morning. In the view-out windows in the basement, I could see a bit of the twinkling stars through the trees in the backyard, when the breeze didn't sway the tree branches.

It was peaceful, calm.

Yet in the cyber world, things would usually just be getting interesting. Chat rooms would be hopping with people from all over the world, visiting, flirting, what have you. Blogs and forums would be alive with posts, news sites would regularly be updated.

It was like sleep wasn't an option in the pixilated world.

'Course, my reason for my lack of sleep had nothing to do with that pixilated world.

It was Jack, plain and simple.

He filled my brain all the time. Like a friggin' virus, he hid behind my eyes, just out of reach, a memory that ached when I thought of him, but longed for him just the same.

I got myself a pop, caffeine free, thank you very much, from the fridge in the basement and headed over to my computer. Mom and Dad had wired the basement so I could keep my computer downstairs near my room so I didn't have to use theirs upstairs. Personally, I think they didn't want me uploading stuff to their hard drive.

Even now, it was almost automatic for me to log into my IM program and see if anyone was on.

People were on, but I wasn't sure I was ready to talk to anyone in the fan fiction world, so I turned on my privacy mode.

Too bad someone saw me before I went invisible.

JEwards:*Lynn.*

What was this? Was the great SPECIAL Agent Jack searching the Internet for me? I debated turning the program off so I didn't have to talk to him.

Yet my fingers had other ideas.

Hush:*Jack?*

JEwards:*Yeah. How are you?*

Hush:*I'm good. Moving onward and upward. You?*

I had to smile at myself, I was so good at full-power bullshit. Even I was almost convinced of my reply.

JEwards:*There's talk about some future assignments.*

Hush:*A lot of future assignments?*

I hated the idea of asking, but I did kinda want to know.

After all, if he was moving forward, then maybe I needed to as well. A life, that's what I needed. I didn't need to be thinking about Jack so much, the man who consumed most of my waking thoughts.

Even now, my heart fluttered in my chest, just knowing I was talking to him. No matter the argumentative emails, even I could admit that each time I had seen one, no matter how irritated I was at him, I still was excited to see his name in the inbox.

Yet I hadn't seen one in almost a month now.

JEdwards:*Not yet. Mostly basic stuff at the moment. They're still collating.*

Hush:*Collating?*

JEdwards:*Trying to decide if I'm up to par. It takes a team of ten or twelve to decide if an agent can move forward.*

Hush:*And what would happen if you don't pass?*

JEdwards:*Desk work only. No field work. Or being sent to a smaller branch where the cases aren't so intense.*

Hush:*I'm sorry.*

I wasn't sure what to say to that. I hated thinking he might have to change jobs because of what had happened with me.

I mean, really, I didn't want to see him lose his job because of my case. Get in trouble? Maybe a slight reprimand, I'd be okay with that. After all, I was jobless at the moment anyway.

Okay, so that was a bit spiteful, but I did have some anger against him.

JEdwards:*It's okay. How are you? What are you doing up at this hour?*

Hush:*I could ask you the same thing.*

JEdwards:*Can't sleep.*

Hush:*Me either.*

JEdwards:*Why not?*

Like I was going to admit he was the reason I couldn't sleep.

Hush:*Had a cappuccino too late at night. What's your excuse?*

JEdwards:*Don't have one. Not sleeping well.*

Now that, I wasn't about to touch.

Hush: *What keeps SPECIAL Agents awake at night, I wonder?*

JEdwards: *Fan fiction writers.*

JEdwards: *What keeps fan fic writers awake?*

I shook my head, looking several times at his words, trying to make them compute in my brain.

I was keeping him up at night.

I paused, my fingers over the keys, ready to reply. A thousand smart-assed replies came to me as I sat there. He was baiting me. I had baited him, now he was repeating it to me.

And I couldn't answer. Nothing wanted to come out. I didn't want to admit, face to face like this, that he was just as responsible for my sleepless nights as I was for his.

It was too close to saying how I felt about him, and I couldn't do it, I just couldn't. There was too much at risk, to tell him to his face. Too much had happened. I couldn't take another rejection.

I flipped off the IM service. I was a chicken, and I knew it.

A couple of tears trickled down my cheeks as I opened my word processing program and started writing my answer to Jack. My fingers flew across the keys, every word, every ache, every pain pouring out of me. Everything.

There wasn't anything I left out. I let everything out, merely stopping long enough to correct misspelled words.

I admitted that he was the reason I couldn't sleep. I blamed him for being a wonderful guy, that it was his fault that I'd fallen so hard for him. That his impressive bed skills had pushed me beyond just a friendly-type feeling for him.

But more than that, his smile, his laughter and his understanding of me and acceptance of me as I was had tipped the scale. And to learn that his attraction had been merely him doing his job.

Could he comprehend how much that hurt? More than anything Rugby did to me, I trusted Jack in a way I hadn't trusted anyone in my life, and he tore my soul to shreds. Even if he had feelings of any kind for me, how could his possibly compare to what I felt?

I was his assignment, and I couldn't help blaming some part of myself for falling so hard, for needing that kind of trust in someone. He saved my body, but he killed part of my soul.

The trusting part.

Two cans of pop later, I finished the seven page letter, tears streaming down my face. Maybe it was the over abundance of emotion that was finally released. Maybe it was the fact that pretty soon my parents would be getting up to go to work.

But I was tired.

My eyelids hung heavily over my eyes, and through the slits, I managed to open my email account and copy the letter into a message.

And I sent everything to Jack.

Chapter Forty-Six

"Here's what you wanted," Cathy said to Jack, handing him a slip of paper with a phone number on it. "Though I want no part of this insanity you're about to execute."

Jack raised his brow at her, smiling. "You're already involved."

Cathy shook her head. "See no evil, hear no evil."

Jack snorted at her.

"I take it the email wars are over?" Cathy took a seat across from him.

"They're either over, or a whole new battle is about to begin." Jack picked up the paper and the phone.

Cathy let out a sigh. "This is the craziest thing I think I've ever seen you do."

"Isn't it about time I did something crazy?" The number he'd dialed started to ring.

"And if it works, it'll be the most romantic thing I've ever seen."

"You have heard of romance?"

"It's a vague notion that has been known to come up from time to time." She winked at him, and in that second, Jack realized his partner was a lot more feminine than she'd ever revealed to him before.

Cathy may be a tough gal most of the time, but deep down, she really was a softy. So soft, she let Jack sign her name to the letter he had sent to Lynn about the college thing, because she knew, as well as Jack did, that Lynn would have thrown it away had it been his suggestion.

The phone call connected.

"ello?" came Lynn's best friend Bella on the other end.

"Bella? This is Jack Edwards." He heard her shift the phone. "Don't hang up."

"What do you want?" Bella asked, though disapproval raked through her voice.

Jack picked up a pencil and started rocking it in his fingers. "I need your help."

"Lynn has been through enough, don't you think?"

"I want to make it better. But I need your help."

“How can I help?”

Jack smiled as he heard Bella’s interest peak. He started outlining his plan.

“I swear to God, Bella, you are the worst friend in the world,” I muttered as Bella pulled into the Chalet.

“Oh, knock it off.” Bella threw her Ford Explorer into park. “You need to get out, and I’m not about to go out and have a good time knowing that you’re at home moping about over some guy...”

“Jack *is not* some guy. Just because you and Stuart were able to break up and move on like it was no big thing doesn’t mean that all of us can do that.”

“Stuart and I have been over for a long time. Long enough to know that we’re better as friends than we were dating, anyway.”

“Still, Jack and I were different than that. It hurts.” I didn’t add that it felt, in some weird way, like I was cheating on him, just being here with Bella.

After all, this was another one of Bella’s grand blind date schemes, except this time, it was a double date. Two guys that Bella vaguely knew, one I’m sure was a “pity date” for me.

“Oh, stop your whining, trust me, you’ll like this guy,” Bella said as she opened the door to get out.

“I’ve heard that before.” Bella didn’t hear me as we walked inside. Probably a good thing.

I let out a sigh. Was this what my life was going back to? A perpetual void of blind dates that never panned out into anything? Me being alone most of the time, on the Internet, playing with other fan fiction writers?

A year ago, that life had suited me just fine.

Now, though, it seemed so empty and pointless. I was jobless. I lived with my parents, and probably would continue to live with them for a while, especially since I had gone ahead and enrolled in those college classes.

I felt like such a loser. Almost thirty-one years old, and no prospects of any decent dates, going back to school now? Not because I was in some low-end job and needed school to move on, but starting out all over again, like I was twenty-one or something.

I felt like someone had hit the reset button on my life and didn’t bother to tell me. Pretty soon, I’d wind up being like the “old chicks” I used to see when I went out to the bars and made fun of because they were too old to really pick anyone up, unless the beer goggles were firmly on the guy’s face.

The Chalet was its usual hustle and bustle. Several fairly large groups were gathered around the tables in the center, men’s eyes focused on the boxing match on the big screen.

I glanced at my watch. Just after nine o’clock. Great, boxing for at least another hour or two. Odds were that the karaoke wouldn’t start until well after that, and from the size of the crowd, I figured I’d be

lucky to get a song in, maybe two at the most.

“So where are these guys?”

“Not sure. Let’s sit at a booth.” We took a seat, and Bella immediately started flipping the channels on the little thirteen-inch television in the back of the booth to find something other than boxing to watch.

I glanced around, half expecting to see some of our karaoke crowd out, but none seemed to be there yet. It was early, though.

“I’m surprised no one is here.”

“Think everyone went out of town.” She started telling me that most of our friends had some kind of thing to do this weekend, since it was the Fourth of July holiday weekend. Friday had been the Fourth, so everyone was still partying a good deal, and probably would until Monday.

Our usual waitress Jenny appeared with our drinks, and we just kinda relaxed for a bit.

“You think they blew us off?” I couldn’t help being hopeful that I wouldn’t have to go through another blind date from hell.

“They should be here.”

“Lynn and Bella?” this man said, coming up to the booth. He was tall with an earthy complexion that hid teeth almost as white as Jack’s. Not bad looking, really. Not my usual type, but not bad.

“Hi, there,” Bella said, pouring out her ten million watt smile. “Have a seat.”

The guy sat down, smiling at her, and shook her hand, then mine. “I’m Rick.”

We introduced ourselves, and I assumed Rick was my date, since he sat down next to me almost immediately. He seemed nice enough; friendly and very engaging, though once again, he seemed to be all eyes for Bella.

Go figure.

“So where’s your partner in crime?” Bella asked.

“Oh, he got tied up, he’ll be here shortly,” Rick said, glancing at Bella, and a strange smile passed over his face, and Bella acknowledged it, just before he turned to look at me. “So what do you do, Lynn?”

“Uh, I’m drinking a tequila sunrise at the moment.”

He smiled, and though charming, he didn’t do a thing for me. His hair was too dark, his expression too relaxed for me. “For a living, what do you do?”

“Oh that,” I said, feigning playful banter. I just wanted to smack myself, because every move he made, every gesture, I found myself wondering how he would have handled the ripped poster. “I’ll be starting classes in the fall at Newman.”

“Doing what?” he asked before taking a sip off his beer.

“Web design and graphic art.”

He raised an eyebrow, a strange look of disinterest passing over his face. “Interesting.”

Nope, he wouldn’t have taped up my poster. He would have just shook his head and told me I was being stupid.

Stop it, I chided myself. This wasn’t Jack. There wasn’t going to be another Jack. I couldn’t expect everyone to be like Jack.

I had to move forward.

“So you decided to take the classes then?” Bella asked.

“Seemed a waste not to. If I hate it, I can always go back to accounting.”

“You won’t hate it.”

I shrugged. “It’s dealing with people’s whims. Not something I’ve ever been good at.”

“Well, you never know,” Bella said.

Rick nodded. “People can be assholes, that’s for sure.”

“Oh yeah,” I muttered.

“Speaking of assholes,” Rick said with a grin. “I think your date is here, Lynn.”

I blinked. “You’re not my date?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“You are in my seat,” came a sexy voice that reverberated through my body like a perfect chord.

I tipped my head up, and once again was excited that God had the forthright thinking to attach the eyeballs inside the head, and the jaw directly to the skull, because my eyes popped open so wide, they could have fallen out, and my jaw about came unhinged.

Jack Edwards stood there, motioning for Rick to get up.

“Hey, I was just keeping it warm,” Rick said.

Jack obviously didn’t believe his friend at all. As soon as Rick was out of the way, Jack swept in, almost a glide, he slid in next to me, our legs touching from hipbone to knee.

“Lynn,” he said, slipping his fingers in mine.

I jerked at the fire of his touch. My God, it’s been three months, and physical contact with him still felt like a burning flame. His hair was a bit shorter, more cropped than it had been before, making it look a little darker. He’d lost weight too, maybe twenty pounds.

His face was thinner, more angular than it had been. Before I realized what I was doing, I had my hand on his cheek, sliding down his jawbone.

“You’ve lost weight.”

“You cut your hair.” His own hand slid up over the back of my neck, into the short brown locks, and fisting them.

The table in the booth jumped a bit, and we both looked over, realizing that Bella and Rick were getting up.

“Do you think they’re going to have sex right here?” Bella said, a little louder than a stage whisper.

“Well, as fun as that might be to watch...” Rick said with a grin, winking at Jack. “We’ll be back later.” They headed out of the booth toward the bar.

I watched Bella walk away, though I didn’t feel nervous about it. I wanted to have this time alone with Jack. Nothing could hurt me now. Jack was here.

“What are you doing here?” My hand rested on his arm, and I didn’t want to take it off, for fear he’d actually disappear, and this was some kind of strange dream. The texture of his skin seemed the same—warm and soft, but still masculine and imposing. I ran my finger over the hairs on his forearm, unconsciously stroking with the grain of growth.

He smiled, letting one finger trail down my face and fall off my chin. “I wanted to talk to you.” He put a hand on my knee. I had worn a skirt at Bella’s insistence on this date, and its fluttery fabric rode up a bit over my knee. Jack’s hand grazed the skin, and he made soft circles with his thumb.

Was it possible to get drunk just from a hand on the thigh? Already my head felt dizzy, and I had to force myself to focus on his words.

I raised a brow at him, pretending his thumb’s assault meant nothing to me. “There is this thing called a phone.” ’Course, my voice came out a bit heady. I wanted to pull my legs back from him, the scarring hadn’t healed all the way, and I didn’t want him to be grossed out at it.

“Yeah, well, some things are better in person.” One hand ran over my shoulders, his fingers lingered at the edge of the short-sleeved shirt. His fingers slid under the sleeve, caressing my shoulder, while his thumb didn’t stop its circular assault on my thigh. “And I can’t do this over the phone.” He leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek, a very close kiss to the lips, but not quite, and it felt like he inhaled the smell of me.

Seriously—he just sniffed me?

I raised my eyebrow at him. “You flew how many thousand miles to kiss me on the cheek and smell my hair?”

“I plan on kissing you lots of places, and savoring the smell of you all over.”

I let out a *neep* .

“But if I start doing that, I’ll forget what I have to say,” Jack said, his eyes dark and feral.

I crossed my arms over my chest feigning indifference to his words, while simultaneously trying to calm my racing heart and erect nipples. “Oh, and you think just showing up here is enough to get under my skirt?” My arms crossed over my chest weren’t helping the hard nipples, and I shifted my arms to try and cover my traitorous body.

“I already am.” His hand slid higher up my thigh, traveling closer to the horny-Lynn zone. “That’s not why I’m here, but later, I want to take this flimsy thing off and savor every inch of you.”

I bit my lip, my whole body quivering at his words. Damn, how did he do that? My whole body was alive, quivering in a way I hardly remembered, it seemed so long ago.

My brain tried to stop my body, saying something about being mad at him, but from looking at him, I knew that was complete and utter bullshit. I wasn’t mad, I was so happy that he was here, I could probably dance a gig on the table.

“Well, you’d better say what you need to say, because if you don’t start kissing me soon, I’m going to explode.”

Jack laughed for a moment, then I met his blue eyes, and that stare was there, the one where he analyzed me and tried to figure me out. A shiver ran down my back, because I couldn’t be sure if he was trying to figure me out, or determine how he was going to take off my clothes.

“Well, what do you want? Missing a DVD or something?” I turned myself sideways in the booth so I faced him. My legs crossed and I tucked my skirt over my skin, covering the scars. He had to speak, and I knew, deep down in my heart, that I had to hear it before I could go on living.

Jack shook his head. “Not a DVD. But I am missing something.”

“What?” My hands started to tremble.

“You.”

I quirked my brow at him.

“There’s this hole in my chest,” he patted his heart. “Every time I try to work, try to move on, move forward like all the shrinks tell me I need to do, I can’t. I can’t concentrate, I can’t think, hell I can’t breathe.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“Too many. And none seem to have anything that will fill the void.”

“Huh,” I replied, biting my lip. “Sounds like an infatuation.”

Jack grabbed my hands, pulling me up close to him, so one of my legs lay across his lap. “Lynn, I’m not just infatuated, not fascinated, not lusting for, but madly in love with you. I love the fact that you know everything there is to know about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I love that you write smutty fan fiction that makes me want to throw you down and have my way with you. I love how you criticize me for saying ‘sack’ instead of ‘bag’. I love the way your brow goes up when you think someone’s full of shit, like

you're looking at me now." He put one hand on my thigh, sliding up inside my skirt. "I'm in love with you, Lynn."

My soul buzzed inside me, heady with power. He did love me. He did. Even now, after all the crap between us, he still loved me.

I shook my head. I had known it in the hospital. I'd known it when I read every snide email from him. I even knew it when I typed up that tome I sent him last week.

Yet I hadn't felt it like I did right now. All the email fighting, all the nasty things we had said to each other, I just didn't want to accept any of it. It was too easy to say that he didn't return the sentiment, that he couldn't possibly care about me, because then nothing had changed. I was still who I was, before this whole mess started.

I hadn't lost my heart.

"I thought I was an assignment."

"For a millisecond." He caressed my cheek. "Do you really think I'd let any woman watch my *Firefly* DVDs?"

I burst out laughing.

Jack pulled me up against him, and his mouth met mine in a searing kiss, and my hands wrapped around his neck, and suddenly I felt whole again.

I wasn't broken, I wasn't an empty void anymore. I was with Jack. He completed me as much as I filled his emptiness. He was the glue in my heart, the one that kept me together.

It had always been Jack, holding me together.

When he was gone, I was dead inside. Now, I was back together, whole, and complete. And everything was brighter, lighter, fuller and happier. The drunks in the bar were less annoying, the boxing match was mere background noise, and I wasn't alone.

I wasn't the single gal in the group.

Jack broke the kiss, and brought his bright eyes down to mine. "Oh, there was one other thing."

I raised my brow. "What? You're married?"

"Not yet, but there's this fan fiction writer I'd love to marry. If she'd have me." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a box.

"Uh..." Jack put the box in my shaking hands, and I could barely hold on to it.

"You're not going to drop it, are you?"

"No, though it would serve you right for not getting down on one knee and all that."

"If there was room, I would. Marry me?" Jack opened the box for me. A beautiful marquise diamond

glittered in the dusky light of the bar.

'Course, the box could have had a bubble gum wrapper in it, and it wouldn't have changed my mind.

"Yes."

Jack pulled the ring out and slipped it on my finger. For the most part it fit, just a tiny bit loose, and the diamond rocked on my finger a bit. "I love you, Lynn. You are my fantasy girl."

"Damn skippy."

Jack held me close, but suddenly pulled away, glancing at me. "Oh, and there was one other thing I wanted to tell you."

"What?" I asked, realizing his shoulders were a little bit more tense.

"Uh...I'm sorry about your tire."

I blinked. "My tire."

"Your flat tire."

It took me a moment to realize what in the world he was talking about. Then it dawned on me. My tire, my slashed one at work. "That was you?"

He held up a hand. "Guilty."

"Shit, Jack! You had me all freaked out over it, worrying about my car, and all that stuff!"

"Didn't you think it was odd I wanted to pay for the damages?"

"Maybe a little."

He smiled. "Don't worry, I won't be slashing any more of your tires again."

"And why does that sound incredibly ambiguous to me?"

Jack just laughed.

Epilogue

October

"So what does Jack think of Kansas?" Bella asked me as we sat at Applebee's.

I sipped my iced tea. "He loves it. He doesn't have to travel nearly as much here. If he's gone, he's gone for a few days, maybe two weeks tops. It's great."

"You're just happy to not be in your parent's house anymore."

"True."

“And what color is the living room this week?”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “Yellow. I can’t help it if I’m indecisive about the wall color.” I had repainted the living room of Jack’s house, well, our house, four times now.

“Did you get all your door handles up?” The first purchase I made for our house was all the little scroll leaf handles for the kitchen.

I grinned. “Damn skippy.” I sipped on my own drink. “I would have never thought it would be such a pain to swap out hardware on a cabinet door, though. I don’t think I’ve ever heard Jack cuss that much.”

“You made him do it?”

“Not all of it. And he was rewarded later.”

The house that he’d rented while he was working here undercover had been owned by the government, but since the case was over, he’d applied to buy it. It had been a real pain in the butt, but it was finally ours.

“Seriously, though I need to figure out what to do with that bathroom. The cotton candy tile has got to go.”

Bella laughed. “Save that for after the wedding. Speaking of which, have you two set a date yet?”

“Nope. We’ve talked vaguely about next summer, after the spring semester, but I can’t decide if I’m going to take more classes in the summer too.”

“You’re really getting into these web design classes.”

“I wouldn’t have ever considered it, if Jack hadn’t pushed it.”

“I thought Cathy got you the grant.”

“She did. It was Jack’s idea though.”

Bella nodded, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. “I’m just so glad to see you happy.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “And how are you doing?” I asked.

Bella shrugged. “I’m fine. Single and living it up and all of that.”

“You know, Jack knows some cute guys from work...”

Bella laughed. “I bet you’ve been waiting years to say that.”

“Maybe.”

About the Author

Candice Gilmer lives with her family in Kansas, admiring the beautiful skyline, watching out for tornadoes

and occasionally writing. She can be found around the Internet here:

Website:<http://members.cox.net/candicegilmer>

Blog:<http://candicegilmer.blogspot.com>

MySpace:www.myspace.com/candicegilmer

This is NOT a test...

The Last Man on Earth

© 2008 Raine Weaver

Iris Foley and Russell Carr are old friends who share everything. As they indulge in a marathon viewing of old, campy horror films on a stormy Halloween night, they are suddenly faced with the very real possibility that something has happened to the outside world.

Just as the last gasp of the Emergency Broadcast System issues a dire warning, they are plunged into isolation and darkness. Naturally, they decide to do what any frightened, civic-minded young couple would do.

They decide to have sex.

Now if only old fears, a surprise adversary, and the Apocalypse wouldn't keep getting in their way...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Last Man on Earth*:

He watched her scoop up the last of her scrambled eggs, enjoying every mouthful, as if it was her last meal on earth.

He, unfortunately, had not been able to swallow a bite.

"Okay." Iris finished the small sample of orange juice he'd provided and, satisfied, sat back in the dining room chair. "I'm relaxed. I'm well fed. I've taken the time to think things through, just as you asked. Can we have sex now?"

He blanched, using his fork to stab his cold sausage in frustration. "Iris. This is not something to be taken lightly. Just because there's no electricity—"

She laughed, and the sound of tinkling light filled the old, cold house. "You think I want to have sex with you because there's nothing on television?"

"I didn't say that. I think... I just don't want you doing something rash under duress, something you'll regret afterward."

“Suppose there is no afterward?”

“Stop that! Everything is fine.”

“But just suppose—”

“No. Let’s have *you* just suppose.” A wee, small voice somewhere in the back of his head was screaming at him in its wee, small way: *“What the hell are you doing, man? She wants us!”*

No, it didn’t seem to be coming from his head at all; it was coming from a lower, far more sensitive extremity, one that seemed to be making him feverish and edgy and more impatient by the minute.

“Suppose this is all, as I said, just the result of a pre-winter storm and some freakish blurb of dialogue we picked up at exactly the wrong time. And suppose, due to this misunderstanding, we go ahead and do this—this thing you’re suggesting. How are you going to feel when the lights come back on?”

She nodded slowly. “You mean, will I still respect you in the morning?”

“You think this is *funny*?” he retorted. “I’m serious! I promised your brother when he went into the Navy that I’d look out for you, take care of you. We have a life-long friendship going here, a business partnership, and I don’t…” He paused, scrubbing his face with his hands. “I don’t want to lose that.”

Her smile faded into softness. “That’s either the sweetest thing anybody’s ever said to me, or—or you’re trying to let me down easy. If you don’t want to have sex with me, Russ, just tell me. I’ll understand.”

“I never said—”

“I mean, we’re not talking serious commitment or anything.”

“It’s not that—”

“And it’s not as if we’re total strangers.”

“I’m just worried that—”

“Then you’re saying it would be all right for us to climb all over each other if we weren’t friends?”

He pounded the tabletop with both fists. “God, woman, you’re making me *crazy* here.”

“You wouldn’t have to worry about a thing,” she persisted. “I don’t expect you to suddenly get the hots for me because I suddenly want to ‘do it’. I know you don’t think of me that way. But I’d handle all the preliminaries, do all the persuading, take care of everything. You could just sit back and enjoy—or tolerate, whichever you prefer. I mean, it’s not about lust or anything silly like that. We could just be fuc—er, sex buddies. Just for whatever time we might have left. I’d try to make it worth your while.”

“Dammit, Iris, here I am trying to be noble, and—” He paused, eyes widening. “What did you say?”

She looked downward, her cheeks coloring slightly. “I said I’d spare you the effort. I said I’d be happy to seduce you. Or give it a try, anyway.”

He fell back in his chair, his body boneless.

Dear God. It really *was* the end of the world.

“We could start now, if you think you can manage. I’d like to get as much in as possible.”

He blinked, then blinked harder, his thoughts losing the race against his hormones. “Iris? That is you sitting there, isn’t it? I mean, you didn’t have any memory lapses last night, or dreams about being abducted by aliens?”

“It’s almost funny,” she said wistfully. “Here I was, wallowing in celibacy because the jerk I was with wanted sex without an emotional relationship—and now I’m propositioning a man who just wants a relationship without sex. Isn’t that funny?”

Oh, yeah. Funny. He was laughing so hard inside his testicles ached. “I...I don’t know what to say—”

“I think it’s the right thing to do. It’s strange that we never think of these things,” she mused. “We live as if we’ve got all the time in the world. Well, I don’t know how much time I’ve got left. I guess nobody does. And I’d like to squeeze in as much living as possible.”

Russ stuttered, choking on the words he wanted to say to her, the words he couldn’t find.

“You’ve always been so sweet, so caring, so honest with me,” she said gently. “I can’t think of anybody I’d rather do this with.”

He brushed the pang of guilt quickly aside, his gaze focusing on her generous mouth, and what it would be like to have it prompt him into hardness, to have her slip those taut, round nipples into his mouth, to feast until she begged for something more...

And he wouldn’t have to say a word? No bumbling attempts to explain his feelings, no coaxing, no persuading, no seduction?

He leaned forward in his chair, ready for action. Even if it was the Judgment Day, God would understand. He was, after all, a masculine God. Everybody knew that. “You said something about starting *now*?”

A delighted smile spread across her face. “You agree then? You really don’t mind?”

He humbly shrugged, reaching for her hand. “You’re one of my best friends, sweetie. I think I understand. If this is the end, I wouldn’t want you to check out feeling deprived, or denying yourself the pleasure of one last sexual encounter. Let’s go upstairs and—”

“No,” she said firmly. “It’s cold up there, and I don’t want to waste any time. How about right here, on the couch in front of the fire? Will that do?”

He was dizzy, actually deliriously dizzy with excitement. “Well, if that’s what you want, I’ll try to manage. For you.”

“Good!”

She pushed away from the table and grabbed his hand, eagerly leading him to the sofa. He blindly

followed, his mind muddled with disbelief. After all this time, and all his wasted planning, she was really going to be his. And he didn't have to cloak the proposition in champagne, or worry about getting tongue-tied and flustered.

It was a gift.

He watched her from behind, already imagining what it would be like to get his hands on that tempting tush, to feel her feverish against him, to savor her mouth, rather than resign himself to the usual friendly peck on the lips.

Russ took a deep breath, trying to control himself. If he wasn't careful, she'd wonder why he was already hard enough to cut diamonds.

She placed him in the center of the sofa and sat beside him, chewing the nail of her forefinger. And there she sat. And sat, forever, it seemed to him, nibbling away. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, trying to appear relaxed, fervently praying that she had not changed her mind. "Okay," he ventured, trying to sound casual. "Here we are."

"This is sorta awkward, isn't it?" She gave a nervous, tittering laugh. "It's just occurred to me that I've never seduced a man before. Never had to."

"I don't suppose so," he muttered, a pang of jealousy knifing through him. "That's probably all Gary and Milton ever thought about."

"Why do we keep coming back to Milton Edwards? I told you I never slept with him."

This was not the time to provoke an argument. This was the time to fulfill his fantasies. "Sorry. Guess I just feel like neither of them deserved you. And this is a tricky situation for me, too. I'm not accustomed to being so...passive."

She smiled, resting her hand on his thigh. "I think I like that. That makes this more of a challenge, more interesting, doesn't it?"

God, if it were any more interesting he'd shoot the works before she even started.

Naked. Wet. Pointing a gun at your dream guy. What a way to start the day...

Romancing the Stones

© 2008 Catherine Berlin

Archaeologist Charlotte "Charlie" Blair arrives home from a dig in Peru to find a dead body in her house—and herself suspected of murder. Sorting out the truth, that a serial killer has been using her place to stash his kills, proves easier than shaking off the detective who's determined to protect her.

Detective Rob Vaiden's first sight of Charlie is naked, wet, and pointing a Glock at his chest. Oh yeah, this is going to be a hell of a case. Something about the bombshell has attracted the attention of Orion, a

killer Vaiden's been pursuing since his days as a rookie cop. To catch Orion, he needs to be near Charlie. Trouble is, while she's easy on the eyes, the maddeningly independent woman is determined she doesn't need his help.

Vaiden gets on Charlie's last nerve, but she's got her own problems. The golden rod of Manco Copac, the greatest find in her career, has disappeared. In place of the gold phallus she finds a bag of mythical Ica stones. Stones for which Orion is willing to kill.

Charlie...the stones...Orion. What connects this deadly triangle? Vaiden and Charlie race to figure it out—before Orion chooses his next target.

Warning: This novel depicts a kickass heroine who enjoys steamy sex with a hunky detective, when not otherwise engaged in being chased, kidnapped, and mugged for a solid gold penis.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Romancing the Stones:

Detective Vaiden stared at the shattered edges of the weathered oak door on the Blair residence. It hung sideways with the top hinge completely disconnected from the jamb. Split wood fanned out along the lock like plumes. The boards covering the windows kept the inside of the house dim even though it was late morning. Not a sound floated outside on the cool air to give him a clue about the condition of the home's occupant, Charlie Blair.

Rob Vaiden drew his SIG Sauer, holding it to his chest just below his jaw. He exchanged a wary glance with his partner, Jarod Ronan. They had wanted to be in and out of here as fast as possible. The investigation was dragging out. Too many false leads. But by the looks of the door, things had changed. So much for asking the homeowner a few questions.

With a nod directed more to himself than to his partner, Vaiden nudged the door inward, then shoved hard with his shoulder. He held his position and motioned Jarod inside. Jarod entered just ahead of him and crossed the room to check for intruders.

A huge black creature streaked out of the shadows near the staircase, rumbled past Vaiden, and escaped to the front yard. Vaiden blew air out quietly, calming his breathing. Just a dog.

He stared at the disarray. A small mountain of papers and books littered the center of the room. The drawers of the file cabinet hung open at varying degrees. The desk nearby had been rummaged to the point of destruction.

Jarod stepped into Vaiden's line of vision and shook his blond head. No one on the ground floor then.

Vaiden moved toward the stairs. "Call it in. I'll check the second floor."

As his foot landed on the first step, he heard the sound of running water. A thief who showers in the victim's home, he mused. That was a new one. He'd be surprised if anyone could hear him above the roaring water, but still, as he eased upward, he kept toward the wall-edge of the stairs to avoid telltale squeaks.

The bathroom door stood slightly ajar. A sliver of bright light marked the hallway floor. Vaiden swallowed. Please let this be a simple robbery, rather than more of Orion's handiwork. He didn't want

to find another dismembered body.

Ever.

“Mr. Blair? Police officer. Are you all right?” Vaiden pushed open the door and stepped inside with his gun held out shoulder height. Ugly orange and brown tile, floor to ceiling. He could’ve fit two normal-sized bathrooms into this one.

“Mr. Blair?” He moved to the shower, closed his eyes for only a second, and whipped back the plastic curtain.

An empty bath, with the water running full blast. The musky scent of strawberries, soap, and steam. But no sign of an occupant. It didn’t make sense—until he heard the door close.

He made a note to check behind the door next time.

“Throw the gun into the tub and put your hands up.”

Vaiden scrunched his brows together. A woman? That explained the strawberry scent, anyway. He hesitated, then placed his weapon carefully into the shallow end of the tub, switching off the water with his free hand. He wasn’t worried. Hell, Jarod was right downstairs if he needed him. Given the right distraction, Vaiden knew he could take her down, with or without the weapon.

He straightened, turned his head, and froze.

She was naked. And wet. And pointing a Glock at his chest.

“There must be some mistake,” he said, wondering why his voice had gone thin. “I’m—”

“I don’t give a rat’s foot who you are. And turn around!” Her cheeks were bright red, and he couldn’t help but notice that the flush extended down her graceful neck and across her breasts.

“Now!” Her eyes flashed.

He couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed or angry. But he’d take a perp like this any day. He followed her orders and looked away smiling. He might not be able to see her, but her naked image was burned onto a screen inside his head. Average height, medium length brown hair, and curvy. Very curvy. Hell, it might be worth taking a slug just to have another look.

“Ma’am, I’m with the police department. We came here to speak to Mr. Blair, and discovered the front door had been forced open.”

“A likely story. Now move around toward that wall.”

He shrugged. Jarod had to have heard her shouting. He’d burst in any moment and tackle her. “Maybe you should move away from the door.” He peeked at her over his shoulder. She’d slipped into a huge terrycloth robe and moved toward the window.

“Can I at least show you my ID?”

She frowned, staring at his shoes, but when he inched his upper body forward, she jerked her eyes back

to his face.

“I just got here twenty minutes ago. My door was in perfect condition. You’re full of it.”

“Vaiden? What’s going on in there?”

The young woman’s attention wavered for a fraction of a second. Vaiden lunged toward her, in a single motion chopping her wrists with one hand and squeezing them together. The Glock clattered to the tile floor.

Jarod swept inside, recovered her gun, and grabbed Vaiden’s SIG Sauer from the shower. He looked toward Vaiden, one eyebrow raised as he dried the weapon with a towel.

Vaiden pulled her arms behind her back and cuffed her. “Good timing, partner.”

She went from stunned softness to spitfire in three seconds flat. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Vaiden pushed her toward the hallway, careful not to tread on the hem of the terry robe that dragged behind her.

They descended the staircase, Jarod walking in front of her. “You broke in here, wrecked the place, and threatened an officer of the law with a gun. You’re under arrest, lady.”

Vaiden frowned at the newly arrived uniforms milling around in his crime scene. From this side of the room he could see for the first time the coat rack that had been hidden behind the door. On it hung a well-worn black leather jacket—a woman’s jacket. And a backpack-style purse.

He stopped the woman on the landing, an uneasy feeling creeping over him. “Ma’am, what’s your name?”

Paler now that she had a room full of people staring at her, but still just as angry, she lifted one eyebrow and licked her top lip. “Charlie Blair.”

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

It’s all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks®Publisher 2.0, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information about ReaderWorks, please visit us on the Web at
www.overdrive.com/readerworks