

A romantic couple is shown in profile, facing each other. The woman, on the left, has long brown hair and is wearing a dark, strapless dress with a necklace. The man, on the right, is shirtless. They are standing in front of a large window that looks out onto a city at night, with a chandelier visible in the background. The lighting is warm and intimate.

REVENGE and *Redemption*

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ra[♥]venous
romance

Revenge and Redemption

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication

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Chapter One

“That guy has been staring at you forever!”

Penny Royale followed her exuberant assistant’s gaze to the man sitting at the table in the back of the café and snorted humourlessly. “Trust me, I am the last woman in the world that guy would be interested in. Well, second last,” she corrected as she slid a citrus tart and a non-fat-soy-latte across the countertop.

“Nonsense.” Karen sniffed.

“Do you know who that man is?” Penny said as she nodded at him, the man who still had the power to make her knees wobble and her heart race at the mere sight of him, even after so long. The man who seemed a little too engrossed in the morning newspaper every time she glanced in his direction.

“He’s tall, dark and sinfully delicious. Who cares who he is?”

“His name is Luke Hardcastle.”

“Wait, you know him?”

“Mostly by reputation.”

“Mostly?”

Penny ignored Karen’s upraised eyebrows and impish grin. “You know those overbearing, self-absorbed millionaires with the endless string of model girlfriends and the holier-than-thou attitude that you hate *so* much?”

“Yeah,” Karen said cautiously.

“Meet their king!”

Karen looked crestfallen. “Bummer.”

Penny laughed. “If it makes you feel any better, he wasn’t always a jerk, not really.”

“What changed?”

“Not sure, but a couple of years ago his women started getting thinner, blonder, and more frequent.”

“Typical. Tell you what, though, he’s looking at you again.” Penny shifted her gaze back to Luke and got caught in his stare. “Are you *blushing*?” whispered Karen with no small amount of amusement.

Penny quickly turned away and cleared her throat. “I think I’ll go downstairs and do some real work now.”

She took off down the stairs and headed straight to the back of her book shop to hide in her miniscule office. She sucked in her tummy and squeezed her way past the boxes of newly arrived best sellers, then slumped into the plastic garden chair that had been serving her needs since her antique kitchen chair broke.

Penny was still amazed the chair was the only thing that got broken the night she tripped over in the dark and landed awkwardly on her favourite stick of furniture. The fact that she’d been drunk at the time hadn’t helped relieve the guilt of smashing something so beautiful.

Of course the only reason she’d been drunk in the first place was because her so-called date that evening had been a total creep. He’d admitted during the entrées that he’d only asked her to go out with him because she was Selina Royale’s niece, and he’d been hoping for an introduction, a shortcut into the corporate shark tank that was Royale Industries. It was shortly after that little revelation that she’d stopped paying attention, both to her date and how much

wine she'd consumed. Because when it came down to a choice between talking about her abusive aunt with forced civility or suffering a blinding hangover, the hangover was definitely the lesser of two evils.

Why was it every time a man asked Penny out on a date, she would find herself talking about her aunt, whether she wanted to or not? Wasn't there even one man out there who wanted her? Just her?

Of course not, she thought. *Don't be daft*. What man in his right mind would choose to be with a giant freak like her? No man, that's who.

Certainly not a man like Luke Hardcastle. No, not Love-'em-and-leave-'em Hardcastle. She knew his preferred type well enough. Models. Tall, blond, snap-in-half-in-a-stiff-breeze willowy, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-their-mouths models, women who oozed sophistication and grace. Not a tall, fat, brunette klutz who opened a café above her bookshop because she appreciated a good slice of chocolate cake and full-fat cream in her coffee. No, never someone like her.

Penny stared vacantly at her laptop and frowned. Still, what was Luke doing here? Maybe he didn't realise who owned the place. Hmm...doubtful. Her name was on the front door. She'd recently won the Small Business Woman of the Year Award. The place was called Royale Teas, for pity's sake!

What was he up to?

She shook her head to clear the suspicious thought from her mind. She was being stupid, paranoid, and for what? In all likelihood his being here was just a coincidence.

She turned her attention to more productive endeavours, but as her fingers were about to touch the keyboard, a knock sounded on her door.

"Come in if you dare," called Penny, thinking it was probably just Karen with a Luke update.

But when she looked up she was surprised to see it was the man himself, and her voice stuck in her throat. She nervously shot to her feet, knocking her chair over backwards against the wall, then tripped over the protruding legs as she moved towards the door. Luke reached over the boxes and caught her arm to steady her.

“Careful, Miss Royale, we wouldn’t want you to have a fall in the workplace.”

Penny just stared at him wide-eyed and mute, as his deep, warm voice filled her tiny office and wrapped itself around her like a lover’s arms.

Oh no, not again!

She’d had the same fanciful reaction the first time they’d met face to face, eighteen months ago, when she still worked for Selina.

And not just to his voice, but to his touch. Ten years of unrequited yearning had surged through her body at the feel of his flesh against hers, at the fantastic sensation of scorching heat that had flowed from his fingertips and into her. Her knees had shook and not from fear, even though he’d yelled at her, his legendary calm giving way to his now infamous temper. Her heart had thundered in her chest, her mouth had run dry.

All he’d done was shake her hand.

This time he was holding her bare arm. Same idiotic schoolgirl reaction, though. Same heat. Same yearning. Same deer caught in the headlights.

Penny groaned inwardly.

Why him? Why couldn’t she crush on some normal bloke with a nice normal job and a nice normal life? She knew why. Because no nice normal man had ever made her feel the way this man had. No nice normal man had ever made her heart thump out of her chest just by shaking her hand.

So what that he had a reputation for being a womanizing pig, or that he made more money in a day than she did in a year? So what that he was tall enough to hold her the way she'd always imagined a man should hold a woman, or strong enough to lift her freakishly large body effortlessly in his undoubtedly perfectly sculptured arms? Who cared that he had the most beautiful golden eyes that sparkled like the sun glinting on the Brisbane River? It didn't matter that he was disturbingly handsome with his stylish short black hair and golden skin and wide sensuous mouth that she just knew would satisfy her every fantasy and—and he was staring at her. Waiting.

Penny managed to pull herself together long enough to free her arm from Luke's strong grip. "Thank you," she muttered as her cheeks flamed with embarrassment.

"Quaint office," he said. "Cosy."

Penny clenched her jaw at the sardonic tone in Luke's voice and fought the urge to tell him to get the hell out of her *quaint* office.

For a moment there, she'd forgotten they were enemies.

"Is there something you wanted, Mr Hardcastle?" she said a little too sharply as she tried to ignore her traitorous thoughts. Unlike Selina, Penny had never mastered the act of indifference. Of course where Selina was concerned, it wasn't an act.

Luke smirked. "I want to speak with you about a personal matter. Why don't you come to my office and we can discuss it?"

"I realise my office is roughly the size of a broom cupboard, Mr Hardcastle, but you sought me out, not the other way around, so you can tell me all about your personal matter right here, right now, or you can leave. I believe you know where the door is."

Luke's eyes narrowed at that jibe and he could see she was fighting back a smirk of her own.

Of course he knew where the bloody door was. He was standing in it.

“Fine,” he said tightly as he stepped fully inside and closed the door.

“I’d offer you a seat, but...” she said, leaving the statement hanging as she gestured at the lack of available space.

Luke quickly scanned the office, and Penny was wrong. He’d been in broom cupboards much bigger than this. He tried to squeeze past the boxes that blocked his way but he was too big, he simply wouldn’t fit, so he gave up and decided to lean on them instead, and was instantly grateful for the barrier as he watched Penny bend over to retrieve her chair.

Gone were the disgusting grey outfits she’d worn at Royale Industries, and *hello!* tight jeans and T-shirt. Luke’s eyes bulged with unrestrained lust as he took in every luscious curve of her denim-clad ass while his hands itched to grab her fleshy cheeks, to squeeze and spank—

“You were saying?” she said as she sat down, her face an odd combination of contempt and discomfort, her arms folded over her chest, drawing his gaze to her big, beautiful breasts.

Luke tried to ignore the rush of heat coursing through him, sparking every cell of his body with need, the same need he’d always felt whenever Penny Royale was within sight. He clenched his jaw and fisted his hands to gain some small modicum of control.

Don’t go there, he thought. Repress and forget. Remember who she is, what she is. She’s a Royale. She’s the enemy. Remember Cassie...

“I own you,” he said, his voice sounding cold even to his ears.

“Excuse me?”

Luke cleared his throat and continued in a more casual manner. “I own you, Miss Royale, you and every other business on this block.”

“I see,” Penny said slowly, “and you’re telling me this because...?”

“I know some of the other retailers look to your business acumen and expertise when dealing with the landlord, so consider this a courtesy call. I’m your new landlord, and I wish to discuss the parameters of the new lease agreements. I thought you might like to take a look at them before I speak with the other retailers.”

Penny’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you said you wanted to discuss a personal matter.”

“I would have thought the future of your business was a personal matter, Miss Royale. We wouldn’t want anyone going out of business unnecessarily, would we?”

He watched her jaw clench and her skin pale as the blood drained from her face and he felt disgusted. *Remember Cassie...*

“I don’t suppose you happen to have one of those new agreements on you?” she said tightly.

“Not at present, no.”

Penny’s eyes darkened, the soft grey-blue he’d once fantasised about hardening to steel. She tilted her chin and glared at him, her lips pursed in a moue of irritation. A more kissable pout he’d never seen, and his blood began to heat with lust once more, but he forced himself to concentrate on the matter at hand and not the hardening cock in his trousers.

“Come to my office this afternoon and we’ll go over the new agreement. Four o’clock.”

Luke knew Penny wouldn’t say no. Changes to the lease meant possible changes to her income, she had a mortgage to pay, and wages, and he doubted her aunt would bail her out if things went wrong. Not with their history. She couldn’t afford to say no.

Her jaw twitched with tension but she nodded her head sharply. “Four o’clock.”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

* * * *

Four o’clock loomed. Penny stood on the footpath outside Hardcastle Tower, stared up at the

building across the street and shook the nervous tension from her hands. Royale Industries. She'd not been within *cooee* of the place for eighteen months, not since the day her aunt fired her. Just the thought of going anywhere near the place sent a shiver down her spine and yet here she was.

The tall grey building was as cold and uninviting as it had ever been, much like its CEO. Selina was in there somewhere, barking orders at her simpering cronies, making millions from other people's misery, and that old familiar feeling of self-loathing began crawling over Penny's flesh, chilling her blood and sucking the air from her lungs. She felt unclean, knowing the things she knew, the things she'd seen—things she'd done.

She turned away and went inside to meet Luke.

The elevator doors opened with a ping and she was greeted by his assistant, a thin, leggy blonde in a skirt suit so short it bordered on obscene but, Penny noticed as she gestured for her to follow, she was also very beautiful. Catwalk beautiful.

Typical, Penny thought.

"I'm Sandra, Mr Hardcastle's personal assistant. Mr Hardcastle is running late. He apologises for the delay and requests that you sit in his office to wait for him. Would you like a coffee or tea while you wait?"

Penny smiled with practised politeness as the beautiful blonde gestured to a black leather couch lining one wall of Luke's expansive office, but shook her head. "Water is fine, thank you."

"Of course."

Instead of sitting as requested, Penny paced out the room. Nothing *quaint* about this office, she mused as she walked to the wall of glass that served for a window and marvelled at the magnificent view. The Museum, the Art Gallery, the edge of the South Bank Parklands, even the City Cats on the Brisbane River could be seen as they ferried passengers from one jetty to

another.

“Great view, isn’t it?”

Penny turned around to see Luke walking through the office door, a briefcase in hand, his assistant following him with a bottle of water and a glass of ice on a tray.

“Thank you, Sandra. You can go home now.”

Luke waited until they were alone again before addressing Penny once more.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said as he slipped his jacket off and tossed it on the couch. His tie quickly followed. “My meeting ran overtime. Please, have a seat.”

He gestured to a stylish black leather chair in front of his desk. Penny watched his every movement as he loosened his shirt collar with long, lean fingers and rolled up his sleeves, revealing the toned muscle of his forearms, the strength of a man who knew the value of hard work. A good man, she’d always thought, despite their enmity. A devilishly sexy man, but an honest man.

“Now, I suppose you would like to see the new lease agreement,” he said as he sat opposite her.

“That is why I’m here, isn’t it?”

Luke leaned back in his chair and smiled, smug. “Not exactly.”

Chapter Two

Penny's eyes narrowed as her stomach hit the floor. She knew it. Luke was going to tear down her beautiful little corner of Brisbane and turn it into a multilevel carpark. He was a property developer, for pity's sake. Why else would he want such old buildings?

"What do you mean 'not exactly'?" Penny said, barely repressing the anger in her voice. "Why am I here, Mr Hardcastle?"

"Please, call me Luke, and you're here because I want your help with a small...side project I'm working on."

Penny was confused. Why would one of Australia's wealthiest men need her help with anything? "What sort of project?" she asked warily.

"The destruction of Royale Industries."

"Okay," Penny said slowly, "I thought you said this was a small project."

Luke was surprised by Penny's reaction. Even with their strained relationship he'd expected outrage, contempt, or at least indignation on her aunt's behalf, not complete apathy.

Maybe he was wrong about Penny?

Or maybe the apple fell closer to the tree than he thought. After all, how would Selina Royale react if Luke said he wanted to destroy her niece? Probably the same way she reacted when he accused her of destroying his sister's company eighteen months ago—with total indifference.

"You don't seem surprised."

"I'm not."

Luke frowned at her continuing bland expression. "Why not?"

“Because every time a man wishes to discuss anything with me the conversation invariably turns to Selina. I’m kinda used to it.”

Then Luke saw it. Penny tried to hide it but she was—what, disappointed? Hurt, even?

Interesting.

“In that case let me get straight to the point. Eighteen months ago your aunt bought out Cassidy Holdings, broke it up and sold it off bit by bit, making herself a tidy fortune in the process. She acquired the shares at a fraction of their value because information was leaked to the business community that caused the prices to plummet. I believe Selina leaked that information, knowing it would cause a panic and give her the opportunity to strike.”

He watched Penny shift in her seat as she crossed one long leg over the other, and wondered for the umpteenth time that day what they’d feel like wrapped around his hips as he drove himself into her. He grit his teeth. The fantasies he’d kept at bay for years had returned, flooding his body and mind with a tidal wave of lust. Lust he was not supposed to feel. Lust he would not allow himself to feel. And certainly wouldn’t act upon.

“Okay,” she said. “So why don’t you go to the Department of Fair Trading? Or the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission? Why come to me?”

“Because I don’t have any proof, and I need you to get it for me.”

Penny started laughing. The sound was so sweet to Luke’s ears he had to clench his jaw and grind his teeth to force his mind to concentrate. He frowned. He couldn’t let her affect him. “This isn’t a joke. I’m serious, Penny.”

“I know you are.”

“Then what’s so funny?”

“That you would need my help for something like this. I sell books and coffee, for pity’s

sake. I'm not into corporate espionage or private investigation. I would have thought a man like you would have professional people to do that for you."

"I do. How do you think I know about Selina leaking the information? But all I have is hearsay. I need actual proof if I want to take her down."

"And why do you think I'll be of any help to you?"

"Because you worked for her, with her. You know how she thinks, how she conducts business...and I know what she did to *you*, Penny. I know she fired you and kicked you out on the street. Exactly how long did you have to stay in that shelter?"

The laughter died from Penny's face and again he felt that twinge of disgust. His words had killed her lovely smile. Anger and hate replaced it.

"Mr Hardcastle..."

"Luke, please."

"Mr Hardcastle, I'm going to say something to you that I should have said this morning. Go to hell!" Penny stood up and headed towards the door.

"Not so fast, Penny. There is one other reason I thought you'd help me that I think you might be forgetting."

"And that would be?" she asked, her hand on the doorknob.

"I own you." Penny's hand fell to her side. "You'll help me ruin Selina or I'll ruin you instead."

"Why?"

"Why not? Selina ruined my sister's life, and you helped, and you know it. I simply want to return the favour as Cassie can no longer do it for herself."

Luke leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers under his chin as he watched Penny.

Slowly she turned to face him. Her chest heaved with every irritated breath, causing his eyes to be drawn to the ample swell of her breasts. He shifted in his seat to accommodate his growing erection.

Penny pulled a set of keys from her jeans pocket and walked back to Luke's desk. He frowned as she laid them in front of him and pointed to each key.

"The blue one opens the door to the shop, the red one is my house key, and the green one opens the laundry door—it sticks sometimes, but if you jiggle it it'll come good."

"What are you doing?"

"You said you'd ruin me if I didn't help you. Selina will ruin me if I do. Oddly enough, if I have to lose to someone, I'd rather it be you than her. Goodbye, Luke."

Luke stared at Penny dumbfounded as she walked out of his office. When he'd gone over every possible scenario in his mind as to how this meeting would go, he certainly didn't picture this. Luke jumped to his feet and raced after Penny. He caught her at the elevator.

"Penny, stop. We haven't finished."

"We have nothing further to discuss."

Luke almost growled with frustration. He had definitely underestimated this woman. It was not something that happened often and as much as he didn't want to admit it, it made her even more appealing.

The doors to the elevator opened and Penny stepped inside. Luke was desperate. He hadn't wanted to do this, it was too Selina Royale in its vindictiveness, but Penny was leaving him no other choice.

Luke braced his arms against the doors of the elevator, holding them open, filling the cavity with his large body. He stared at Penny, his expression cold, and kept his voice from betraying

his desperation.

“What if I didn’t ruin you? What if I ruined your fellow retailers instead?”

He stepped back and waited with his arms folded neatly across his chest. The doors began to close, until Penny’s hand shot out between them and made them open again.

Luke had been glared at by his fair share of women but something in Penny’s steel-coloured eyes at that moment chilled him to the bone. She stepped from the elevator and slapped his face hard, then marched straight back into his office.

Luke adjusted his jaw as he followed her. He closed the door behind them, then sought out the glass of ice his assistant had brought in earlier. He almost laughed as he sat down at his desk, holding the glass to his cheek.

“I’ve been slapped before but, bloody hell that hurt.”

“Be thankful that was all you got,” Penny said.

Luke looked at her with new eyes. “You really aren’t what I was expecting,” he said.

“Didn’t you have me investigated?”

“Of course I did, but we’ve met before, remember? I thought I had you pegged.”

“You met a different person,” she said as she shifted her eyes from his.

“So I see. Never judge a book by its cover, eh?”

“Cute.”

Luke smirked at Penny’s dryness. “I must admit I find it interesting that you will quite literally fight for the rights of your neighbours but don’t even bat an eyelid for your aunt.”

“So?”

“She’s family.”

“Families come in all shapes and sizes, Luke, and Selina may be related, but she is not my

family.”

“Then why won’t you help me? You know she’s crooked.”

“I never witnessed anything illegal in all my time at Royale Industries. Morally reprehensible, yes. Illegal, no. And the reason I won’t help you is not because of loyalty to Selina.”

She sighed heavily. “All outgoing employees are made to sign confidentiality agreements forbidding them to disclose any and all information gleaned while working at Royale Industries. I’m sorry, Luke, the agreement is binding for three years. I can’t help you.”

There was a moment of silence, then a crack. The glass in Luke’s hand shattered. He dropped the broken glass as the pain in his hand cut through the haze of burning hatred that had welled within him.

Penny jumped to her feet. “First-aid kit? Luke?”

“Behind Sandra’s desk,” he said dispassionately.

Penny dashed out of the office and came back with a white box. She flipped it open and pulled out saline ampoules and alcohol swabs. She tweezed some small shards of glass from the heel of his palm and cleaned the cut.

“You’ll live,” she said as she applied a Band-Aid to his hand.

“But Cassie won’t,” he said quietly.

Penny’s throat constricted with guilt. Eighteen months ago word had leaked out that Cassandra Cassidy, CEO of Cassidy Holdings, was dying from cancer. Luke’s half-sister had taken over from her father and in six months turned the company around from a flailing financial nightmare into a prosperous and worthwhile venture.

Selina had been furious. She had wanted to buy them out but Cassie’s company’s revival

ruined those plans. Penny wouldn't put it past Selina to do what Luke was accusing her of, but she had no proof either. She never saw anything illegal take place and Selina had some of the best lawyers on retainer to ensure she never crossed that line.

"How is she?" she asked quietly.

"Not great, not that she ever lets on how bad she really is. But that's my baby sister. Never backs down."

Penny looked long and hard at Luke. The man was her first and only real crush. From the first day she'd seen him standing on the footpath opposite Royale Industries, Luke Hardcastle had been her fantasy man. A man she had tried to help once before, and had incurred Selina's wrath for doing so. What did she really have to lose if she did it again?

Everything.

The word was a lump that choked her and threatened to crush her. Selina would crush her, her business, her life. Penny had employees to think about now; she was accountable for more lives than her own. It didn't matter that Luke looked so vulnerable and simply begged to be comforted. He was still the man trying to blackmail her into doing his dirty work. Even so, the urge to slip her arms around his neck and cradle his head against the pillow of her breasts was enticing.

She moved to a safe distance away from temptation. "I am sorry, Luke. I do wish I could help, but I can't."

Luke slowly raised his head and stared at her. "Do you, Penny? Do you really wish you could help?"

Penny looked away before she could drown in his golden depths. "I know better than anyone what a bitch Selina can be, Luke. I don't blame you for wanting to cut her down to size."

“Then let me take a look at that agreement.”

“What?”

“The confidentiality agreement, I’ll have my lawyers go over it and see if they can’t find any loopholes. If they can, will you help me?”

“And if they can’t?”

“Then I’ll just have to think of some other way to bring that bitch to her knees.”

“And until then, are you still going to hold the leases over my head?”

“Yes. I can’t take the chance that you’ll go telling tales to Aunty Selina in the meantime, can I? I wouldn’t want you trying to curry her favour.”

Penny clenched her jaw. If only Luke knew how bloody unlikely that statement was.

“Fine, but if you want to hold a lease over my head, then hold my lease over *my* head. Leave my friends alone. They are good, honest, hardworking people who deserve better than to get caught in the middle of this nonsense.”

“Fair enough.”

“And you and I are going to sit here all night if we have to and go over their lease agreements. I will not let you rip them off.”

Luke fought to keep himself in check, to keep his face from betraying his delight. Seeing Penny all riled up like that, with her arms akimbo and her magnificent chest heaving and her cheeks flushed a pretty pink had made his cock twitch with expectant excitement. He’d almost expected her to waggle a disapproving finger at him.

“I’m hungry. Do you like Chinese?” He picked up the phone and ordered a meal, then turned his attention back to Penny and watched her pace across his office.

She stopped by the window and turned back to face him. “You know, I used to think you

were one of the good guys,” she said. “I’d never thought much of your social life but you were always on the level where business was concerned. I’d never have thought you would lower yourself to her standards.”

Luke winced at the harsh judgement, especially her criticism of his social life. If only she knew—

“It’s called fighting fire with fire, Penny.”

“The only problem with that, Luke, is that everyone gets burned.”

* * * *

It was two o’clock in the morning when Luke stopped his car outside Penny’s house in West End. The small weatherboard cottage was very familiar to him. He and his dad used to build and renovate houses like this one before Luke, at age seventeen, suggested building something bigger.

Penny’s house had been renovated. A Queenslander-style veranda had been added all the way around the little house and the doors and windows looked decidedly new, as did the corrugated iron roofing and still fresh-looking coat of paint. It was obvious she was doing well for herself.

Luke watched Penny sleeping in the passenger seat. All night long, as they’d gone over lines and paragraphs and addendums, he’d watched her as she’d fidgeted with her clothes and hair. She definitely had image issues, though he’d be damned if he knew why. She was beautiful, sexy, no more so than when she was deep in thought.

She had this habit of chewing on her bottom lip and every time she did it Luke’s eyes were irresistibly drawn to her lusciously rosy mouth. He would watch with lascivious fascination as her lip would swell and darken with blood giving her a sensual pout that simply begged to be

kissed.

And dear God, had Luke wanted to kiss her. Hell, he wanted to do a whole lot more than that.

END EXCERPT

More than once he found himself walking around the office to put some distance between them. At one point during the night he'd had to remove himself from her presence altogether. It was either that or actually try to kiss her and risk another slap. Not that he'd minded the sting of her palm. Strong women were definitely a turn-on.

But all the while his inner voice had chanted, *She's a Royale*, as if that would magically transform her into something far less desirable than the woman now sleeping beside him.

Sleeping beside him.

That thought was going to haunt him when he finally got to bed tonight. *Suck it up, Luke*, he chided himself.

"Penny?" he said softly. She didn't stir. He reached over and gently shook her leg. "Penny?" he said a little louder. Her eyes opened and she blinked at him, sleepy. "You're home."

She turned her head towards her house, then looked down at the hand spread across her leg, the hand Luke had been caressing her with, gently circling his palm against her thigh, the action feeling as natural to him as breathing...

"Thanks."

...but inappropriate nonetheless, especially considering the circumstances. Although he couldn't help but notice she didn't shy away from his touch.

"No problem," he said as he moved his hand away.

"Uh, why don't you come inside and I'll get those papers for you?"

Luke swallowed hard as he thought of all the reasons following Penny inside her house was a

bad idea, then fought the urge to ignore them. “It can wait ’til tomorrow.”

“What time is it?” Penny asked, and yawned.

“Around two.”

“Then it already is tomorrow. Come on, I have them in my office. It won’t take a minute.”

Luke’s resolve weakened. “Okay.”

He followed Penny inside her little house.

“Wait here, I won’t be a moment.”

“Don’t want me to see your safe combination, huh?” he joked softly.

“No, I just don’t want you to see how messy this end of the house is.”

Luke chuckled quietly as Penny disappeared down the short hallway, towards her office. Towards her bedroom.

“Get a grip before you do something stupid,” he muttered to himself. “She’s a Royale.”

While he waited he took the time to poke around. Her house was very much like her shop: a little old world, maybe even a little bohemian, certainly eclectic. Both were warm and quirky and definitely not what he would have expected from a Royale, not after seeing the frigid rigidity of her aunt’s office building. In that respect, at least, Penny was very different from Selina.

Luke moved into the lounge room. The aged pine sideboard and coffee table were stacked high with books on every subject, old and new and all emanating that unique scent of milled paper and printer’s ink. But the walls were almost bare—no art, no posters, no photographs. Just a big station clock ticking away quietly.

As warm as this little house was, it also felt very lonely.

He sat down in one of the large inviting arm chairs. It was soft and comfortable, its chocolate coloured overstuffed cushions the type you snuggle into on a cold winter’s night. He smiled

lazily as images of snuggling with Penny snuck sideways through his brain, then sprung out of the chair like a jack-in-a-box and shoved the unwelcome thought from his mind.

The sound of Penny's footsteps as she re-emerged from her office brought him back to the hallway. She handed him a manilla envelope, and as he took it his hand brushed against hers. Heat blazed through his body and made it jump with a yearning he could no longer hide. Their eyes met and Penny chewed her full bottom lip.

That was more than Luke could bear.

"Screw it!"

He let the envelope fall to the floor and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her hungrily, his lips bruising, demanding. He'd wanted to taste that rosy pout for ten years—even if she was a Royale—and tonight as he'd worked beside her his body had ached for her.

When Penny slid her hands into his hair and held him to her, returning his kiss with equal fervour, his eyes widened in surprise, but then he simply surrendered to the moment and snaked his hands down to cup the ample rounds of her ass, pulling her tight against him, no longer hiding his arousal but pressing it hard against the soft folds of her belly.

His tongue lashed against hers, searing her with the passion he'd long denied, and he knew his resolve was defeated. Luke would claim her as his, would take her to bed and bury himself deep inside her voluptuous warmth. Anything to stop this feeling from ending.

But it had to.

He could not succumb to his lust. He would not let it defeat him.

As abruptly as the kiss had begun, it stopped. Luke put Penny at arm's length and slowly shook his head, panting his frustration at the ceiling before lowering his eyes to meet hers once more.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. It’s been a long day,” he offered as an excuse, weak as it was. “Is this everything?” he said as he picked up the envelope. Penny nodded even as she touched her lips with trembling fingers, enticing him again.

“Yes.”

“Right then, I’ll be off. Goodnight, Miss Royale.”

“Goodnight,” she whispered, her sweet voice barely audible over the blood pounding in his ears.

Luke walked back to his car in a daze. He slumped into the driver’s seat and head-butted the steering wheel. “You’re a bloody idiot, Luke.”

Chapter Three

Penny felt dejected as she watched Luke drive away. But then, what had she hoped for? That his kiss was a sign of more to come? That he would make love to her? That he wanted her? That was a joke. Penny knew Luke's type and she wasn't it.

Still, she touched her fingertips to her lips again. They were swollen from the force of his kiss and the graze of stubble that would undoubtedly be shaved clean come sunup, leaving no reminders of his obvious lapse in judgement. Penny was a Royale, after all, and there was nothing Luke Hardcastle hated half so much as a Royale.

She groaned out loud. It was bad enough that yet again, a man was using her to get to Selina, but why did it have to be Luke Hardcastle—and why did he have to kiss her? Obviously he'd seen her staring at him, drooling as she watched him walk around his office with his powerful legs and perfect ass and disgustingly handsome face, all exuding a raw masculine power that commanded attention. Obviously he intended to use that attention against her.

"It's called fighting fire with fire, Penny," he'd said.

And using people's desires against them was a very Selina Royale thing to do.

"Probably laughing his bloody head off," she said aloud. "Well to hell with him. To hell with them both!"

* * * *

The door slammed shut, the bang drowning out the sound of the tinkle bell above the door. Penny stalked to her office and flicked on the light. It was only six o'clock. The shop didn't open 'til nine but she couldn't sleep, and she didn't want to sit at home doing nothing, and so she had

come to work.

The boxes had been cleared out of her office, ready for Karen to put on the display this morning, so she didn't have to climb over or squeeze past anything, but that didn't improve her mood. She flopped into the garden chair and glared at nothing in particular.

She felt angry. Very angry.

In fact Penny hadn't felt this angry in eighteen months—not since she'd confronted Selina about the Cassidy Holdings takeover. Selina had been so proud of herself, but Penny had been appalled.

Her aunt had used the news of Cassie's illness to convince other Cassidy Holdings shareholders to sell up and get out—as long as they sold to Selina, of course.

It hadn't taken long for panic to set in. Share prices began dropping dramatically, shareholders dumped stock, deals that had been in the pipeline fell through and existing suppliers started looking elsewhere for distributors. Cassidy Holdings had collapsed so fast it made the market spin.

The mystery was, how did the story get out?

Penny remembered meeting Luke during the whole saga, remembered vividly the day the man of her dreams stormed the enemy bunker. Of course, in her fantasies he'd been coming to rescue her from her desolate life of abuse and fear, not to yell at her in Selina's stead.

It was the first time she'd come face to face with the man she'd adored for years. And he'd completely overwhelmed her. He'd towered over her and dominated her personal space with his broad shoulders and muscular chest. His large, strong hands had been fisted by his side, his handsome face contorted by rage, and his voice—

After the yelling had stopped his deep, smooth voice had softly spelt out his ultimatum: Stay

away from his family or there'd be hell to pay.

Luke's was a voice that could be so fierce it was truly frightening, or could be, as she discovered last night, so gentle and warm that it held you captivated and lulled you into a false sense of security.

That was exactly what Luke had done to her last night. As soon as he'd found out Penny had signed a confidentiality agreement, his voice had lost its threatening edge and took on a more sensual tone. A dark, velvety I'll-be-your-best-friend-in-more-ways-than-you-can-imagine tone. A seductive, fantasy-inducing tone. One that had made concentrating on lease agreements near impossible.

Penny closed her eyes and tried to focus on her anger, to let it seep into every cell of her being and dominate her feelings towards Luke, but no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't do it. It simply wasn't in her to think that way. Not about him. So she sighed and resigned herself to riding her usual train of thought where that man was concerned.

Luke Hardcastle. Builder.

Penny couldn't stop the smile that always accompanied Luke when he entered her daydreams. She pictured his tanned, sweaty body, smeared with dirt and sawdust and dressed in ratty denim shorts slung low on his hips, scuffed leather work boots on his enormous feet and a sensual smile of his own playing around his wide, kissable mouth.

"Miss Royale," he said as he handed her a hardhat. "Shall we begin?"

Penny Royale, building inspector, followed Luke around the half-finished house with her clipboard in hand, absently ticking items off her list, barely listening to a word he said as her eyes devoured his muscular back and perfect ass. Oh, what she wouldn't give to bite that ass!

"Any questions?"

“Huh?” Penny quickly snapped her wayward attention back to her clipboard. The clipboard that was now being plucked from her trembling hands.

“How long are we going to play this game, Miss Royale?”

“What?”

“Every inspection it’s the same thing, this unspoken...wanting.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Mr Hardcastle.”

Luke grinned as he walked forward, forcing Penny back against a wall. “Really? So you weren’t undressing me with your eyes just now?”

“No, I wasn’t! Now please, give me back my notes.”

“You mean these official-looking pieces of paper,” Luke taunted as he held up the clipboard, “that I notice you’ve cleverly decorated with tiny hearts and the initials LH. Hmm...”

Penny lunged for the clipboard but Luke held it out of reach. She tried again and collided with his chest. His hard, dirty, masculine chest. Her hardhat fell to the ground and her hair tumbled over her shoulders in wild disarray.

“Give that back!” she snapped as she primly straightened her suit jacket.

Luke grinned wickedly as he held the clipboard out to her and then snatched it back, laughing at her ever increasing frustration. “You can have it back on one condition.”

“And what’s that?”

His smile became seductive again, his golden eyes shimmered with lust. “One kiss. On your lips.”

Penny’s eyes narrowed. “That’s all? Just one kiss?”

“On your lips.”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Fine. One kiss on my lips and then you give back my–

What are you doing?”

Luke had sunk to his knees and begun sliding her skirt up her thighs.

“Stop that! You said a kiss on my lips!”

“But I never said which lips...”

Before Penny could think Luke had her skirt around her waist and her knickers around her knees. He blew warm breath across her exposed mound, making her gasp, making her grip his shoulders to stop herself from falling to the ground.

Then he kissed her.

His lips pressed against hers, his tongue delved deeper into her hot, moist flesh, licking and sucking, nibbling and probing, making her writhe like some demented belly dancer, grinding her hips back and forth as she tried to reach that seemingly unreachable state of bliss. Closer and closer, she was almost there—

“Luke! Oh, yes, Luke! Just a little more...”

Luke grabbed her ass in both hands and pulled her forward, forcing his tongue deeper and deeper, greedily lapping her sweet liqueur.

Penny grabbed his head in both hands, her nails scoring his scalp, and held him against her as she came.

“Luke!”

Penny’s body shook the garden chair as her orgasm washed through her. Slowly her breathing calmed to normal. She opened her eyes and pulled her fingers from her knickers.

“I’m so pathetic.”

As if Luke Hardcastle, the real one that is, would ever go down on her.

But then he had kissed her.

Actually he'd done more than that. He'd felt her up and kissed her. He'd grabbed her ass and stabbed her in the belly with his very obvious, and large, erection. Had *she* done that? Had she given Luke Hardcastle an erection?

A heady thought if ever there was one.

She couldn't deny the feeling of being wrapped in his arms as he kissed her socks off had been wonderful. And terrible.

It wasn't that Penny hadn't enjoyed the kiss; it was just that she'd basically given up where men were concerned. She'd already decided she was fated to be a lonely old spinster who would never go anywhere or do anything, and would only be missed when the junk mail started spilling from her letterbox and caused some sort of safety hazard on the footpath.

Being kissed by her fantasy man had never come into the equation.

Penny stared at her watch. It was almost seven. She sighed loudly and forced herself to her feet. She flicked on the shop lights and put up the new book display, then counted the tills, cleaned the counters and mopped the floors just for good measure, the memory of Kit's hot lips and strong arms keeping her company while she worked.

By eight o'clock she was sipping a cup of tea and staring vacantly out the window at one of Luke's enormous construction cranes, the giant phallus just one of many that dotted the ever-expanding cityscape. This one had a Hardcastle Construction banner flapping from it, a larger-than-life reminder of her Lord and Master.

"I thought I was opening today," Karen said as she skipped up the stairs.

"You are," Penny said as she continued staring at the banner, distracted as her insides were being twisted by conflicting emotions of loathing and lust.

Luke had kissed her. He'd really kissed her. And it had been amazing. But *why* did he kiss

her? Was he simply doing as he promised and fighting fire with fire, using her own desires against her? What else could it possibly be? More to the point, was she really going to let him get away with it?

No. When she saw him next she would make certain he knew. He might be able to blackmail her into doing his dirty work, but no way was Luke Hardcastle going to blackmail her into bed.

No matter how unnervingly tempting the possibilities might be.

“So why are you here?” Karen pressed.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Pen, you look terrible. Is everything alright?”

Penny forced a smile. “I’m fine. I was up all night with Luke.”

“Oh, really?” said Karen with sudden interest and a cheeky grin. The bubbly blonde quickly pulled up a chair and propped her chin in her hands. “Tell me everything.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “It was nothing like that. We were discussing new lease agreements.”

“All night?” Karen asked sceptically.

“Yes, all night. He wants to call a proprietor’s meeting so he can be introduced and assure everyone that their businesses are safe and blah, blah, blah. You know, the usual stuff.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Good. Go home and get some sleep.”

Penny smiled sleepily. “Can’t just yet. I have some other stuff to take care of. But then, then I will go home and leave the shop in your capable hands.”

By lunchtime, Penny had phoned all of the businesses on their tiny block, informed them of Luke’s request and was now riding the elevator to his office.

She stood patiently in front of Sandra's desk while the blonde took down a message, then got annoyed for being made to wait when she would rather be asleep and moved for Luke's door. Sandra threw the phone down and jumped to her feet to stop her.

"You can't go in there, Miss Royale. Mr Hardcastle is in a very important meeting and cannot be disturbed."

"I only need a moment of his time, Sandra," Penny said as she grabbed for the doorknob.

Sandra blocked the door. "I simply cannot allow it. He's with a very important client. He said he was not to be...disturbed," she finished with a sigh as the door opened.

Penny's eyes opened wide and she swallowed down a whimper of desire as she took in the vision of Luke. The crumpled, unshaven, half-dressed vision of Luke. He looked like he'd just rolled out of bed after a night of sex. She shot a scathing glance at the skinny blonde standing by his side and hated herself for the spear of jealousy she wished she could wrench from her heart and stab through his assistant's.

"Sandra, continue holding my calls. Penny, come in." He stepped aside to let Penny walk past and then shut the door behind her. "Sorry for my appearance but I haven't been home yet."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Luke. I should have called...or made an appointment or...something," she stammered, distracted by the tantalising glimpse of the finely muscled chest she could see between his unbuttoned shirtfront.

"Yes, you should have. What can I do for you, Penny?"

As she continued staring at Luke's chest, Penny struggled to remember why she'd come to his office in the first place. Oh, yeah, that was it. To tell him *her* body was off limits.

She swallowed hard. "I've set up the meeting you wanted with your new tenants," she said as she dragged her eyes up to meet his, only to be greeted by a thinly veiled smirk. "Tomorrow at

seven at Mama's Table," she added quickly as her cheeks heated with embarrassment.

"Good. Anything else?"

"Yes, actually, there is."

Luke waited. "Well?"

Penny took a fortifying breath. "I'm not having sex with you, Luke," she stated firmly.

Luke frowned. "Okay," he said slowly. "And why exactly do you think you need to tell me that?"

"Because you kissed me last night."

"So?"

"So I think we both know it wasn't just a kiss, and I'm not going to fall prey to this fire versus fire thing you have going on. I would like to get through this...whatever *this* is, with at least some of my dignity intact."

Luke raised an eyebrow. "You want to lecture me about dignity? When *you've* been gawking at *my* body this whole time?"

Penny gasped indignantly as she realised it was her daydream all over again. But she held her ground and planted her hands on her hips. "Well, I'm not the one walking around half naked looking like I just screwed my—"

"Besides," he snarled, "I thought I apologised for that kiss."

Penny straightened. "You did."

"Then why are we discussing this?" He yawned.

She watched as he moved to the couch, lay down, stretched out, and tucked his arms behind his head. His shirtfront fell open and revealed even more glorious muscle, tanned, hard, hot muscle, and Penny wondered what it would feel like pressed against her own naked flesh.

She began gnawing on her bottom lip as she tried desperately to ignore the sudden flood of heat that washed through her entire body and came to rest between her thighs.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s commonly known as sleeping, Penny. Care to join me?”

Penny gasped again as she wondered if Luke had read her mind, then glared at the broad grin on his face. “Didn’t you listen to a thing I just said?”

“Honestly?” Luke chuckled, then shrugged. “I just meant you look tired, like you didn’t get much sleep last night either. Why is that, I wonder?”

Penny couldn’t believe Luke was teasing her. “You’re a pig.”

“Why, because I find you attractive and I’m too tired to be bothered hiding it?” he said, and sighed. “I’m sorry I kissed you, okay? It won’t happen again. Now, if there’s nothing else, Miss Royale...” Luke threw his arm across his eyes, dismissing her.

Penny turned to leave, her mind in a spin as she tried to process Luke’s words—he found *her* attractive?—but stopped as she remembered something else he’d said.

“Why didn’t you go home last night?”

“What?”

“You said you hadn’t gone home yet. Why not?”

She chewed on her bottom lip as Luke settled his golden gaze on her again. She hated how much she liked seeing him like this, how much she didn’t want to leave his office because it meant leaving him.

She felt like a love-struck teenager. Stupid.

“I came back here so I could go over the papers you gave me.”

“And?”

“And Selina has very good lawyers,” he said as he sat up again. “I couldn’t find anything that would allow you to share information with me. I’ve sent the agreement to my legal department for a fine combing, see if they can find something I missed.”

“So...does that mean I’m off the hook?” Penny asked cautiously. “No more blackmail?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Penny, I need you, and if I have to blackmail you to keep you, then I will.”

Penny spoke through clenched teeth. “Did it ever occur to you to *ask* me for my help?”

Luke stared at her thoughtfully. “Would you?”

“After you’ve already blackmailed me, are you kidding?”

Luke grinned as she threw that back at him. “I realise this is probably just my exhaustion talking, but you’re in very real danger of earning my respect, Miss Royale.”

Penny feigned incredulity. “Luke Hardcastle respect a Royale? Wonders will never cease to amaze.”

“I so enjoy how you mock the situation, as though it were nothing out of the ordinary.”

“That’s because it isn’t out of the ordinary for me,” she said with a sigh. “Maybe this is just my exhaustion talking, but to tell you the truth, Luke, it almost feels like I’m back at Royale Industries.”

Penny may as well have slapped Luke’s face again. She couldn’t have insulted him more completely if she’d tried. She knew it, too. The look on Luke’s face was disturbing. Penny wasn’t sure if it was rage, contempt, or disgust she was seeing but she knew it was time to leave.

“Get some sleep, Luke. You’re going to need it. I have a feeling you’re about to head into uncharted territory.”

Chapter Four

Penny sat at the table at the rear of the busy Italian restaurant with the other proprietors, waiting for Luke's meeting to begin.

He was late.

Angie Campioni, the proprietor of Mama's Table, sat down beside Penny and huffed impatiently.

"He's not impressing me so far, *amica*," she said, her thick Italian accent the type that brooked no opposition.

"He's a very busy man, Angie. I'm sure he won't be too long."

"He'd better not be. I hate waiting."

"I know. But just think, the last landlord didn't bother meeting us until he wanted to jack up our rent. At least Luke wants to be on good terms with his tenants."

"I suppose so," Angie grumbled. "Of course, he could just want to lull us into a false sense of security for when he wants to jack up our rents."

As much as Penny feared for her own business, she believed at least that Luke was on the level about the other leases. She shook her head. "He's a better man than that, Angie."

"I hope you're not saying so just because he's so *bello*."

"I'm not."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Penny jumped at the sound of Luke's voice behind her. She stood up to greet him and tripped over her own feet. Luke caught her hands in his and stopped her from falling.

“Thank you,” she said as her cheeks bloomed scarlet.

Luke grinned. “Are you always this clumsy, Penny?” he asked, his voice low and husky. Penny swallowed hard. The feel of her hands in his was near electric. She jammed her brain back into gear.

“Only when I’m trying to impress someone,” she quipped as though she wasn’t as nervous as hell to be this close to him again, as though she didn’t want to taste his wide, masculine mouth again. Luke looked away from her to the table and dropped her hands.

“I apologise for my tardiness, folks,” he said as he addressed the meeting.

“Everyone, this is Luke Hardcastle, our new landlord. Luke asked us here tonight to discuss our tenancy agreements. Luke?”

“Thank you, Penny,” he said as she sat down. “I just wanted to meet everyone tonight and get to know a little about each of you and your businesses. Now, I’ve had new tenancy agreements drawn up that I would like everyone to look at, and please, feel free to discuss them with your family, your solicitors, et cetera, before signing them. If you have any concerns regarding any part of the agreements, please come and speak with me directly, but I think you will find everything in order. I’d also like to thank *Signora Campioni* for hosting this evening’s meeting. *Grazie, signora.*”

Angie nodded at Luke in acknowledgement and then clapped her hands loudly. “*Marcos, Lei ora servirà cena e vino, grazie.*”

Angie’s son Marcos moved quickly to the kitchen door and repeated the order for dinner and wine to be served. Within moments the table was heavily laden with pasta and crusty bread and bottles of Italian wine. “*Buon appetite!*”

Luke moved to an empty chair and sat down to enjoy the meal. Penny was quietly impressed

by the way he spoke to everyone throughout the evening. There was no condescension, no arrogance, just a relaxed man having a chat with new friends. He was the Luke Hardcastle she'd admired in the past, the man she'd dreamed of from afar, the man she had always wanted, but always knew she could never have.

He was so far out of her league.

"I take it back, *amica*. He's no *bello*," Angie told her later.

"No?" Penny asked with a raised brow.

"No. He's *magnifico*, and so *provocante*, so sexy. And did you know he lived in *Italia* for two years?"

"I know."

"He would be a good match for you, I think," she said with a knowing smile.

"Don't even go there, Angie. I'm not his type."

"Not his type! Bah! You are *bella donna* and he is blind if he cannot see it."

Penny blushed. "He only dates models, Angie."

"Then he is *stupido*! A big man like him needs a real woman, not some *puttana* that's had her backside injected into her lips."

Penny almost choked on the bread she was eating and quickly washed it down with some wine. "Even if that were the case, Luke is *not* the biggest Royale fan. You know he and my aunt have had dealings in the past, and not pleasant ones at that. Trust me, Angie, let this one go."

The older woman sighed heavily. "Very well, *amica*."

Luke sat down beside Penny and reached across her for one of the small pastries that had been brought to the table with coffee.

"I need to speak with you privately. Can we go to your shop when we're done here?"

Penny nodded. Luke's request was whispered in her ear and his breath was warm, his voice, too. Her heart skittered with excitement, and once again she had to remind herself that he was not her secret lover; he was blackmailing her for personal vengeance.

"Of course. We should be finished here soon."

A little while later everyone started to leave. Penny made good her escape without any more comments from Angie, but Luke was not as lucky. She smirked as she watched him from the doorway as he was kissed repeatedly on both cheeks. His backside got thoroughly pinched too. He seemed to take it all in good fun and chuckled most of the way to Penny's shop.

"Angie's a gem," he said.

"Angie's a saint. But you should be thankful she doesn't have any daughters or you'd be married by the end of the week."

Luke laughed as he followed Penny inside. "Actually, she did offer to find me a wife, said she knew someone who'd be perfect for me."

Penny stilled and as she opened her office door and flicked on the light, her heart hammering in her suddenly tight chest. She swallowed hard. "Did she mention names?" she asked in what she hoped was a neutral voice.

"No," Luke lied.

Angie had actually told him unequivocally, "You must marry Penny! She is *bella donna*, *si?* Penny, she give you *molti bambini*. She is *buona donna*, is very sweet."

"*Dolce come miele*," Luke had replied. Sweet like honey.

Luke had watched Penny throughout most of dinner and apparently Angie had noticed. But how could he not have watched her? Her laugh was infectious, her perfume intoxicating, and her eating habits—

Oh, how he'd enjoyed watching the woman eat!

Her beautiful pout covered in pasta sauce one moment, being licked clean with the tip of her sensual pink tongue the next. When she dipped her bread in the sauce at the end of the meal, it had dribbled over her fingers and she had licked them clean, had sucked each finger into her mouth between those rosy lips and slowly slid them out again.

By the time Luke had finished envisioning those luscious lips giving his cock the same treatment he'd stiffened to the point of pain, and almost drove a fork into his leg just to distract himself from his salacious thoughts.

But now he was alone with her and his cock was stiffening again as the memory of her eating one of those sticky pastries invaded his mind's eye. He forced himself to concentrate on the business at hand. She was a Royale. She was the enemy. He should not be thinking about the kiss they'd shared or how good she'd felt in his arms, how good she would feel laid out beneath him in his bed as he satisfied his lust over and over again—

Besides, she didn't want him touching her anyway. Penny had made that blindingly clear when she'd confronted him in his office. She would not be selling herself as a part of their deal.

Fine. He didn't *need* the complication anyway. And he could ignore the fact that he *wanted* the complication.

At least, he could try.

Luke watched Penny sit down and look at him expectantly, and braced himself for a storm. He was about to tell her what he wanted her to do, and he knew she wasn't going to like it.

Chapter Five

“I’d rather give you my shop!”

Luke folded his arms over his chest and stared her down. “No, you wouldn’t, Penny. Stop trying to pretend this old place doesn’t mean anything to you. I know how much you love it. Why do you think I bought it?”

“How long have been planning this?” she asked carefully.

“Ever since your aunt hurt my sister.”

“Eighteen months?”

“It took a while for an opportunity to present itself, but just because you disappeared from Royale Industries doesn’t mean you dropped off my radar.”

“You’ve been watching me?”

“Yes.”

“For eighteen months?”

For ten years. “Yes.”

“Then you know why I can’t do it.”

“You can and you will, Penny. This is not negotiable.”

“Don’t make me do this, Luke. Please.”

The completely devastated look on Penny’s face almost made Luke change his mind. Almost. But he’d waited too long for this. He needed revenge on the Royale women, both Selina and Penny, for what they did to his family. Luke could think of no better way to accomplish that goal where Penny was concerned than by making her do something she really, really didn’t want

to do.

He would make her reconcile with Selina.

“I want you back in her good graces so you can spy on her for me.”

“Yes, I get that, thank you, I’m not an idiot! But don’t you have people who can plant listening devices in her office or something? Why the hell do I have talk to her?”

“For starters, listening devices are illegal, but more to the point, they can’t direct a conversation, which is what I’ll need you to do if you’re going to make her confess her crimes.”

“This is too much, Luke. I’m not doing it.”

“Yes, you are,” he said softly.

“No!”

“You want some added incentive?” Luke asked coolly. “How about your house?”

Penny froze. “What about my house?”

“Do this for me and I’ll pay off your house.”

Penny’s jaw fell. He was offering to pay out her mortgage if she willingly spied on her aunt? That was unexpected. Any profit she made from the shop would be hers to do with as she wished. The funny thing was that Penny actually didn’t have a problem with spying on Selina. How many times had she daydreamed about sticking it to her sadistic aunt and her depraved ways? She just hated the fact that she would have to speak to the evil, conniving bitch. Selina had had no qualms about kicking Penny to the curb, just like the newspapers had had no problem reporting what happened at the time.

Royale Rift, the headlines had read.

Eighteen months later and the only redeeming factor of that whole portion of her life was that she found out exactly how strong she was when she needed to be.

She needed to be strong now.

“No, Luke. I can’t do it.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Take your pick,” she said trying to sound as unaffected as Luke.

“Fine, then try this on for size. Instead of paying off your house, I’ll buy out your mortgage. I’ll own your shop and your home.”

Now that was more like it. Penny fought hard to keep her temper in check. “You’re a bastard, Hardcastle.”

“Is that a yes?” he asked calmly.

Penny glared at him, then nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll leave the details of your reunion up to you. You know best how to go about luring her out from under her rock. Just be sure to keep me informed. I want you to make contact with Selina by the end of the week. Agreed?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need a lift home?”

“Not from you,” Penny gritted out.

Luke sighed so quietly Penny barely heard it. The hard lines of his face softened and his golden eyes glowed with warmth, a warmth that was completely at odds with the conversation they’d just had.

“I’m not letting you take the bus at this time of night. Come on, my car is out front.”

Luke said the words with such tenderness in his voice that Penny couldn’t fight him anymore. She felt very tired all of a sudden and simply let him take her hand. Her thoughts and emotions were chaotic at best and she was barely able to put one foot in front of the other.

Penny was so lost in her thoughts that she was standing on the footpath before she knew it, with Luke behind her locking the door and pulling down the security screen. Then she felt his jacket being draped over her shoulders. The lingering warmth of his body permeated hers, his musky male scent filled her nostrils and she had to repress a moan of desire.

So much for being strong, she thought.

* * * *

Luke helped Penny into his car and drove her home. They sat in silence the entire way, Luke fighting his own inner battle on the journey. He hated what he was doing to Penny and he hated himself for feeling that way. This was business, she was a Royale, and she deserved what she got.

The only problem was that Luke was attracted to her. More than attracted—

When Penny was a kid she wasn't much to look at, but when she became a teenager her skinny body had blossomed into womanhood. Before long Penny had curves that could turn a man's head twice. Not that she'd noticed. Luke doubted she would have known what to do with a compliment if she ever got one, which he guessed she never did, remembering her sheer lack of confidence.

She'd always looked so damned vulnerable. She'd slumped when she walked and shuffled her feet, but Luke had seen the other side of Penny Royale, the side he guessed few knew existed. And he still remembered the exact day he saw that other side—the sexy side.

Penny was sixteen. She was walking along the footpath outside the Royale Industries building drinking a Coke, just as she did every day after school. Luke's office overlooked the street then, not the Brisbane River. He'd seen her dark green blazer and cream straw hat with its fluttering green ribbon moving through the four o'clock crowds, and he saw her stop outside the

entrance to Royale Industries. Penny had put her school bag and drink on the ground and crouched down to retie her shoelace. A strong and sudden wind had blown her hat off and her long chestnut brown hair had whipped around her face. She knocked over the Coke as she lunged for her hat and it splashed her blazer.

Luke had chuckled as he'd watched her. She was such a klutz. Penny had removed her blazer and stuffed it in her bag, then turned into the wind so her hair was blown back from her face. Then Luke saw what would catch his eye to this very day.

Her breasts.

Penny had tossed her head back and proceeded to tie up her hair, the natural action of which thrust her chest forward and outlined her figure to Luke's hungry eyes. Her school uniform had been pulled tight across her voluptuous chest and the wind had moulded the green and white striped fabric to every other luscious curve of her body. Her womanly hips, the soft round of her belly, her long, shapely thighs—Luke's cock had sprung to life as he'd watched her, and then he'd chastised himself for having such lustful thoughts about a sixteen-year-old girl.

The Penny sitting in the passenger seat now was a very different woman. This Penny had confidence. This Penny walked tall and proud. This Penny wasn't afraid to say no. But she still blushed, she still had a certain vulnerability about her, and that had always appealed to him.

Luke pulled up in front of her house and walked her to her door. He watched her fish her keys from her pocket, watched her slot the key in the lock, and he couldn't help but remember what had happened the last time he'd been here. He'd given in to temptation and kissed her. And she'd kissed him back.

"Who are you?"

The inquiry jolted Luke from his thoughts and made him frown. "What do you mean?"

“You threaten me with financial ruin one moment and walk me to my door the next. You’re all easy and charming in public but snide and hurtful when we’re alone. So I ask you, who are you, Luke Hardcastle?”

Luke opened Penny’s door and gestured for her to enter her house, but he stayed firmly planted on the veranda. He wasn’t willing to take the chance of losing control again and doing more than just kiss her.

“I’m the man who protects what’s his, and whether you like it or not, Penny Royale, for the time being, you’re mine.”

Penny scoffed at that. “You may own my shop, mate, but that’s just bricks and mortar. You do not own me!”

Luke lowered his gaze to Penny’s mouth. Her lips formed a perfectly defiant and kissable pout. He stepped forward into the doorway and reached around her to grab the doorknob.

“You are mine, Penny, and you’re going to behave and do what you’re told, because you know what will happen if you don’t.”

“And here I was thinking you’d be out of your depths with these sorts of tactics,” she said softly. “It seems I was wrong. This isn’t uncharted territory for you after all, is it?”

Luke grimaced. “Maybe I’m just a fast learner.”

“Or maybe you’re not the man I thought you were.”

“Fire with fire, Penny,” he breathed as his lips glanced over hers.

Penny jumped at the fleeting touch, then her door was suddenly closed with her on one side and Luke on the other. She leaned back against the door and let out a ragged sigh. She jerked forward as the door suddenly opened again, and Luke poked his head around the corner.

“My jacket,” he said stiffly.

“What?”

“You’re still wearing my jacket.”

“Oh!” Penny quickly shucked the jacket off her shoulders and handed it to Luke, who slung it over his arm. He lingered for a moment in the doorway as Penny stared expectantly at him. She licked her lips in anticipation, wondering if he was going to kiss her again. Hoping...

“Well, goodnight,” he said finally, and he was gone again. Penny locked the door and kicked off her shoes.

Why did she always feel like such an idiot around that man?

* * * *

Luke sat on his couch with his face pressed into his jacket and his hand fisted around his cock. He could smell her. Penny’s perfume lingered in the lining of his jacket and it was intoxicating.

What was it about this woman? She drove him to distraction, constantly invading his thoughts with her curvy body and luscious pout. He’d thought he’d gotten over this particular obsession.

Obviously not.

Luke had always known who Penny was, before and after she’d taken over his fantasies. But he’d never really seen her as a woman in her own right. She was always just Selina Royale’s niece, or PennyRoyale of Royale Industries. There was always something to ensure he kept his distance from her. Always something to ensure he’d never see her as just Penny.

Doubts resurfaced in Luke’s mind. This thing he was doing he was doing to *just Penny*. Sweet, intelligent, beautiful Penny.

And what the hell had he been thinking almost kissing her again? Thinking? That was a joke.

So much blood had drained from his head to sustain his near constant erection throughout the evening he was amazed he'd been able to form a coherent sentence. He'd been on the edge of erupting in his pants all night.

He envisioned her again, standing in her doorway looking up at him with those uncertain blue-grey eyes and that delicious mouth of hers. It would have been so easy to take her in his arms again, to waltz her down the hall to her bedroom, to strip that glorious body and fuck her senseless. Hell, he'd only wanted his jacket back was because he knew her perfume would be on it!

"This is all your fault," he said as he looked at his cock.

Luke slumped back on the couch and inhaled again, the sweet smell of gardenias filling his mind with images of Penny. *His Penny*. He imagined stripping her slowly, one item of clothing after another.

He'd start with those pretty blue ballet flats she'd worn tonight, slipping them off her weary feet, massaging her toes, her arches, her ankles. Slowly he'd work his way up her legs and under her skirt, he'd find her knickers and ease them down, he'd press them to his face and inhale her womanly scent. Next he'd take her blouse, slipping each little pearl button from its hole, allowing her glorious lace encased breasts an inch of freedom at a time. He'd push the silky fabric from her shoulders and watch it fall away, he'd...he'd...

"Damn," he groaned as he came in his hand. "Didn't even get her bra off."

Chapter Six

Penny put the phone down for the third time and jumped up and down on the spot waving her fists in the air and screaming silently at the ceiling, as if that would somehow make her dial Selina's phone number. She went upstairs to the café and made herself a cup of coffee, then walked around the room for a bit, chatting with the regulars.

She was procrastinating.

Penny knew she had to call Selina and she had to do it today. By the end of the week, that was what Luke had demanded. Today was Thursday and Selina would be in meetings all day Friday if she stuck to form, so it was now or never.

She returned to her office and took a deep breath, then picked up the phone and called Selina, the numbers flying forward from her subconscious more easily than she would have liked. She waited anxiously for an answer.

"Oh, yes, hello. My name is Penny Royale and I would like to—"

She was put on hold. Penny listened to the classical music wafting through the phone line and sighed impatiently. Minutes ticked by. Maybe Selina wouldn't take her call. Maybe her aunt wanted to speak to Penny almost as much as Penny wanted to speak to her aunt. She didn't.

Penny hadn't even really thought about what she would say to Selina beyond hello. After all, what do you say to the woman who took you in and raised you against her will, educated you to her own ends, treated you like her slave when it became blindingly apparent that you weren't interested in taking over the company, then threw you out into the cold because you did what you felt was the right thing, and not the Royale thing?

“Penelope, is that really you?” Penny froze. For what seemed like an age, she lacked the ability to speak. “Hello?”

“Hello,” Penny croaked as she found her voice. “Aunt Selina.”

Silence ensued again.

“I must say this is...unexpected,” Selina said after a minute more. “I hadn’t thought to be hearing from you any time soon.”

“Yes, I know, but I, um...I was over your way the other day and I got to thinking that maybe I should call you so I am, calling you.” Penny winced at her unease. And she thought she sounded like an idiot in front of Luke!

“Yes, I heard you were taking a meeting. I don’t suppose you care to explain what you were doing at Hardcastle Tower?”

Penny should have realised Selina would have her spies watching Luke’s front door. But there it was, the opportunity she needed to bait her aunt. Didn’t take long, much less time than she’d expected.

“Oh, just some small item of business, nothing important, really.”

“What sort of business?” asked Selina in her sugar-coated way.

“Nothing that would interest you, I’m sure, Aunt Selina,” Penny said. “Luke is my new landlord, that’s all.”

“Is he now? And what would someone like Luke Hardcastle want with a mouldy old bookshop?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Penny said defensively, the jibe about her business cutting deeper than she wanted to admit. “Why would he tell me anything?”

A thoughtful sigh followed by a triumphant snigger met her ears. “Have lunch with me

tomorrow. My treat. We'll catch up, discuss what's new."

Penny agreed to meet Selina for lunch at her favourite restaurant at midday sharp, then hung up and took a deep breath.

Now to tell Luke.

"Come to my office when you finish work today. We can discuss what you're going to say."

"I can't, Luke. It's Thursday, it's late-night shopping. The shop doesn't close until nine and I won't be finished until almost ten."

"Fine, then I'll come to you."

As much as she liked the sound of that idea, as much as she wanted to see his handsome face and perfect ass, as much as she knew she shouldn't, she also knew it was a waste of time. Both hers and his.

"And do what? Sit around and wait for however long? Why don't I just call you when I get home and we can discuss it then?"

Much better idea. A disconnected voice was much easier to deal with than a real live man. Especially this man, the man who had the power to make her knees go weak with the slightest of grins and—oh hell. Who was she kidding? Even over the phone with nothing more than his sumptuous voice, he made her feel like the giddiest of idiots.

"I'll come to you, Penny. If I get bored, I'll have a cup of coffee and read a book."

"Fine," she sighed, resigned to the idea that she was going to make a fool of herself one way or another anyhow. "What time should I expect you?"

"About sixish. Would you like me to bring you some dinner?"

Penny scrunched her brow at the unexpected gesture. "Ah, sure, I guess, as long as you're buying."

“Do you like Indian?”

“Love it, the spicier the better. Something with goat in it.”

“Goat?” Luke scoffed with an affable laugh. Penny couldn’t help smiling at the warmth in his voice and she relaxed a little.

“Hey, don’t knock it ’til you try it. Goat is *very* yummy.”

“Let me write this down so I don’t forget: Goat for the crazy lady,” he teased. Penny chuckled quietly and she thought she heard Luke’s breath catch. Right. Like that would happen. She shook her head, certain she imagined it.

“For that you can get me some veggie pakoras, too.”

“Got it. I’ll see you tonight, Penny.”

Luke’s words sounded more like a seductive promise between lovers than a business appointment between blackmailer and blackmailee. Penny’s pulse thrilled at the idea. There was no denying that she found Luke insanely attractive. He was so tall and so broad that he practically filled any doorway he stood in, but there was so much more than a physical presence about him. Luke was confident, sure of every move he made, decisive and bold.

Since starting his own company more than ten years ago, Luke’s special blend of knowledge, dedication and confidence had seen Hardcastle Construction win bid after bid until it grew into the corporate giant it was today.

Penny had read time and time again where Luke had said all of his success was made possible by the love and support of his family.

She’d always wondered what that would be like, to be loved so unconditionally. She didn’t begrudge people fortunate enough to have that in their lives; how could she? She found it difficult to miss something she’d never had. But for the past few days it had played on her mind.

It wasn't just that she was attracted to Luke, or that she wished there could be something more between them than deceit and distrust—she knew there couldn't be—but Luke's family was almost all gone now. Soon he'd be alone. Just like her.

* * * *

Luke strolled into Royale Teas just after six with a plastic bag in hand, the hot spicy smells of curry and the sweet tangy scent of yoghurt wafting from within. Penny and her assistant, Karen, were serving customers. He watched them for a moment until he caught Penny's eye and he held up the bag to show her he hadn't forgotten. The smile that met his eyes was blinding and his heart picked up pace.

Penny called out to one of her other staff members to help Karen and she led Luke to her office, but only so she could fetch her bag and coat.

"Come on," she said as she started back across the shop floor. Luke frowned as Penny said goodnight to her staff, and wasn't sure if he should be amused by Karen's cheeky wink and silly grin, but then Penny grabbed his hand and dragged him out of the shop.

"I thought you had to close the shop."

"You see, Luke, the great thing about being the boss is that I have staff who can do these things for me when I have better things to do."

"Why didn't you just say that when we spoke today?"

"And miss out on a free meal? Are you nuts?"

Luke laughed and shook his head as he watched Penny pull her coat on to ward off the early spring chill. He definitely liked this woman way more than he should, and therein lay the problem.

"So, where to? Your place or mine?" he asked, trying his hardest to keep the suggestiveness

out of his voice.

“Since you have to give me a ride home either way, we may as well go to my place.”

Luke groaned as the unbidden thought of giving Penny *a ride* bounced through his head. He had to get this under control. Yes, there was a strong attraction on both sides, but nothing good ever came from sleeping with a woman whom you were manipulating for your own ends.

* * * *

“So, why a book shop?” Luke asked as Penny served the food. He clenched his jaw and willed his cock to stay down as he watched her suck a dribble of marsala sauce from her thumb.

Damn, but he needed to get laid.

Preferably with her.

She tossed the empty plastic container in her sink and sat down at her small dining table before answering. “I thought you wanted to talk about Selina.”

He screwed up his face. “Not while I’m eating.”

Penny smirked and shrugged. “I love reading. A book shop seemed logical.”

“And the cafe?”

“Caffeine addict.”

Luke stared at Penny curiously. Her answers were short, to the point, and hardly conversational. He laid his fork aside and interlaced his fingers as he put his hands on the table. Penny looked cautious as he leaned forward.

“I realise that my blackmailing you doesn’t make for the most comfortable environment, Penny, but there’s no reason we can’t keep this friendly.”

Very friendly, if he got his way. Which he usually did.

“I am being friendly.”

“No, you’re not.”

Penny’s eyes narrowed as she rose to the bait. “What do you want from me? Because I think I’ve been pretty bloody patient with this whole blackmail and revenge thing, don’t you? I’ve done everything you’ve asked of me so far, and believe it or not Luke I know some of what you’re doing is for my benefit alone, so don’t think you’re pulling the wool over my eyes on that score, mate.

“And as for Selina...you want to know why I run a café, Luke? Well, I’ll tell you. Because I grew up with junkie parents who were more concerned about getting their next fix than feeding their child, and when they died I was sent to live with a woman so frigid she makes Antarctica look like Tahiti. Tea and scones and coffee and triple-chocolate cheesecakes are warm and lovely and fun. Everything I never had growing up I surround myself with now because I’ve bloody well earned them!”

Luke sat in stunned silence as he stared at Penny, her chest heaving with every angry breath, her hands balled into fists on the table. He’d only meant to tease her, to cause her cheeks to flush that pretty pink he was becoming way too fond of, not to cause her grief. His libido quickly took the back seat as the urge to gather her soft body into his arms, to hold her tightly and protect her from any more hurt became almost unbearable.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, Penny.”

“You think I’m insane, don’t you?” she snapped.

“It’s not insane to want nice things in your life.”

“Says the man who wants to take them away from me.”

If Luke thought he was having doubts before, they were nothing compared with what he was feeling now. He’d known Penny’s life had been unusual, but he’d never guessed she’d been so

unloved, so alone. If Penny hadn't spoken first he might have actually called the whole thing off.

"Can we just talk about tomorrow, please? Selina wants to meet at Jorge's Café in the Queen Street Mall."

"I know the place," Luke said as he shifted into work mode. "Plates as big as the tables with meals the size of atoms. Very chic."

"And very expensive, so she'd better be buying."

"I'll give you some money just in case."

"I don't need your charity, Luke."

"I've already bought you dinner twice this week. What's a lunch on top of that?" Before Penny could answer he sighed and said, "Consider it a slush fund, then. Some flash cash to keep Selina interested, make her wonder just how well you're doing, little Miss Small Business Woman of the Year."

Penny tried to hide a swift smile behind her hand but Luke saw it anyway and he smiled too. "What? You didn't think I knew about the award?" he said, and added irrelevantly, "You were right about the goat, by the way. It's actually pretty good."

Penny frowned. "Are you sure you want to go through with this, Luke?"

"The goat or Selina?"

"Selina."

"Quite sure. Why?"

"She isn't just going to admit any wrongdoing any time soon. She's been at this for a long, long time and she's very good at what she does."

"Your point?"

"I just hope you realise what you're going to have to do to beat her at her own game, what

you're going to have to become. Despite everything that's happened this week I would still like to believe you're a good man, Luke. But if you want to beat Selina you're going to have to become something you're not."

"Really?" Luke said with a grin, completely ignoring the seriousness in Penny's voice. "And what's that?"

"A prick."

Luke laughed out loud at the sincerity in Penny's face. "I can be a prick, Penny." He chuckled.

"So I've heard, but we're not talking about your love life now, are we?"

Luke sobered.

"If you're serious about bringing Selina down, then you are going to have to be ruthless, merciless, and I'm sorry, but your reputation leaves a lot to be desired in that regard."

"I've already resorted to blackmail, Penny. What else would you like me to do, sacrifice a small child?"

"If you really wanted to make sure you could keep me in line you would never have conceded to my demands over the other leases. You would have held them over my head in case I had any ideas of, oh I don't know, say, changing premises to a building *not* owned by Hardcastle Construction? You'd have no hold over me then, no bargaining chip."

"You think because I conduct myself with integrity that I'm weak," Luke said coolly.

"I've never thought that, but Selina does, and she will use your integrity against you." Penny sighed. "But I guess we won't really know how to play the game until I see her tomorrow," she said as she cleared away their plates.

"I suppose not," he agreed as he helped clean up.

Luke handed a glass to Penny as she stacked the dishwasher and their fingers touched. She almost dropped the glass and grabbed at it with her other hand. She was shaking. Luke took the glass from her and held her hands in his, his thumbs circling gently over the backs of her long fingers, sliding up over her knuckles, caressing her, scorching her skin with his sensual heat.

Penny slowly lifted her eyes to meet Luke's, and was greeted by liquid fire. His golden gaze was hotter than a jeweler's crucible and her heart began beating erratically. Her breasts rose and fell with every staggered breath and her tongue moved slowly over dry lips. Luke moved forward. He pressed her back against the kitchen bench and slid his hands into her hair. He held her captive with his body and his gaze, and there was no escaping that sensual mouth as it slashed down over hers and stole her sanity.

The taste of spice added to the heat of their kiss as Penny's fingers tunnelled through Luke's thick black hair and held him to her. She heard a lustful mewling escape her lips and heard his masculine growl in response. He pulled her roughly against him and Penny could feel every hard rope of muscle beneath his blue business shirt and his perfectly tailored charcoal trousers, and as he slid one hand down her back and squeezed her ass, forcing her even closer, she could feel his long, thick erection stabbing into her.

Her mind spun and she wanted to whoop with delight. She *had* given him an erection. Her, Penny Royale, the antithesis of a professional coat-hanger, had given Luke Hardcastle an erection.

Again.

She was terrified, but it was a wonderful kind of fear—exciting, seductive.

Luke listened to Penny's feminine whimpers and sighs as he grazed his lips over the sensitive flesh of her cheek and ear, leisurely working his way down her throat, and he was spurred on in

his quest to rid himself of this relentless need he was developing for her. Maybe if he could take her to bed, maybe if he could lose himself in her for just one night, he would get past his ridiculous obsession and see with his own eyes exactly how wrong for him she was.

“Luke?” she whimpered as his mouth traveled closer to her heaving cleavage.

“Hmm?” Luke slid his hands under Penny’s blouse and tenderly caressed her plump ribs, felt the heat and the silky softness of her skin. Wanted more.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper before.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Luke murmured against her neck before moving lower into the V of her blouse and nuzzling the warm, fleshy crescents that spilled over the top of her bra.

“And, I...I’m sorry I slapped you the other day,” she stammered as Luke’s hands cupped her lace-covered breasts and rubbed her nipples with his thumbs, teasing the little peaks until they stood out as hard and erect as his cock. He lifted his mouth from the pillow of her chest and grinned wickedly.

“Don’t be, it was a turn on.”

Luke’s husky voice assailed Penny’s senses once more and then stole her breath away with another all-consuming kiss. She tried to rein in her overexcited hormones. A futile exercise. She’d simply never been kissed so well in all her life. The way he gently nibbled at her lips, first the top and then the bottom, before he sucked them between his own lips and teased them with his tongue, gently prying them further apart and sliding it inside her welcoming mouth, wrestling her will into submission.

His kiss had Penny’s whole body buzzing with need, with heat, with longing and yes, with lust. A lust she’d never felt for anyone but him. She felt him press his thigh between her legs, felt herself start to move against him, grinding her hips, searching for something—exciting.

Dangerous. Elusive.

Something about this man made her insides twist with raw wanton passion, made her need him more than she needed her next breath. Made her crave him like a drug.

Drugs were bad.

Drugs used you up.

Drugs made you dependent.

Suddenly she wanted the kiss to end. Because through the haze of passion shone the knowledge the man doing these wondrous things to her body didn't actually like her. How could he? He still blamed her for her part in the Cassidy Holdings fiasco. And how could she let herself become dependent on a man who didn't even like her?

A lead weight settled in her stomach, crushing her mood with a mighty thud. Reluctantly she tried to push Luke away. "We shouldn't be doing this."

"Yes we should," he said as he tightened his hold on her, pushing his thigh harder between her legs as he savaged her throat with his mouth.

Penny tilted her head back, the feel of his lips against her hammering pulse sending a jolt of pure desire straight to her core. She moaned. She fisted her hands in his hair and pulled his mouth back to hers, ravished him with that desire. Until she felt his hands at her waist, unzipping her jeans. Unzipping himself.

She panicked. She pushed against the solid wall of his chest. "No. Stop. Please."

Luke stopped, his hands poised to push her jeans down her legs, eager for the feel of her molten heat, itching to discover what lay between her legs. Would she be smooth, her skin shaved clean? Or would he find soft curls, the sign of a real woman?

Would he ever find out? He clenched his jaw with the effort of pulling away from her, turned

his back to catch his breath, to calm himself, to hide his disappointment and frustration.

“Why?” he growled over his shoulder as he adjusted himself and thought of every turn off he possibly could to lessen the throbbing tension in his trousers.

“You know why.”

“Yeah, I know why,” Luke agreed as he zipped up his trousers and turned to face Penny. “Because I’m blackmailing you and you’re not that kind of girl.” She scowled at his sarcastic tone. “Sorry, was that not *dignified*?”

Her eyes darted away from his. “I just think it would be best for everyone if we try to keep this strictly business,” she said, the lack of conviction evident in her breathless voice.

Luke dropped the attitude and smiled handsomely, moving forward again. He placed one hand on the bench either side of Penny, effectively blocking any route of escape. “You can *try* all you like, Miss Royale,” he said, his voice smooth and warm, “but the fact of the matter is we will be working quite closely together for the next few weeks, and you can’t deny that you find me attractive.”

He watched her knuckles whiten as she gripped the bench behind her. He saw her swallow hard and lick her lips, her head tilting, readying for his kiss. Then he saw her eyes narrow, the spark of temper blowing away the haze of lust, and his cock twitched with life once more. Damn her.

She leaned forward and met him eye to eye. “Are you saying this was a pity thing? Poor pudgy Penny doesn’t have a man in her life so I’ll give her a few thrills? Is that what this is, Mr Hardcastle?”

Luke had to choke back the urge to laugh, then suppressed a groan of pure need as his cock strained towards her. Why did she have to look so sexy when she was mad at him?

“I’m not saying anything of the kind,” he replied with deceptive calm. “I’ve already told you I find you attractive.”

“And I’ve already told you I know what you’re up to. Nice try, Luke, but no deal.”

Luke’s frustration intensified as he pushed away from the bench. Penny couldn’t have misconstrued his actions more completely if she’d tried. All he wanted to do was rid himself of the ache that had been swelling his groin from the moment he saw her bend over to retrieve her chair in her office. It wasn’t hard to guess what Penny was thinking, though. She thought he was going to seduce her, use her, chew her up, and spit her out.

Maybe he would.

Or worse, maybe he’d find out she really was the perfect woman he’d fantasised about for a decade.

“Fine. We’ll do it your way. Strictly professional. Happy?”

Penny nodded at Luke’s sharp tone and glowering golden stare.

“I should go. I have an early meeting.”

She walked Luke to the door and pretended not to watch his lithe, effortless movements as he pulled his suit jacket on and took something from his pocket.

“Here, take this,” he said stiffly. Penny looked at Luke’s hand. In his palm was what looked like a small remote control. “It’s a digital voice recorder. I want you to record every and all conversations you have with Selina.”

Penny looked Luke in the eyes. All emotion was gone. He was definitely back in business mode. She reached out and took the device and turned it over in her hands.

“This is the manual. It has fresh batteries, and Penny, I fully expect you to use it. I will debrief you after every meeting you have with Selina and I will collect the recordings from you

when I do. Here, take this, too,” Luke added as he pulled out his wallet. He handed her five hundred dollars. Her mouth fell open in shock.

“I realise you’re probably not used to seeing this much money all at once, Miss Royale, but please try not to leave your mouth hanging open. It’s not very professional.”

Penny clenched her jaw.

Luke opened the door but stopped in the doorway. “By the way, why haven’t you started looking for non-Hardcastle-owned premises?”

Penny’s eyes narrowed as she studied Luke’s inscrutable face. “Why?”

“Humour me.”

“Because I don’t have the funds to move anywhere else,” she gritted out, “but you already know that.”

Luke smiled but there was nothing happy in his expression. “Yes, I already know that. I just wanted to hear you say it out loud.”

“Why?”

“To remind you of our deal, just in case you’re thinking of changing your mind.”

“I know the consequences if I don’t do what you want, Luke.”

“Maybe you should remember that. For the next time you feel like changing your mind.”

Penny’s nostrils flared with anger. So that was it, huh? He was pissed because he didn’t get his own way, because she’d made him pack up his bat and balls and go home. Well, screw that!

“Get out before I slap you again!”

Luke’s lips spread in a predatory smile, then he very deliberately slid his eyes down Penny’s body. She fumed with indignation, then with embarrassment as she remembered what he’d said in the kitchen. Slapping him was a turn-on.

“Get out,” she said again.

Luke’s smile turned smug. “Goodnight, Miss Royale. Don’t forget to call me when you’re done with Selina.”

And he was gone.

Penny slammed the door shut and winced as she heard the windows rattle in protest. Why did he have to be so infuriatingly handsome? He had absolutely no physical flaws that she could exploit as turn-offs.

“Rude, arrogant, snide, malicious—”

What was he playing at tonight? Pin the tail on the gullible idiot? Or Penny *piñata*, perhaps? Batter her defences enough and see what goodies fall out. Like her breasts. Not that they’d actually fallen out. Not quite. But she was sure they would have had she allowed Luke to continue whatever little game he’d been playing.

She scowled as she collapsed onto her couch, trying again to understand her feelings for the man. She’d made out with guys before, she’d kissed and touched and aroused. But never with a man of Luke’s calibre. And she’d certainly never felt such an overwhelming *need* before. A need to—what? Make love? Have sex? Fuck?

She cringed at the word, but yes, that was exactly what he made her feel, made her want, made her crave. And that was exactly the one thing she’d said she’d never give him.

What with wanting to keep her dignity and all that.

Because she was doing such a bang-up job of it right now.

She glared at the voice recorder in her hand and sighed loudly, putting the little device down before the urge to fill it up with a stream of insults directed at Luke overtook her good sense.

She’d tried so hard over the past eighteen months to pull her life together and make it

something of her own. She'd be damned if she let anyone take away her hard-earned freedom and independence. Not Luke Hardcastle, and certainly not Selina Royale.

Penny sighed again as she stepped down from her soapbox and conceded the truth. She was trapped, and she knew it. She just prayed that Selina didn't find out what she was up to because then she really would be in danger of losing everything. At least there was a chance, a slim chance to be sure, but a chance nonetheless, that Luke was bluffing. Selina, on the other hand, wouldn't hesitate to crush her like a bug and dance on her remains.

Penny hauled herself to her feet and meandered through her usual nighttime routine. Have shower, wash hair, get dressed for bed. Clothes in the washing machine ready for the morning, check the locks, finish tidying the kitchen, lean against the bench where Luke had kissed her and mentally slap herself for being so weak and stupid—

But she had to admit, the man certainly knew how to kiss.

“Of course he does, you twit. He changes girlfriends like he changes underwear,” she said aloud as she started plucking the dead leaves from the parsley plant she had growing in the kitchen. “Big, stupid, sexy, womanizing—”

Not that Penny could blame those women for being suckered in. Luke's beautiful golden eyes alone would have most women falling at his feet. Combine that with a voice that could melt steel and a body that felt like it was carved in stone and the man made quite an impressive package. He was charming, brilliant, and of course, wealthy. Not that Penny cared about money the way some women did. She knew firsthand you couldn't buy happiness, no matter how much money you had.

She was content just making enough to get by.

After double checking the locks, Penny took herself off to bed. She snuggled under the

blanket and closed her eyes, hoping a good night's sleep would help eradicate this evening's disasters from her memory, but every time she closed her eyes, images of Luke kissing her and touching her crashed into her mind's eye like morning traffic on the Gateway Motorway.

Her whole body tingled with sense memory as she remembered how his warm hands had felt sliding across her bare flesh. How his soft lips had felt pressed against her neck, how they'd made her squirm with wanting as he'd travelled across her collarbone and lower still, down into the V of her blouse, to the swell of her breasts—

Until she'd made him stop.

Luke Hardcastle up close and personal was vastly different from Luke Hardcastle fantasy man. From afar he'd been her knight in shining armour. In her face his armour was just as tarnished as everybody else's. Yet still she craved him, him and his angry, sexy, passionate heat.

For as long as she could remember Luke had had this bizarre effect on her. Just a glimpse of him coming and going from Hardcastle Tower used to send her heart rate into the stratosphere. Now that she'd had a taste of him, those cravings were only going to get worse.

She rolled over again and sighed loudly. Why did he have to tell her she was attractive? Why did he have to give her that faint glimmer of hope that she could mean more to him than a means to an end?

No. She had to hold on to the facts, to what she knew to be true. Luke was using her. Luke was not above lying and cheating and telling her whatever she wanted to hear to make *his* life easier. Penny grimaced as she wondered how he'd react to the knowledge that she would have helped him knock Selina off her perch—if he'd bothered to ask her first—simply because she'd dreamed of marrying him when she was a teenager.

Right. Like he needed any more ammunition against her.

Chapter Seven

Penny sat at the reserved table at the back of Jorge's Café and waited nervously for Selina. She fiddled with the voice recorder under the table, made sure the settings were right, and slipped it inside her coat pocket. She sipped on her drink and ignored the urge to chew her fingernails off.

Then she saw her.

Selina Royale. Entrepreneur. Aunt. Bitch.

Selina stood at the entrance of the café and scanned the room with her best superior look. She spotted Penny at her usual table and smiled as warmly as she was able to, which to Penny's mind looked something like a jackal sizing up its prey. She raised a hand in a halfhearted wave at her aunt and tried to smile.

"Hello, Penelope." Selina's condescending tone grated on Penny's nerves.

"Hello, Aunt Selina," Penny said, trying to sound as calm as possible even with her insides in knots.

Selina's beady eyes raked over Penny's attire. "You're looking...well," she said as she sat down and snapped her fingers at the waitress.

A petite sour-faced blonde dressed from head to toe in tight black clothing and a long black apron with *Jorge's Café* stamped on the front of it hurried over to their table. "I'll have the usual," Selina said as she declined a menu. "Penelope?" Penny quickly looked down the list and settled on grilled fish and salad. "Good for you, dear, and about time, too. I always said you were too fat."

Penny swallowed down an acidic retort and replied instead, “Yes, thank you, Aunt Selina,” knowing the submissive statement would please her aunt, and hating herself for saying it. But it worked. Selina smiled with satisfaction, obviously glad that her niece still knew her place in the world: under Selina’s heel.

“So, how’s business?” Selina asked, from habit more than actual interest Penny was sure.

“Fine. Better than fine, actually. It’s great.”

“Really?” Selina sniffed. “How much do you need?”

Penny frowned. “I beg your pardon?”

“Money, Penelope, how much money do you need?”

“I don’t need any money, Selina,” said Penny defensively. “I told you I’m doing great.”

“Then why were you meeting with Luke Hardcastle? And don’t try to tell me again that he’s your new landlord. I know for a fact that is a lie.”

“You know no such thing!” Penny whispered. “Luke is my new landlord, although why he would want to own buildings as old as that I’m sure I don’t know, and the reason I was meeting with him was to negotiate new leases on behalf of the other tenants.”

Selina looked shocked by Penny’s assertiveness. She looked even more shocked when Penny rose from her chair and picked up her handbag. She threw a hundred-dollar note down on the table and made sure that Selina could see the rest of Luke’s flash cash in her purse.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” she muttered to herself. “All I wanted to do was say hello, maybe mend some bridges, but you’re never going to forgive me. You’re never going to give me a second chance. Lunch is on me, Aunt Selina. Enjoy.” Penny began to walk away.

“Penelope, wait,” Selina called. Penny stopped and waited. “Please, stay for lunch.”

Penny turned slowly and saw Selina gesturing to the empty chair. She took a moment to

pretend to think about it and then she sat down again.

“Well, it would seem you’ve found a voice in the past eighteen months, but just remember who you’re talking to now, my girl. I won’t stand for any more insubordination on your part.”

“Yes, Aunt Selina,” Penny said.

“I know Hardcastle is your new landlord,” Selina said. “I simply assumed your business was failing and I needed to be certain you weren’t trying to boost your capital by selling off my trade secrets. But you’re right. Why would he want that particular piece of real estate? What makes it special?”

“I don’t know,” Penny lied.

“But I’ll bet you could find out,” Selina said. “I find it extremely hard to believe that a man as importantly wealthy as Hardcastle would stoop so low as to discuss lease terms with the likes of you. He has lawyers to do that for him. No, I think he’s trying to seduce you.”

Penny laughed out loud even as the memory of the previous night flooded through her brain, and squeezed her thighs together to quash her body’s traitorous reactions.

“What on Earth for? Luke only dates models, Selina. Somehow I don’t think I qualify.”

“Good point. You are far below his normally high standards. I mean, look at you, Penelope, really. What is with that skirt? Can’t you do something better with your hair?”

“Like what?” Penny asked tightly.

“Like run a brush through it for starters, and the scarf?” she tsked, “Honestly, I think I almost prefer those juvenile ponytails you used to wear. And another thing...”

Penny subconsciously fiddled with the red scarf she had used as a headband and clenched her jaw as she realised how quickly her aunt’s criticisms had her fretting again that she didn’t measure up.

I am Penny Royale, proprietor of Royale Teas and Small Business Woman of the Year, Penny chanted over and over in her head in a valiant attempt to stem the tide of insults she was being forced to endure, and would be forced to endure again when she was debriefed by Luke.

“...still, since he has recently broken up with his latest fling, oh, what was her name? Crystal, Christmas...? Oh, I can’t keep track of them all. That’s why I have assistants. Anyway, he’s probably only after a casual rebound romp. Why not let it be with you?”

Penny stared at her aunt, horrified. “Are you out of your mind? Why on Earth would I do such a thing?”

“To learn his secrets, of course.”

“What secrets? Besides, he would never date me.”

“Who said anything about dating? You’d be surprised what a man will tell a woman in bed. Much more than he would ever tell her over dinner. And you’d also be proving yourself to me, mending some of those bridges you were talking about.”

“You want me to sleep with him so I can spy on him?” she asked with the appropriate amount of incredulity.

“Keep your voice down,” demanded Selina in a harsh whisper.

“But why? You’re not even in the same industry. Luke builds skyscrapers and luxury apartment buildings, and you buy out failing companies and sell them off as scrap. Why do you want me to spy on him?”

“That, my girl, is none of your concern, and Hardcastle is in the same business as me. The business of making money. Now, I will give you twenty-four hours to decide. Do you wish to be welcomed back into our little family, or would you prefer your recent award to be all for nothing and watch your pathetic little shop go under in less than a month?”

Penny's stomach fell to her feet. "What are you talking about?" she asked as calmly as possible.

"It's quite simple, really, Penelope. You will spy on Luke Hardcastle and pass along information to me that I might find useful. Financial information, to be exact. In exchange for proving your loyalty to me, I will release your accounts. Your money will be yours to do with as you wish. But if you don't comply, it's bye-bye bookshop."

Penny thought she going to throw up. This couldn't be happening, could it? Selina stood up and tossed her napkin on her plate.

"Twenty-four hours, Penelope. I'll expect your answer by lunch tomorrow."

Penny watched Selina saunter away with a self-satisfied smile on her pinched face. Penny rose to her feet and began to leave too when she was accosted by the sour faced waitress.

"Your change, miss."

Penny looked down at the two dollars and ten cents in the girl's hand and glared at her. That was a hundred dollars well wasted.

"Keep it," she said quietly, then left to seek the solace of a hot cup of tea and the smell of old books.

* * * *

Penny twirled the small recording device in her hand and contemplated erasing it. The conversation it held inside its guts was humiliating, but interesting.

What had Luke done to deserve Selina's wrath?

True, he had verbally obliterated her in front of a room full of her lackeys and Selina had destroyed people for less. But surely she would have rained down her vengeance by now? Or maybe she'd been biding her time just like Luke had. Maybe Luke's plans for revenge against

Selina had given her the opportunity she needed against him, too.

“What’s that?” Karen’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Oh, nothing,” Penny said as she slipped the device inside her pocket. “Let’s close up, eh?”

An hour later Penny was in the lobby of Hardcastle Tower and headed for the elevator, head down, thoughts distracted. The doors pinged open and Penny stepped inside and bumped straight into the person that was exiting.

“Oh, I’m so...oh, it’s you,” Penny said, her apology replaced with contempt as she saw who she’d bumped in to. Luke raised one black eyebrow and smirked at her derisive tone.

“I was beginning to think you’d forgotten,” he admonished.

“Oh, you mean like you seem to have forgotten I have a business to run?”

Luke stepped from the elevator, forcing Penny to follow him.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“But I thought you wanted to—”

“Not here, Miss Royale,” Luke said as he opened the lobby door and led her outside. Penny walked in silence beside Luke for about a minute and a half before her patience wore thin.

“Where are we going?”

“I told you. Home.”

“Won’t we need your car if you’re taking me home?”

“My home,” Luke said.

Penny blanched. “Oh. That would be where, *exactly*?”

“My penthouse in South Bank,” Luke said. “Just a short ferry trip to the other side of the river, a quick walk through the parklands, up the street, and we’re home.”

Penny quickly glanced at Luke, then smirked as she looked away again, wondering if he'd noticed his *faux pas*, too.

"Ah, when I said *we're* home, I didn't mean to imply, you know, *our* home," Luke said awkwardly.

He'd noticed.

"Of course you didn't. No one would ever believe that you and I...I mean, I'm not exactly your type, am I?"

Luke cleared his throat and avoided answering the question, which in Penny's mind was a confirmation of her fears. Luke would never choose a woman like Penny, not when every young, beautiful and pencil-thin model out there was throwing herself at his feet.

Luke paid for Penny's ferry ticket, then sat down to await the boat. Penny leaned against the North Quay railing and watched the setting sun reflect on the river while she waited. Luke studied her appreciatively. She was wearing a skirt today, a fifties-style flare job with navy and red stripes and practical pockets, and she'd matched it with a simple pale pink blouse that accentuated her large breasts, but hid her other luscious curves.

He suppressed a groan of disappointment as Penny pulled on her coat and covered up those wonderful breasts, but consoled himself as his eyes travelled lower and settled on her long, shapely legs. Legs that he longed to feel wrapping around him and—

"Evening, Mr. Hardcastle." Luke's attention was pulled from Penny and refocused on the man talking to him.

"Chris Marks, what are you doing here?" Luke said as he shook the man's hand. "The City Cats aren't exactly your style."

"Yeah, well, support public transport and all that."

“Porsche on the blink again, eh?”

Chris grimaced ruefully. “I wish, mate. Lost it in the bloody divorce, didn’t I. Still, it could have been worse.”

“How so?”

“I could still be married to the witch.”

Luke laughed.

“What are you doing tonight?” Chris continued. “Want to join me for a few at the pub?”

“No, thanks, mate. I’m previously engaged.”

“Oh well, never mind. Maybe I can get that leggy brunette to join me instead.” Luke followed Chris’s gaze back to Penny. “I like the chubby ones. Lower self-esteem. They offer less resistance.”

Luke’s jaw clenched painfully as Chris’s insult kicked him in the gut. Or was that possessiveness that had his insides in knots? Luke didn’t like that Chris was even looking at Penny, let alone thinking about getting her drunk and naked.

She was his woman.

He owned her.

He alone was allowed to ogle her and touch her and kiss her.

“She’s not for you, Chris. Leave her alone,” he gritted out.

Chris narrowed his gaze on Luke. “Well, she’s not exactly your type, mate.”

“I don’t like repeating myself.”

“What do you say we let the lady decide?” said Chris as he started walking over to Penny.

Luke wasn’t fast enough to stop him. He saw Chris lean on the railing beside Penny, smile, and lean down to whisper in her ear. Then he saw his hand slide into the small of her back.

Penny stiffened at the contact of a strange man's hand but before Luke could step forward to play the hero, Chris's charming smile disappeared and his hand left Penny's body.

"I think I'll take the bus," Luke heard him say as he watched Chris retreat.

"Are you coming?" Luke looked back to find Penny by his side. "The ferry is here."

Chapter Eight

Luke stood close beside Penny on the deck of the ferry, close enough to feel her body heat in the cool evening air. Close enough, he noticed, to raise a few eyebrows from their fellow travellers. Not that he cared. Not when every fibre of his being screamed at him to wrap his arms around her and protect her from all other men. To mark her as his.

“I’m sorry if that jerk frightened you before,” said Luke as they started up the path from the South Bank Quay to the parklands.

He loved South Bank at night, especially Friday night. People were constantly coming and going to the restaurants and kiosks, swarming about the canvas tents of the open-air markets that sold everything from children’s toys to fine millinery. There were always people jogging and cycling along the pathways or strolling along under the massive Grand Arbour, the funky steel construction that snaked its way across the parklands for a full kilometre. At this time of year it was covered from top to bottom in hot pink bougainvillea. With the sun setting over the city and casting an orange glow over everything, it was very romantic.

Penny looked even more beautiful in this light, like she was glowing.

Luke clenched his jaw. He wasn’t supposed to be having these kind of thoughts about Penny Royale. He was supposed to hate her. He was supposed to want her to suffer for helping Selina Royale hurt his little sister. But all he’d been able to think about for the whole week was holding Penny in his arms, kissing her full lips, savouring each and every luscious curve of her body as he made love to her over and over again.

“He’s not the first bloke to feel me up, Luke,” Penny said as she shot him an accusing glare, “I wasn’t frightened so much as I was annoyed.”

“Right,” Luke said. “Well, what did you say to him to make him back off so fast? I don’t think I’ve ever seen Chris give up that quickly.”

Penny stopped walking. “You *know* that idiot? What did you do, Luke, send your friend over to give me a scare so you’d look like a gentleman by comparison?”

Luke stopped too. “I didn’t need to send him over,” he shot back. “Chris zeroed in on you as soon as he saw you. And he’s not my friend. I went to university with him. He’s always been a jerk where women are concerned. My only worry was that you’d slap him into next week and get charged with assault.”

Penny smiled tightly. “Thanks for the concern, but I only slap men who are blackmailing me.”

Luke clenched his jaw again and picked up his pace, making Penny almost have to run to keep up with his very long strides.

He opened the door to his apartment and ushered Penny inside and smiled to see she was suitably impressed. He watched her as she stood in the middle of the apartment looking lost in the huge open space and then followed her to the large floor to ceiling windows that looked out over the city.

“What do you think?” he asked as he stood behind her.

“Did you build it?”

“Well, my company did.” He chuckled. “It’s been a while since I’ve built anything.”

“It’s an impressive piece of architecture, Luke,” she said. “But why don’t we get down to why I’m here? I thought you wanted to listen to this.”

Penny pulled the recording device out of her pocket. Luke took it from her and turned it over in his hand as he eyed Penny curiously.

“So, you actually went through with it. I’m impressed. But then, you are a Royale.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Penny snapped.

Luke watched her cheeks bloom with colour as her anger manifested. He enjoyed antagonising her and for all the wrong reasons.

“Just that it didn’t take much to get you to turn on your own family.”

“I’ve already told you, Selina isn’t family. And it’s not like you gave me much of a choice, is it?”

“Then I’ll give you one now,” Luke said as he picked up the phone. Penny looked cautious. “Thai or pizza?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t you ever cook?”

“Not lately,” he admitted. “I’m in the mood for pizza. What toppings do you like?”

“You decide. I’m not very hungry,” she said as she turned away again to stare at the view.

Luke watched Penny as he ordered the pizza. She kept her back to him the whole time. She was trying to keep distance between them. Not a bad idea, but it was almost like she was afraid of him. Luke frowned at that thought as he hung up the phone.

“The pizza will be here in about half an hour. I’m going to take a quick shower and get changed. Help yourself to the fridge, have a drink, whatever you like. Just don’t leave, okay?”

Penny nodded without turning around.

Luke let the hot water glide over him and tried to wash away his regret and disgust. This wasn’t him. Blackmail was so far beneath him he couldn’t believe he’d even thought of it, but then, there was nothing he wouldn’t do for Cassie.

If only Penny wasn't so—distracting. If only she still dressed the way she did at Royale Industries. How those dull grey suits and high-necked blouses, severe makeup and school ma'am bun had made him shudder, had made him wonder where that pretty girl had gone. But then he'd see her again, a glimpse of her sunny smile, or a flash of a shapely leg, or he'd see her hair flow down her back when she freed it from captivity, or he'd see her bite her lip.

He loved watching her bite her lip.

Without warning Luke's imagination overflowed with lustful yearning. His cock hardened so fast it made his head spin. He wanted Penny in his bed and it was becoming harder to convince himself she was his enemy. He turned off the hot water and gritted his teeth against the cold.

Focus, Luke. Stay on course.

* * * *

Penny wandered around the apartment while she waited, sticking her head in and out of doorways. She discovered bedrooms, Luke's office, and even a home theatre, where an extensive collection of Jessica Rabbit posters held centre stage.

Penny frowned. The curvaceous pouting cartoon character was the complete opposite of the skinny flat-chested models whom Luke dated in real life.

She strolled back to the main area of the apartment and sat down on the large black leather couch, breathing deeply as she tried to settle her stomach, sick with the knowledge of what was coming.

She was chewing on her bottom lip, lost in thought, when Luke waltzed into the room with his T-shirt slung over his shoulder and his hair damp and messy from the shower. Penny's mouth fell open, her eyes widened and all thought flew out the window. Luke was still fastening the front of his jeans as he walked into the room, his bare feet shuffling across the polished wooden

floorboards.

The entirety of Luke's chest was impressive, broad and bronzed and subtly defined, his pecs covered in a fine mat of black hairs that trailed down the middle of his stomach and vanished beneath the waistband of his jeans. His arms were strong, the muscles lean and sculptured, and when not hidden by a shirt and tie, his neck was long and powerful and purely male.

Luke walked to the fridge and again she was riveted by his gait. With long, powerful strides he crossed the room, denim pulling taut around his muscular thighs and perfect ass with every single step.

He fetched a beer and offered one to Penny. She nodded dumbly, his body commandeering her brain—until she glimpsed his grin. Penny blushed and snapped her attention back to the window. Luke put the beers on the coffee table just as the intercom buzzed.

“That’ll be the pizza,” he said, and Penny swallowed down a whimper of disappointment and gnawed at her lip again as Luke pulled his T-shirt over his head and hid his beautiful body from view.

Luke set the pizza box down on the coffee table and quickly opened it. He devoured two slices before Penny had even eaten half of one. She watched him with repulsed fascination. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and took a swig of beer.

“Sorry my for manners, but I skipped lunch. I’m famished.”

“Oh,” Penny said weakly. She quickly glanced at the recording device sitting beside the pizza box. Luke noticed.

“You really don’t want to be here, do you?” he said, his wide mouth turning up in a wicked grin. “I wonder what’s on that unit that you don’t want to hear twice?”

Penny could feel her eyes filling with tears but she fought to keep them in check. “Can we

please just get this over with so I can go home?”

Luke’s grin died as he noticed the look of fear in her eyes. He nodded his head and wiped his hands on his jeans. “All right, if that’s what you want.”

He picked up the recording device and set it to play back Penny’s lunchtime conversation with Selina. He could hardly believe what he was hearing—was appalled, in fact, that Selina would speak to Penny that way. He’d known the older woman looked down on her niece but he never imagined she’d suffered any real abuse. Obviously he was wrong. Very wrong.

By the end of the recording Penny was standing by the window again with her back to Luke, discreetly wiping away her tears. He rose and stared at her back. He wanted to go to her, to hold her, comfort her, and tell her he was sorry for making her go through that horrid experience. Twice.

Damn her vulnerability. Damn his protective instincts that made him feel like the lowest of the low for doing this to her.

But the fact of the matter was he needed her to do it again, and again, and again until Selina gave up her secrets and told the truth about the Cassidy Holdings deal. He couldn’t afford to back down. He couldn’t afford compassion. He tried a different tack.

“It’s not a bad idea, you know,” he said as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Do you mean the part where Selina is blackmailing me to spy on you or the part where she tells me to sleep with you? Because I thought they were both really bad ideas.”

“We could make this work to our advantage, Penny.”

“*Our* advantage? Since when did we become partners in crime?”

“Since I found out she’s withholding all your money,” said Luke calmly. “Not that I’m really sure what that means,” he added, his brow scrunched.

“She means my trust fund. She means all the money I ever earned working at Royale Industries. All the money she never allowed me a cent of.”

Luke’s frown deepened. “How did you live, buy food, clothes...?”

Penny shrugged. “Selina paid for everything. It was just another way for her to control me.”

Like I am, Luke added mentally, his conscience niggling at him again. He pushed the errant thought from his mind, put his hands on her shoulders, and turned her to face him, his gut clenching with self-reproach as he stared at her tearstained face. He had done this to her. He had subjected her to her aunt’s own personal brand of torture twice in one day.

Damn her. He needed to focus. He stroked his finger under her eyes to wipe away her straggling tears and gently stroked her cheek.

“Selina tossing her hat in the ring has changed the game. You need my help now just as much as I need yours, and I think I know how we can help each other.”

“How?” Penny’s eyes narrowed at Luke’s velvety tone of voice. He smiled devilishly and held her face in both hands as he stared into her eyes with those molten golden orbs.

“Do as Selina says, Penny. Be my mistress.”

Her tears turned to ice and she shoved Luke and his tender gestures away from her.

“Would you please pick a personality and stick with it? I swear, Luke, I never know if I coming or going with you!”

“What did I do?” he asked, his face bathed in genuine confusion.

“One moment you’re nice to me, the next you’re not, one night you’re blackmailing me, the next you’re kissing me. You’re sarcastic and mean to me when you want me to do your dirty work and you’re tender and caring when you want me to do Selina’s dirty work. And if you think sleeping with you is going to happen *any time* soon then I have—”

Penny's tirade was stolen by Luke's smiling mouth as his lips slashed down over hers and absorbed her passion. Without thinking she returned his kiss with all the force of her argument. Tongues lashed in a war of wills as Luke lifted Penny off the floor and wedged her between himself and the glass wall behind her. His hands groped and caressed her ass and thighs, wrapped her legs around him, and pulled her hips into him.

Her mind was in a spin. She was lost in Luke's kiss. Why did his lips have to be so soft? Why did his body have to be so hard, feel so good, so right thrust between her legs with his thick erection grinding down her resistance?

But it wasn't right, none of this was. Penny shook her head and broke the intoxicating kiss.

"No, I won't do this," she whispered urgently. "I can't do this."

Luke either didn't hear her or didn't care to. He held her firmly, not letting go. "Be my mistress, Penny," he murmured as he buried his face against her neck and licked her hammering pulse. "Let me make love to you."

Penny clung to Luke's shoulders and closed her eyes. Making love sounded so nice the way he said it—made her want to give in to him, made her want to know how it would feel to have this magnificent man pleasure her and love her.

But then dismay settled low in her belly as she realised Luke would never love her; he would never even like her. Why should she give herself to a man who would never give himself to her? By making Penny do his dirty work, he was already exercising too much control over her. She wouldn't let him take what little independence she had left.

"No."

Luke pulled back and took a moment to steady himself. He looked at Penny and saw the conflict in her eyes. She wanted him. He knew it. Hell, he'd known it from the moment he saw

her blush the other morning in her café, and he knew it now as he studied her face. But the look of distress settling across her features made him concede to her wishes. Again he hid his frustration at her resistance.

“Why are you afraid of me?” he asked softly as he put her down.

“I’m not afraid of you!”

“You’re afraid of something,” he pressed.

“If I’m afraid of anything, Mr Hardcastle, it is of becoming someone’s dirty little secret, or worse, a not-so-secret scandal. If I allow myself to be your mistress I run the risk of being first one, then the other.”

Luke frowned as he studied Penny’s face. Where did she get these notions? Was this Selina’s influence? After listening to the recording he could well believe it was. Luke found it very plausible that Selina would fill Penny’s head with fears and doubts about the world, about men. It would make her so much easier to control, and it would seem Selina was all about the control.

“I’ve never kept secrets, Penny, dirty, little or otherwise, and I have no intention of starting now. And as for scandals, what is so scandalous about a man and a woman dating?”

“In this city, when the man is a Hardcastle and the woman is a Royale, scandal is bound to follow. There is too much bad blood between our families for it not to.”

“The only bad blood is between me and Selina.”

“And me. You still blame me too, Luke. How are you supposed to convince people that you’re in love with me when you don’t even like me? Even then you’d need a miracle to—”

“To what, Penny?” Luke watched her as she shifted her feet anxiously.

“I’m not exactly your type, Luke,” said Penny as she looked away. She was embarrassed.

“What do you mean?”

“You only date models,” she said, exasperated. “And Selina’s right. I hardly scrub up to the task.”

Luke laughed out loud, until he saw the sheen of tears in her devastated eyes. He took her face in both hands and kissed her again, just long enough to throw her off kilter.

“Honey, you are the sexiest woman I have ever known, and the fact that you don’t know that makes you even more so. Why do you think I want you in my bed?”

Penny looked at Luke as though he’d lost the plot. “Because you’re horny and I’m convenient,” she said, her temper obviously winning out over her hurt.

Luke chuckled. “There is nothing convenient about you, Penny. Trust me.”

Moving his office from one side of Hardcastle Tower to the other several years ago, so he could avoid the temptation of watching her come and go from Royale Industries, had been far from convenient.

Missing lunch today because he would rather lie and say he wasn’t hungry than stand up in front of his board members with a raging hard-on induced by the smell of Penny’s perfume on his jacket, was extremely inconvenient. But he could see she wasn’t convinced.

“For the record, I do like you. A lot more than I ever thought I could, and definitely more than I should,” he said, his voice growing husky and low. He swept Penny up in his arms. “Stay with me tonight.”

“Put me down.”

“Not until you agree to stay with me.”

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Fine. Stay and *talk* with me then.”

“I can’t. I’m opening the shop tomorrow.”

“Get someone else to do it.”

“No. Put me down.”

“No. Kiss me.”

“You said talk,” she gasped, and turned her head away just as Luke’s lips crashed against her cheek.

“Does that mean you’re staying?” He chuckled softly against her ear.

“You’re incorrigible,” Penny said, a laugh bubbling in her voice.

Luke pulled back and smiled. “And you’re beautiful.”

Penny’s face darkened again. “Stop saying that.”

Luke frowned and put her back on her feet. He leaned back against the glass wall, folded his arms across his chest, and watched as she moved back to the couch, sat down and smoothed her skirt out over her lap and tugged at her blouse and fiddled with her hair.

“No one’s ever told you that before, have they?”

“Lots of times, but they didn’t mean it either.”

Luke’s frown deepened. Conversations with Penny made his head hurt. Her words constantly contradicted what he read in her body language, she rarely smiled and more often than not Luke found himself wanting to forget about getting his revenge—against this Royale, anyway.

But damn if those very complaints didn’t make her more intriguing.

He slumped down beside her, stretched his arm along the back of the couch and toyed with her silky hair, letting the chestnut strands sift through his fingers. He repressed a sigh when she rejected his advances yet again and shied away, but he refused to move his arm. He had *some* pride.

“What do you mean?” he said. “Who didn’t mean it?”

“The men who thought to climb the corporate ladder by wooing me. They all said I was beautiful, they all said I was special, but they all lied. As soon as they discovered the way to the top at Royale Industries was to sleep with Selina instead of her niece, they didn’t think twice about giving me the flick.”

“Did Selina know?” Luke asked through gritted teeth, images of Penny being used and discarded by Selina’s sycophants making him sick to his stomach.

“If she did, she didn’t care.”

Luke glared at nothing in particular. In his mind Selina was racking up a laundry list of crimes that had nothing to do with Cassidy Holdings and everything to do with hurting Penny. He wasn’t sure why he felt so protective of her but he knew he wanted to hurt Selina for hurting her, and he was no longer thinking of ways to hurt her himself. In fact, his thoughts were leading him down a very different path.

He turned to her and suddenly grinned. “Well, Penny Royale, I suggest we make a new deal. You were right about me. I am a good man, and I really don’t know how to blackmail people—”

Luke was cut off by the phone ringing. The answering machine picked up and his sister’s bubbly voice burst into the room.

“Luke, pick up the phone. I know you’re home, you slacker, now pick up. Okay fine, ignore your one and only sister. Please, continue having sex with whatever swizzle-stick bobble-head Euro-trash you’re—” Luke scrambled over the back of the couch and snatched up the phone from the kitchen bench.

“Now is *not* a good time, Cas.”

“I didn’t offend your date, did I?” she asked with glee.

“No, because I’m not on a date.”

“Yeah right, Mr. Model-of-the-month. Who is it this time?”

“It’s Penny Royale.”

“Oh, so, the plan is in full swing, then? I wasn’t sure you’d actually go through with it.”

“Can we talk about this tomorrow, please?”

“So you haven’t forgotten then?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten. I’ll pick you up at eight-thirty. Now go to bed, Cas.”

“Yes, mum. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Cassie.” Luke hung up the phone, grabbed two more beers from the fridge and moved back to the couch. “Now, where were we?”

“You suck at blackmail,” Penny reminded him.

Luke laughed. “Yes, I do. And as I said before, by making demands of her own Selina has changed things, for the better I might add.”

“How is me being blackmailed by two people instead of one person better?”

“Because I’m not blackmailing you anymore. I don’t need to, not if you agree to my new deal.”

“And if I don’t agree to the new deal?”

“Then I guess we’ll be sticking with the blackmail option.”

“You know, for a moment there, I actually wanted to kiss you.”

Luke smiled seductively. He let his eyes dip to her mouth and watched her pink tongue moisten her lips.

“But now I just want to slap you again.”

Luke shrugged a broad shoulder. “Kissing, slapping. Where you’re concerned, Penny, both are a turn on. Now do you want to hear the deal or not?”

Penny rolled her eyes in frustration at his cheeky grin but nodded her head.

“If we play the game right, we can both get what we want. If Selina wants inside intel about my finances, then we’ll give it to her.”

“Not to pick holes in the plan, Luke, but wouldn’t that be counterproductive?”

“Not if the information she receives is false.”

Penny took a sip of beer as Luke’s words sank in. They were going to trick Selina. “So I pretend to mend bridges by giving Selina dodgy information about you, and she gives me my money.”

“While you’re mending those proverbial bridges you can get me the evidence I need against Selina.”

“It still sounds like I’m the one doing all the work, taking all the risks. If Selina thinks I’m screwing her over, even for a moment, she’ll ruin me. I can’t afford to start all over again. Again.”

“You won’t have to. Selina can’t take your shop because I own it. If she tries to intimidate your suppliers, I’ll be there to reassure them, and if she tries to take your house, she’ll find that you own it, lock, stock, and barrel. In short, I’ll protect you, Penny.” He paused and stroked her cheek, the warmth of his hand soothing against her skin. “I won’t let Selina hurt you again.”

The urge to throw herself at Luke was overwhelming. After everything he’d put her through this week, such generosity was completely unexpected, especially since Penny knew he wouldn’t have forgotten about her part in the Cassidy Holdings deal. But even as her body cried out for her to lean into him, to taste his mouth once more, to slide her hands under his T-shirt and knead his hot, hard flesh, her stubborn pride reminded her of the promise she’d made and she shrank from his intimate touch.

Dignity, first and foremost.

Well, at least on the outside.

“But why would you do that for me?”

“Because even if you don’t want to be my mistress, I would hope we can be friends. Do we have a deal?” Luke asked. He held out his hand to shake Penny’s. She hesitated to take it.

“But what about our *affair*? If I start giving Selina detailed information she’ll expect us to be fooling around, and if she doesn’t see any evidence of that, she’ll get suspicious.”

Luke thought for a moment and scratched his chin. “You’re sure you won’t sleep with me?” he asked with his best come-hither smile, golden eyes smouldering with the promise of wicked delights.

Penny’s pulse beat so fast she thought she’d have a heart attack. She quickly looked away and shook her head before she threw her dignity out the window, caved in and leapt on him.

“I’m sure,” she said, hoping she sounded sure.

Luke sighed dramatically, then drummed his fingers on the arm of the couch. His brow creased as he thought for a moment, and he picked up the voice recorder. Penny filled with dread. She didn’t want to hear Selina’s voice again today. Her nerves were raw enough.

Luke skimmed through the conversation until he found what he was after.

“I find it extremely hard to believe that a man as importantly wealthy as Hardcastle would stoop so low as to discuss lease terms with the likes of you. He has lawyers to—”

He stopped the recorder and grinned.

“Would Selina believe I was mentoring you?”

Penny chewed her lip as she considered the idea. “I don’t know,” she said thoughtfully. “Maybe. I mean, it’s more plausible than her thinking I was selling you her ‘trade secrets,’ isn’t

it?”

Luke chuckled. “But do you think she’ll believe it?” he asked again.

“I’ll make her believe it,” Penny said.

“So, do we have a deal, Miss Royale?”

Penny shook Luke’s hand. “We have a deal, Mr. Hardcastle.”

Chapter Nine

The next morning, Luke drove Penny to Royale Teas. The previous night had been a revealing experience. They'd stayed up until three in the morning, just *talking*. Luke had never done that with a woman before. He was actually quite surprised to find it wasn't nearly as pointless as it sounded.

Usually Luke's brief relationships consisted of little more than hot sex in classic romantic locations like Milan, Paris, and Hong Kong, with gorgeous young models with strange names. Vanity, Mercedes, Alura. Talking was not required.

But Luke found he *wanted* to talk to Penny. He wanted to know everything about her, and he'd never wanted that with a woman before either. He rationalised his behaviour by telling himself that if he could just find that one little flaw that would drive him crazy, he could cease and desist his rekindled infatuation before it took over his life again.

He'd found nothing.

It was as Luke feared. Penny Royale was a caring, compassionate, gentle woman. When her anger wasn't being provoked, she was witty and kind, passionate about her work and her friends, and as the night progressed she'd learned to relax in his presence and even began teasing Luke, and took his teasing with grace.

He smiled as they drove along Brisbane's streets at the thought that they would be spending a lot more time together.

Luke stopped the car in front of Penny's shop. He turned to look at her and smiled. She'd paired her stripy skirt with one of Cassie's T-shirts and had her hair pulled back in a simple yet

stylish ponytail. Even after only four and a half hours sleep, she still looked lovely to his eyes.

“Would you like to come up for a cup of coffee?” Penny asked.

Luke grinned wickedly as he fixed her in his sensual golden gaze. “You do know what that question is the universal code for, don’t you, Penny?”

“Don’t start that again.” She blushed at his teasing. “I’m offering coffee only, and maybe cake.”

“Mmm, coffee *and* dessert. Tempting,” Luke purred as he let his eyes leisurely and deliberately scan Penny’s body, making her blush an even darker pink. “But I’ll have to take a rain check. I have to pick up Cassie in half an hour. But I will call you tonight and you can tell me if Selina bought our cover story. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Penny, then paused before asking tentatively, “When will I see you again?”

Luke wanted to say, “Stuff the phone call. I’ll just come and see you tonight instead,” but he knew they would both benefit from some personal space.

“I thought you might like some time to yourself. I know I’ve run you ragged this week. Why don’t we say Monday?”

“Monday. Oh. Okay.”

Luke didn’t miss the disappointment in Penny’s voice and it wrenched at his vitals. Did she do it on purpose? Of course she didn’t. Penny had no idea of the strength of the pull she had on him, and at times he had trouble fathoming it too. He didn’t want to wait ’til Monday to see her again, either. In fact, the offer for coffee and cake had him fingering his mobile phone and contemplating calling Cassie to say he’d be running late.

He’d never ditched on his little sister for anyone, for any reason.

“You need to get out of the car now, Penny,” said Luke with a strangled groan. She shot him

a look that reeked of rejection. A look that he wanted to quash. "It's just that if you stay here any longer I'm going to have to kiss you again."

Rejection gone, annoyance back.

"But last night you said—"

"Just because you don't want me doesn't mean I'm going to stop wanting you," said Luke with a hint of annoyance in his own voice. Penny opened the door and climbed out of the car. She turned and was about to close the door when she bent down and stuck her head back inside. Luke met her proud gaze and pert pout with raised eyebrows.

"For the record, I never said I didn't want you," she said, then shut the door, smiling smugly at Luke's pained expression.

Little tease. He'd make her pay for that.

* * * *

"You're late! As usual."

Luke nodded his thanks to the orderly who'd waited with Cassie, then helped her out of the obligatory wheelchair she was occupying and put her in his car.

"You're looking good, Cas," he said as he revved the engine and drove out of the hospital grounds.

"So are you, lover boy." Cassie grinned.

Luke frowned. "I told you last night, I wasn't on a date. I was with Penny Royale."

"You mean the same Penny Royale that's been turning your head for, what is it now, ten years?"

Luke harrumphed.

"The same Penny Royale that you were, and I quote, 'possessive and enamoured of'? That

Penny Royale?”

“What the bloody hell are you talking about?”

Cassie pulled a newspaper page from her handbag and showed Luke. His jaw fell open and he suddenly swerved to the side of the road and stopped the car. He snatched the paper from Cassie’s hand and stared dumbfounded at the full-page article complete with photographs of him and Penny—in his penthouse window.

“Oh no.” Luke groaned. He scanned for the byline. “Chris Marks. I’ve always hated that bastard.”

“So...tell me all the gory details.”

Luke scowled at Cassie’s broad grin. “Yeah, that’ll happen.”

“Then tell me how this Chris Marks got a hold of such juicy gossip and turned it into a page three scandal.”

Luke sighed heavily and rubbed the back of his neck as if it would ease his agitation. “Penny and I took the ferry to South Bank last night and walked up to my apartment. Chris bumped into me while we were waiting. He tried to make a move on Penny. I told him to leave her alone but he tried anyway.”

“That could have caught his attention.”

“Possibly, but I think it was Penny’s rejection of him that really did it. Well, that and the fact that I bought her ticket, and took her hand to help her on to the ferry, then stood close enough to her to give the impression of my being...”

“Possessive and enamoured?”

“Yes,” he agreed ruefully.

Luke stared at the main photo that filled the top half of the page. It was taken when he had

Penny pinned against the wall of glass with her legs wrapped around him, kissing her wildly, groping her luscious ass, and reveling in the feel of her big breasts being smashed against his chest. Thankfully her clothing hid her body, and what Luke was doing to it, from the camera. The other smaller photograph was taken when Luke had scooped Penny up in his arms and convinced her to stay with him for the night.

He ran his thumb over the image. It looked so right to him, to be holding her like that. It had felt right too.

He began skimming the article. There was nothing too scandalous in it. But it would completely blow away their cover story. On the up side, it could get him closer to his new goal of having Penny as his mistress.

“I wonder if Penny’s seen it yet,” Cassie mused.

Luke folded up the page and handed it back to her. “She would have rung me in a panic by now if she had.”

“So what did she say to Marks to reinforce the idea that you two were a couple?”

“Nothing directly.” Luke grinned. “When he touched her she simply told him that if he didn’t remove his hand from her body that she would do it for him...and then she would shove it so far up his ass the coroner would find fingerprints on his brain.”

Cassie burst out laughing. “I knew I’d like her.”

* * * *

Penny flicked on the shop lights and sighed contentedly. Even with the lack of sleep, she’d never felt so at ease in her life. Last night with Luke had been wonderful. Therapeutic, even.

Shame nothing could ever come of it.

For hours Luke had asked question after question and she answered every one of them. No

matter how embarrassing or uncomfortable the answer, she'd told him the truth. She wanted him to know the real Penny. She wanted to show him she wasn't the corporate wind-up toy he'd met before.

"I thought you had me investigated," she'd complained when he'd asked her about her first kiss.

"Business background only, nothing personal," he'd replied before insisting with a grin that she was avoiding the question.

Penny told him everything he wanted to know. Her life with her parents when every day was a struggle to survive. Her life with Selina, cold, structured and lonely, and her new life, the life she was making for herself. Rife with indulgence and truth and happiness.

"Excluding this week, of course," Luke had said quietly.

He'd stroked her cheek then and pushed a stray lock of hair from her face, and Penny had thought he was going to kiss her again, had wanted him to, but he'd pulled away and looked at his watch and suggested they go to bed. She didn't wonder at her disappointment when he showed her to Cassie's room and said goodnight.

Of course that didn't stop her from behaving like a Puritan twit when she'd knocked on his bedroom door and found herself in his arms once more, being kissed like there was no tomorrow and manoeuvred towards his bed.

She'd only wanted something to wear to bed, shorts and a T-shirt, perhaps, but when he'd answered his door wearing nothing but a pair of black briefs and an expectant grin, she'd panicked. Her survival instinct had kicked in, fight or flight, and she'd chosen flight. She'd chosen dignity. Stupid, good-for-nothing dignity.

"I should go home," she'd stammered as she'd retreated out his door.

She'd heard Luke swear and follow her down the hall. "Penny, wait. I'm sorry, I didn't think. Please stay. I have some clothes you can wear. Please," he'd said as he caught her hand. "I misunderstood, that's all. I guess...I guess I was hoping you'd changed your mind."

"I haven't," she'd said quietly.

"And that's okay. I'll get you some clothes."

Luke had fetched some shorts and a T-shirt for Penny to wear, then said goodnight again.

Penny touched her lips as she remembered Luke's kisses. Her mouth—hell, her whole body responded so emphatically to him as soon as those strong masculine lips possessed hers, sucking every last ounce of common sense out of her brain and sending it packing along with her need for independence and what little self-respect she still possessed.

She'd almost caved in to temptation last night. She'd almost surrendered to the pleasure she just knew Luke would give her with those big, strong hands and hot, silky tongue. The strength of will she'd needed to pull away from his long, hard body was staggering. He frightened her, him and this strange hold he had on her. She still couldn't understand why he kept trying to seduce her, besides the obvious.

Luke was a virile man, and Penny was convenient.

By half past eight she was ready to open, and ready for some breakfast. She locked the shop door and wandered down to Gerard's Patisserie to buy some treats for her cake cabinet and for herself.

Gerard greeted her with a broad smile. "Good morning, Penny. How did you sleep?"

Odd question, Penny thought, but she smiled back and returned his greeting.

"Morning, Gerry. Fine, thanks. And you?"

"Fine, fine. Just the sweet rolls today? Are you sure you don't want something a little more

substantial? A busy young woman like yourself needs to keep up her stamina, you know.”

Penny laughed. “I’ll be fine, thank you.”

She stopped by the news agency on the way back to the shop and bought the morning paper, then went upstairs to relax before opening the shop to customers. Just as she reached the top of the stairs the phone rang. Penny heaved a sigh as she dumped the box of sweet rolls on the counter and answered the phone.

“Royale Teas, this is Penny, how may I help you?”

“Penelope, my girl,” Selina said. “When I suggested that you sleep with Hardcastle I didn’t think you’d jump straight into bed with him. Bravo. Well done.”

Penny frowned. “Aunt Selina, I—“

“No, no need to explain. A picture really is worth a thousand words. And two pictures is twice as good. I have to admit I didn’t think you had it in you, not after the stories I’d heard from some of your co-workers at Royale Industries, but then he is absolutely gorgeous.” Selina growled in her smoky way, “That man is built to pleasure women. So, how was it?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Selina,” said Penny now that she was finally able to get a word in.

“Oh come now, don’t be shy. We’re both grown women. I’m talking about you and Luke Hardcastle. Last night? At his penthouse?”

Penny was stunned into silence. When she found her voice it was angry.

“How do you know I was with Luke last night?” she asked. “Did you have me followed?”

“Oh darling, please. Half of Brisbane knows what you were doing with Luke Hardcastle last night,” Selina drawled in a bored tone.

“What are you talking about?”

“Am I to guess that you haven’t seen the morning paper yet?”

“I was just about to read it now before...why?”

“I suggest you start with page three,” Selina said with a snigger. “Call me when you have something useful to report.”

The phone clicked in Penny’s ear and she put it down as she stared at the newspaper she’d tossed on one of the tables. She moved towards the newspaper hesitantly, as though it were a bomb set to go off at any moment. She took a deep breath and opened it to page three, then stared in disbelief at the images of her and Luke in his penthouse window, and the large black letters beneath.

Raunchy River City Romance.

Her legs felt weak and her chest felt tight, her cheeks bloomed scarlet in silent rage and the prickle of angry tears stung her eyes as she read on.

Millionaire playboy Luke Hardcastle, CEO of Hardcastle Construction, appears to be recovering well from his recent break-up with up-and-coming Aussie couture model, Charlie York. Last night, the man responsible for three-quarters of the construction cranes that dot the River City’s skyline, was seen with a new woman on his arm, and according to eyewitness reports, Mr. Hardcastle appeared to be possessive and enamoured of the lady.

But many eyebrows were lifted in curiosity when it was discovered that Brisbane’s favourite son’s new bed bunny was none other than Penny Royale, estranged niece of rival company Royale Industries CEO Selina Royale.

It has been discovered that the pair have spent most of this past week together, even enjoying a casual night of dining with friends. But it was last night’s steamy interlude that caught the attention of passersby as the couple seemed blissfully unaware of their very public display...

Penny's knees buckled and she sat heavily on the nearest chair.

He'd betrayed her.

Luke had said they could be friends, he'd—wait a second. Chris Marks was the reporter. The bloke who tried to feel her up last night was named Chris. She narrowed her eyes on the grainy black and white picture of the article's author, then reached into her pocket and pulled out her mobile phone.

"I'm guessing you've seen the morning paper," said Luke when he answered her call.

"You said he wasn't your friend, Luke. You said he was a jerk, Luke. You forgot to mention the bastard was a reporter, Luke!"

"Penny, calm down. It isn't as bad—"

"Isn't as bad as it looks?" she raged, springing to her feet once more and slapping her hand on the table. "Well, it looks pretty bad from where I'm standing. Did the two of you set this up? Set me up? Is this your revenge for my part in the Cassidy Holdings deal?"

"No!"

"I told you, didn't I? I told you I didn't want to be your mistress because of stuff like this. I can't deal with the media circus again. I've worked too hard to lose everything now through idle gossip and innuendo."

"I'm coming over."

"Oh no, you're not!" Penny stormed.

"Penny—"

"You're going to stay the hell away from me. Our deal is off. I don't care what you do but you will never touch me again!"

Penny hurled her phone at the wall and it fell to the floor with a crash and a scatter of plastic.

She swiped angrily at the tears that had escaped her eyes and took a deep breath to calm herself. She removed the offending page from the paper and tucked it away in her skirt pocket, then left the rest of the paper for her patrons to read. She put the sweet rolls in the cake cabinet, had a quick cup of coffee, swept up the remnants of her phone, and opened the shop for business with a firm, false smile set in place.

Chapter Ten

By lunchtime Penny wanted to run and hide in her office, or better yet, go home and crawl under her bed never to be seen again. Royale Teas had been flat-out all morning, busier than usual, and the constant curious stares from men and derisive glances from women gave her a good clue as to why.

People were coming out to gawk at “*Brisbane’s favourite son’s new bed bunny.*” Add to that the irritation of fielding phone calls from pesky reporters all morning, and the last thing Penny needed was to see Luke and Cassie walk into her shop.

The crowd seemed to step aside for him as he moved toward her, his golden eyes warm, his smile sensual. She tried to ignore him as she helped a customer, but as soon as she was done he lifted her face in his strong lean hands and kissed her. Penny’s toes curled defiantly in her shoes as Luke’s lips and teeth and tongue stole her breath right out of her lungs with a spine-tingling and very public kiss.

“My office. Now,” she hissed against his soft lips. She took his hand and dragged him away to her office, closing the door behind them. “I told you to stay away from me. What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she demanded, keeping her voice soft so she wouldn’t add to the spectacle that was becoming her life.

Luke leaned back against the door and smiled lazily. “Plan B,” he said simply.

His eyes drifted over her, revisiting every detail of her appearance. The way her ponytail flicked up in the end and bobbed when she moved, the outline of her sumptuous figure, no longer hidden under a loose blouse but accentuated by the too-tight T-shirt she’d borrowed. His hands

itched for a chance to explore those big breasts again. Then he noticed the way she was glaring at him, her hands balled into fists.

He could tell it was taking all her restraint not to slap him.

“And what is Plan B? Ritual humiliation? You set me up! Oh, you’re good, Luke. You had me completely fooled last night. Why else would you have kissed me the way you did, where you did?”

Luke straightened, Penny’s accusations cutting right to his heart. “The only thought going through my head last night was how much I wanted you.”

She barked out a disdainful laugh. “You didn’t want me. You wanted revenge. You played me and I fell for it. So congratulations, Luke. One Royale down, one to go.”

Luke’s eyes narrowed as he listened to Penny’s hushed tirade. She really believed what she was saying. She really thought Luke was that despicable. His stomach clenched in self-reproach. He had no one to blame but himself. Wasn’t that the image he’d been trying to portray? And apparently, with the unintentional help of Chris Marks, he’d finally succeeded.

Only last night he’d decided he didn’t want to be that person. He wanted to be himself, the good man that Penny had said she knew he was.

“I didn’t know about the article, Penny.”

“Yeah, right!”

“I didn’t! If I had to guess I’d say it was Chris’s way of getting back at you for rejecting him last night at the quay.”

“So this is all my fault?”

“Of course it isn’t your fault,” Luke said, losing his patience with her. “I told you last night the guy was a jerk and now you know why.” He raked his hands through his hair and let out an

exasperated sigh. “Anyway, if you hadn’t been with me, he wouldn’t have had a story at all.”

Penny looked like a caged animal as she paced back and forth across the narrow office space, still glaring at him, her steel coloured eyes hard and cold. He got the distinct impression she didn’t believe him.

“Selina rang me this morning,” she said suddenly.

Luke’s jaw clenched. “What did she want? Did you record the call?”

Penny shook her head. “No. She only called to congratulate me on my initiative,” she said. “Apparently she didn’t think I had it in me to seduce you.”

“Did she say anything else,” Luke demanded as he ignored the condemnation in her eyes.

“She told me to call her as soon as I discovered anything of use to her. But I won’t. I’m not playing these games anymore. If you and Selina want to hurt each other, go for it, but I won’t be caught in the middle. Now get out of my office,” she said, “and get out of my life.”

Luke’s eyes bored into Penny’s. “No.” He stepped forward and grabbed her upper arms. He held her firmly, making her look up at him. In an instant her anger was gone and in its place was a heady combination of lust and fear. The unguarded look drove Luke wild. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply to calm himself, but only managed to inhale her perfume, further inciting his desire.

“I need you, Penny,” he said as he opened his eyes, “and you need me.”

Even as Luke said the words he wasn’t sure if he was talking about their deal, or them. Cassie was right, Luke wasn’t just infatuated this time.

He was falling in love with her.

Their talk last night only confirmed what he’d always hoped but never dreamed. Penny may be a Royale, but she was not Selina.

She was so much better than that.

“I don’t need you, Luke. I don’t care about my money. And I don’t care about you.”

“Liar,” said Luke, the lack of conviction in Penny’s voice louder than her actual words. “You do care. You can’t help but care, Penny Royale. That’s just who you are.”

“A pathetic sap,” she bit out.

Luke chuckled and shook his head. “A good woman.”

“You’re resorting to flattery now?”

“Whatever works,” he said with a grin that disappeared all too quickly. “Look, I don’t want to blackmail you, but I will if you force my hand.”

Penny jerked away from Luke and wrapped her arms around herself like a protective shield. She chewed on her bottom lip and frowned as she thought about what had happened. Was she overreacting?

Luke sounded sincere when he told her about that rat reporter and the article, even about wanting her, but then he’d sounded sincere last night, too. Penny didn’t know if she could trust Luke, but she recognised the determination in his voice that said he most certainly would resort to blackmail again to get what he wanted.

Penny had to make a choice.

She could either take a leap of faith and trust Luke, or she could maintain her shrewish ways and widen the gap between her and the only man in the world who’d ever needed her for any reason. Either way she had little choice but to do as he wanted.

“Promise me you had nothing to do with that article, that last night wasn’t just about revenge.”

“I promise, Penny.”

She took a deep breath. “Then maybe you should tell me about Plan B.”

Luke grinned. “You already know what Plan B is, my little ‘bed bunny’.”

Penny shot him a look of pure venom for that jibe and her pride jerked up in response. “How many times do I have to say it?” she gritted out. “I am *not* having sex with you.”

“Why not?”

If Penny wasn’t so cross with Luke she would have laughed at his childish whine and frustrated expression.

“I’m not blackmailing you anymore.”

“But you’re still using me to get what you want, and I will not let you take what little self-respect I have left by jumping into bed with you.”

“Fine,” Luke conceded, “but thanks to Chris Marks, Selina isn’t going to believe our mentoring story anymore. So what do you suggest?”

Penny pulled the newspaper article out of her pocket and smoothed it out.

“That’s not going to go away, Pen.” Luke paused for a moment. “Listen, how about this? Be my mistress—” Penny began to protest but Luke clamped his hand over her mouth. “Let me finish. Be my mistress in public only. A little kissing, some cuddling, holding hands, that’s it. In private we’ll be purely platonic. I promise.

“Let Selina think she’s in control by doing what she wants you to do, but when we’re alone, when no one’s watching us, I’ll let you take the lead. If you only want my friendship, fine, we’ll be friends.” He lifted his hand to stroke her cheek. “But if you change your mind, if you decide you do want more, you can have it.”

Penny stared at Luke with a knit brow. The millionaire businessman, the head honcho of Hardcastle Construction, was willing to relinquish control—to *her*? He was either really horny

and hoping she'd throw him a bone for his generosity, or he really was the good man she'd always thought he was.

She shook her head, more from disbelief than denial. "But what about the media? I just know they'll drag out the usual claptrap about my parents and my falling out with Selina and—"

"And you won't have to go through it alone this time. I'll be here with you."

"You will?"

"Yes. And you never know, hanging out with me might actually be fun. When I'm not blackmailing people I'm really very lovable."

Penny didn't doubt for a second that Luke Hardcastle was lovable. She already felt the pull he had on her heartstrings, already felt despair at the thought of losing him, and all after only one week. Well, twelve years and one week, if you counted her hero-worship teenage crush.

These new feelings she felt were the real reason she wouldn't sleep with him. Penny knew she wouldn't be able to bear the loss of him when all of this was over and they parted ways, for she knew they would part ways. It was inevitable.

Men like Luke Hardcastle simply didn't stay with women like Penny Royale.

"What time do you finish work?" he asked, cutting into her thoughts. "Why don't you have dinner with me and Cassie?"

"No, I don't want to intrude on your time with your sister, Luke."

"Nonsense. We're just going to eat all the junk food they don't let her eat at the hospital and watch movies. I'll even drive you home when we're done so there'll be no repeat of the...*misunderstandings* from last night. Okay?"

Penny eyed Luke and chewed her lip. She knew in her heart he was a good man, she knew she should trust him, and she really didn't want to end their relationship just yet. Whatever that

relationship might be. Besides, the prospect of kissing Luke Hardcastle on a frequent basis without the added pressure of sex did have a certain appeal.

Penny forced herself to relax and willed away the doubts swimming in her mind. It was time to take that leap of faith. It was time to trust Luke.

“Okay.”

“Good. What time do we pick you up?”

Chapter Eleven

Two weeks sped past in a blur. Penny kept up an impossible pace as she continued to run her shop, liaise with Luke's legal department about finalising the lease agreements, pretend to suck up to Selina with the false information Luke was providing, help Cassie organise a charity ball for the Cancer Foundation, and *date* millionaire playboy Luke Hardcastle.

If it wasn't for the fringe benefits of dating Luke—the kissing, mostly—Penny wasn't sure she'd have the will to keep up.

Her resolve to get through this with her dignity intact was slipping. Big time. Hell, it hadn't been that strong to begin with, his declaration that he found her attractive putting a major crack in her shell of self-preservation. A big, whopping crack that every kiss on her lips and every playful squeeze of her sizable ass widened.

"You look exhausted."

"Just what every girl wants to hear to make her feel loved," said Penny wearily as she climbed into the car. "I'll be fine. A long soak in a hot bath followed by a light supper and an early night, and I'll be as good as new."

"I guess that means you won't be joining me for our candlelit dinner tonight," Luke said.

Penny groaned. "That was tonight? Oh Luke, I'm sorry, I forgot about dinner." She sighed and took a deep breath and a forced a smile. "Okay, take me home. I'll have a quick shower and get changed, then romantic dinner, here we come."

Luke chuckled at her fake enthusiasm. The sound filled the car and enveloped Penny in a soothing embrace. "I have a better idea. Why don't we cancel dinner, you can have your long,

hot bath and I will make you that light supper?”

“You? Cook?” Penny laughed. “Since when?”

“I’ll have you know I’m quite a good cook, thank you very much.”

“Sorry, it’s just hard to imagine the Take Away King in the kitchen. I’m going to have to see this for myself.”

Luke grinned. “See? Honey, by the time I’m done with you, all of your senses will be satisfied.”

For two weeks now Luke had kept his word and upheld his end of the deal. In public, Luke and Penny were the perfect couple. They dined out on a regular basis, went for walks through the parks, and even had a picnic in a secluded nook of the beautiful City Botanical Gardens, where Luke had been a perfect gentleman—until he pretended to trip over his own feet and pinned Penny beneath his massive frame. He’d crushed her breasts against his hard muscled chest and smashed his lips against hers in a slow burning kiss, all while his hand had made a leisurely exploration under her skirt and along her thigh.

If she didn’t know any better she’d have thought he was trying to take advantage of their deal, push the boundaries of “a little kissing, some cuddling and holding hands,” but when his fingers had brushed against the cotton of her knickers where they wrapped around her hip, he stopped. Leaving her panting for more and knowing it was up to her to ask for it.

A photo of the incident had graced the pages of the following day’s newspaper. But, Penny had to admit, the media attention wasn’t as great as she’d feared it would be. Although Chris Marks did report, and rather snidely at that, that Luke sent Penny roses every morning and picked her up from work every afternoon, but as yet there was very little about Penny’s parents or her horrid past.

And for two weeks now, as soon as they were alone and out of the public eye, Luke kept his hands to himself and let Penny dictate their relationship. So far she had kept things friendly, even though since the beginning of this whole charade Luke had made her heart hammer and her toes curl with every single public display of affection he performed.

It *was* a performance; none of it was real. Luke would never waste his time on a woman like her if he didn't have something to gain from it all. Which was why she would never ask him for more. To him it would just be sex, just another notch on the old bedpost.

For her it would be so much more.

It wasn't his fault she craved the sight of him walking around his apartment without a shirt on, displaying every powerful masculine rope of sinewy muscle and bronzed flesh that her fingers simply itched to touch, or that she longed for the taste of him, for the feel of his silken tongue pressed against hers—

The fact was, she'd started delaying their retreats into the security and privacy of Luke's apartment or office or her house just so she could keep touching him, so she could keep kissing him.

So he'd keep kissing her.

Yep, her dignity was fighting an uphill battle.

Penny left Luke in the kitchen while she ran her bath. She went to her bedroom and grabbed up her pyjamas and a light robe, then returned to the bathroom and undressed. She stood in front of the mirror and looked at herself naked.

Everything about Penny was big. Big bum, big breasts, big belly in between. But she wasn't ashamed of her figure. She was curvy, that was certain, but she still had a waist that dipped where it should, and two of the longest legs in town. Penny always walked tall, proud of height.

Not that that had always been the case.

According to Selina, Penny was a freak. She was too big to ever attract men. She was too fat, she was too tall, her face was too plain, and her hair was too brown and her eyes were too dull, like her personality.

Penny had believed her, until Matt asked her out.

Matt Taylor, the first man to use Penny as a stepping stone at Royale Industries. Next was Colin Newland, then Doug Sands. Three times she fell for their lies. Three times she let her guard down and dreamed of happy endings. Three times she'd been disappointed.

Penny didn't want to go through that again. She'd never known love before but she had a pretty good hunch what she was feeling for Luke Hardcastle was it. And she didn't want to go through the rejection she knew was inevitable. Not from him.

No, Penny would keep her feelings, and her hands, to herself. Better to have Luke as a friend than as nothing at all. If she let herself succumb to her emotions, to her lust, it would only lead to more hurt. He would use her body for his own pleasure, then turn her away as soon as this was all over, just as he did with every other woman he dated.

Penny had tolerated being cast aside by the other men because she'd never really had any true feelings for them, but she knew she wouldn't survive being cast aside by the man she loved.

Much better to keep her heart locked away, protected. Alone.

She sighed heavily and slipped into the bathtub. She sank below the froth of bubbles and let the hot water soothe her aching muscles. She closed her eyes. She could hear music. Luke must have put on a CD. Penny could hear the soft crooning of one of her favourite singers drifting down the hall and it helped to calm her mind just as the bath was calming her body. Then something else drifted through her mind.

Luke Hardcastle. Knight in Shining Armour.

Penny sat at her desk filing daily reports and tallying quarterly totals. Where else would she be? No one remained in the building but her, but then no one else was chained to their desk like a dog. She tugged at the thick golden collar secured around her neck, trying to loosen it. It didn't budge. It never did. It never would, not without the golden key. And the key was kept on a golden chain wrapped around Selina's neck.

She was never getting out of here.

But then she heard footsteps. Heavy, muffled footsteps made their way along the carpeted corridor. Determined footsteps. Penny could do nothing but wait and see who or what approached. When she saw him, her heart skittered in her chest.

It was him! Sir Luke of the Tower. Tall, dark, and exquisitely muscled, his helmet missing, his handsome face set with the same determination of his gait. His surcoat was ripped asunder, his chainmail pants dripping in sweat and blood. In one hand he held a blood-soaked sword, in the other a golden key.

"I have slain the fire-breathing bitch and have come to rescue you. Never again need you fear her."

He slotted the key into the lock and the collar fell from her neck.

"However may I repay you, Sir Luke?"

He looked her up and down with a sly grin writ across his face. "This key fits another lock, does it not?"

Penny smiled and bit her lip as she raised her skirt and revealed a shining golden chastity belt. Sir Luke fell to his knees and unlocked it, casting it aside. "You will be my slave now," he said, his breath caressing her thighs.

“You wish to keep me in chains as the fire-breathing bitch did?”

“Not as she did. Never again will you work your fingers to the bone and sit alone in the dark. No, honey, I will chain you to my bed and there you will stay, my pampered pet, my cherished slave, my bringer of love and light.”

Then he leaned forward and pressed a kiss between her legs, a kiss that lingered, a kiss that deepened. A kiss that did indeed fill her mind to overflowing with white light and happiness.

Penny sank further under the bubbles and smiled as her orgasm washed through her.

If only it were that simple, she thought.

* * * *

Luke wandered around Penny’s little house while he waited for her to finish her bath. He put on a CD he found hidden away with Penny’s miniature stereo, he searched the kitchen for ingredients for dinner, then strolled down the hall with his hands in his pockets, imagining Penny naked and wet in the bath. Imagining her hands lathering soap all over her body. Imagining *his* hands lathering soap all over her body.

He let out a gentle sigh and wondered how much longer he’d have to wait for Penny to come to her senses and admit she wanted to be more than just friends. He kissed her senseless every chance he got, but it just wasn’t enough. He wanted more. So did she, if her recent behaviour held true. Did she think he wouldn’t notice? Did she think he’d mind? As if he would. If she wanted to expand on their public relationship, who was he to say no?

Just then he passed by her bedroom door. It was slightly ajar. Luke backed up and nudged the door with his foot so that it swung open and he could see inside. He glanced down the hall towards the sounds of sloshing water. Penny would be a while yet. Luke grinned and stepped into the forbidden zone.

It was a very comfortable room, feminine without being girly. It definitely had touches of Penny's personality, a warmth and a subtle sensuality that made Luke want to walk straight into that bathroom down the hall and take full advantage of the beautiful woman he knew he would find.

Her bed was a direct reflection of her, big and inviting. It was a restored antique four-poster with fine indigo-coloured Indian cotton curtains hanging all around it. The light from a garland of fairy lights shone from inside the canopy.

Luke hooked back one curtain and breathed deeply. Penny's scent filled his nostrils and made his cock twitch. The bed was unmade, the sheets pooled at the bottom, the feather pillows askew, and clothes had been tossed carelessly on the mattress. Luke looked again. Not just clothes—lingerie.

He glanced cautiously at the door again before picking up a very sexy pair of black silk and lace knickers and matching strapless bra.

"Oh honey, when are you going to let me see you in these?" He groaned.

Luke tossed them back on the bed and stared longingly at Penny's pillow. He wondered not for the first time how she would look stretched out beside him in bed, her hair spread across the pillows in chestnut coloured cascades, her blue-grey eyes soft on his face after making love.

And with Penny, it would be making love. He wouldn't use her the way he'd used all the others—as a means to satisfy his lustful nature. Penny needed more than that, and Luke wanted nothing more than to give her what she needed, to love her. If only she would let him.

He moved to the old pine dresser and nosed around. He picked up a crystal perfume vaporiser and squeezed the little pink rubber ball. A squirt of fragrance filled the air in front of him and made him smile. Gardenias. Penny's scent. His body twitched with lust again.

He put the perfume back amongst the assortment of earrings and scattered personal items that covered the top of the dresser, items that included her new mobile phone and—a photograph of him. He moved it to the little table by the bed.

The sound of water draining from the bath tub made him hurry back to the kitchen to prepare supper. Fifteen minutes later Penny appeared in the doorway just in time to watch him serve up omelets with a crisp white wine. He watched her gaze sweep over his handiwork—white linen, fine china, and candlelight—before settling on him. Luke pulled out her chair for her.

“Good timing,” he said with his most handsome smile.

She wore a light cotton bathrobe wrapped tightly around her and had her hair piled on top of her head, loosely held by a butterfly clip. The sight had Luke aching for a chance to hold her lovely body, yearning to see what was under that robe, longing to release the chestnut cascade and run his fingers through it, but they were in private now.

It was up to Penny to make the first move.

She took a bite of omelet. “Wow, this is actually good. Are you sure you made it?”

Luke scowled at her teasing. “No, while I was waiting for you to finish your bath, the omelet fairies came down from above and graced your kitchen with their presence.”

Penny smiled at his sarcasm. “It’s wonderful, Luke. Thank you.”

Luke’s scowl faded at her compliment. “You’re welcome, Penny.”

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. The soft candlelight created little flickering shadow puppets on the walls around them and the gentle crooning coming from the stereo continued to play soft and low.

“Thank you, Luke,” Penny said again as she finished her meal.

“It’s just an omelet, Pen. No big deal.”

“No, not just for dinner. I mean about everything. Oddly, if it wasn’t for you blackmailing me, we would never have become friends, and I do think of you as my friend, Luke, and I hope you think of me the same way.” Penny paused to sip her wine and locked Luke in a vulnerable stare. “I really hope that when all of this is over, we won’t have to say goodbye.”

Luke’s gut tightened in disappointment as he swallowed down that bittersweet pill and forced a smile. “I don’t want to say goodbye to you either, Pen.”

Tell her now, he thought. Say it.

I love you.

The words wouldn’t come. He knew she would never believe him anyway. Maybe it was better to shelve this particular dream. Being friends wasn’t the end of the world, certainly better than nothing. Now if only he could convince his heart of that.

“I should go, let you get that early night.”

“Okay.”

Luke pulled on his shoes and grabbed his suit jacket and briefcase. Penny opened the door for him and leaned back against the door frame. Luke walked out to the veranda and stared hard at nothing, not sure if he felt angry or confused or both, and then he hung his jacket over the veranda railing and leaned his briefcase against it, too. He spun around and quickly grabbed her about the waist.

Penny startled as Luke hauled her full length against him and tilted her head back. He stared into her eyes with his golden gaze aflame with desire and kissed her.

She could not have resisted him even if she’d tried. Luke’s lips were so demanding, his tongue forcing its way between her teeth and lashing against her tongue, his hands holding her so firmly against him that she could feel his thick erection pressing between her thighs.

She slid her hands up his chest and clung to his broad shoulders, the urge to give in to the pleasure of the moment overwhelming her, but before she could, Luke ended the kiss and gently stroked her cheek.

“You never know who’s watching us,” he whispered against her ear. “We wouldn’t want anyone to discover our little secret.”

Luke left Penny standing in the doorway, staring dumbly after him as he slung his jacket over his shoulder and whistled as he walked down the stairs and along pathway to the garden gate. “Don’t forget about tomorrow,” he called out. He hopped in his car and drove away.

Penny closed the door and walked as if in a daze towards her bedroom. Tomorrow? What was tomorrow? Penny could barely remember her own name after Luke’s parting kiss. She went to her bed and started clearing away her mess.

“Those weren’t on my pillow,” she said with a frown as she picked up her black silk underwear, then realisation set in. “Oh God!” she groaned. “That sneaky...”

Luke had been in her bedroom. And seen the black silky knickers that she was too chicken to actually wear. “Oh God,” she groaned again. Penny pushed the rest of her clothes on to the floor and crawled into bed, her face warm from her blush.

Luke had been in her bedroom. Did he sit on the bed? Did he go through her things? Did he touch anything besides her knickers?

Her mobile phone rang. She jumped out of bed and grabbed it off the dresser, then noticed other things had been moved. “Hello?”

“I forgot to tell you,” Luke purred, “nice PJs.”

“Were you in my room tonight?”

“Why?”

She scowled as she located the photo of Luke beside her bed. “Just wondering.”

“Sounds like you have something in there you don’t want me to see,” Luke said, the humour obvious in his voice.

“You pervert, you were in my room.”

Penny tried to sound mad but the thought of Luke in her bedroom, in her bed, made her as dizzy as a schoolgirl.

“Perhaps.”

“Was there a reason for this phone call?”

“Yes.”

Penny heard knocking on her front door. “Oh, what is it now?”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s someone at the door. Hang on a tick.”

“You want me to stay on the line in case it’s some weirdo, or a reporter?”

“Aren’t they the same thing?” The knocking sounded again. “I’m coming!”

Penny tied her bathrobe around her again and stalked down the hall to the front door. She yanked the door open—and stared at Luke snapping his mobile phone shut.

His eyes locked on to hers, golden pools of light flaring with lust. He reached out and plucked her mobile phone from her trembling fingers and snapped it shut, too. Penny stood frozen to the spot, transfixed by the power of his gaze.

Luke stepped over the threshold and closed the door with a swift backwards kick. He stared down at her, his eyes darting hungrily from her luscious pout to her uncertain eyes. Slowly he took her face in his hands and traced the pad of his thumb over her soft lips.

“Don’t be afraid, Penny,” he murmured.

“I...I’m not afraid.”

“Then tell me you want me, Penny. Tell me you want this.”

“I...we...I can’t, Luke.”

“You can.”

“No.”

“Why are you afraid of me?”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

Luke’s stare intensified as his brow creased. “I know I’m a big man, Penny, but—”

“I said it’s not you,” Penny snapped as she pulled away from Luke. He growled in frustration and raked his hands through his hair to stop himself from grabbing her again.

“Then what is it? Why won’t you let me love you?” He did grab her again. “Is there someone else?” he demanded, unable to keep the jealousy from his voice.

Penny’s steely eyes flared. “No! Of course there isn’t. Do you really think I would have agreed to any of this if there was?”

“Why *did* you agree to this, Penny?”

“I...You know why.”

“Because you fear me, fear what I’ll do to you,” Luke said, his voice taking on that irresistible husky timbre, his hands sliding down her arms in a gentle caress. “What do I do to you, Penny?”

“Stop saying my name like that!”

“Like what?” he said as he angled her towards the hallway, towards the bedroom, his voice gentle and low.

“Like we’re lovers,” she spluttered in a rush.

“We could be lovers, Penny. Just tell me you want me.”

Penny backed away from Luke. She was afraid of him. She was afraid of what he made her feel. She was afraid of losing herself to the moment and offering up the last of her dignity on a silver platter, of the regret she would feel afterwards for being so weak, of the rejection she would suffer at his hands when he tired of her and cast her aside.

“No.”

“Did someone hurt you?” Luke asked. “Is that why you persist in denying the connection between us?”

Connection? Penny’s heart thudded furiously. Luke felt it too.

Or was he just telling her what she wanted to hear? She knew she’d never been able to hide her emotions well, and Luke’s renewed interest in having her as his mistress in private as well as public was proof that he had noticed her true feelings.

“Was it one of those bastards at Royale Industries?” Luke pressed on as his grip tightened around her wrists. “Did one of them hurt you?”

Penny gasped incredulously. “No.”

“Something is holding you back, Penny. Something is stopping you from being the sexy, passionate woman I know you are. Tell me, why are you so determined to live in fear?”

“I...”

“What?”

Penny felt cornered and lashed out. “It’s none of your business!” she snapped. “And why do you care anyway?”

“Because I do care, Penny,” Luke said, his deep voice washing over and through her, soothing her fears, tempting her to give in to him. He loosened his grip on her wrists and stroked

his strong lean hands back along her forearms, infusing her skin with his heat. “Tell me.”

“No.” Penny tried to pull away.

Luke tightened his grip again and held her firm. “Tell me.”

“I...”

Penny looked in his eyes and saw the resolve and tenacity that made him the man he was, the man she loved, and suddenly she was gripped by a new fear.

If she never gave in to temptation, never let go of her death grip on her independence and freedom, she may never have another chance. What *was* holding her back, really? The fear that she would lose him? If she didn’t take a chance now she would lose him anyway, and where would that leave her? In love with a man she could never have.

But she could have him now, for a little while at least, and that was something.

“Tell me, Penny,” Luke said, lowering his mouth to her ear as his hands fell to her hips, pulling her closer. “Tell me you want me.”

Penny tried to push away from him but her mind and her body were at war. Her body was unable to resist him anymore, was trembling against him, searching for warmth, longing for his strength, needing him, wanting him. Craving him.

But her mind still fought for the side of caution, reminded her that he was a womanizing pig, that whatever they had now was only temporary, nothing more than empty sex, a cunning façade. Her temper rose to the occasion, forcing Penny to fight.

“I...”

“Yes?”

Luke’s warm lips grazed the sensitive flesh below her earlobe, making Penny quiver with need. It was the subtlety of his seduction, the arrogance and the certainty that he’d won that

made her temper snap and blurt out the truth.

“I’m a virgin, all right? I’m a bloody virgin!”

Luke quickly pulled back and looked down on Penny’s blushing face with his brow knit and his mouth hanging open. “You’re a virgin? But...the way you kiss...”

“I’m twenty-six years old, Luke. It’s not like I’ve never dated before. I do know how to kiss a man.”

“I’ll say.”

Penny shook her head and laughed joylessly. “You don’t want me now, do you? Well, you wouldn’t be the first man to tell me that virgins are more trouble than they’re worth.”

Luke’s expression could only be described as shocked. So she *had* been hurt, just not how he’d suspected. Luke fumed, indignant on Penny’s behalf. He couldn’t believe any man would be so cruel as to say that to a woman, or would reject such a special gift. He recovered quickly and held her face so she couldn’t look away from him, eager to reassure her that he didn’t share such a narrow minded and ridiculous sentiment.

“Knowing you’re a virgin, knowing I’ll be your first, only makes me want you more.”

Penny narrowed her eyes as she searched Luke’s gaze. “Really?”

He smiled and tugged her into his arms, held her head to his chest. “Oh, honey.” He chuckled quietly. “You have no idea what you do to me.”

Penny relaxed as he tightened his arms around her and she reveled in the closeness of the moment. “I think you’re right, Luke. I am afraid of you, a little.”

“Why?” he asked, pushing her back so he could look in her eyes again.

Penny didn’t dare tell Luke the real reason she feared him, that he would break her heart and leave her devastated. That when all was said and done and he didn’t need her to spy for him

anymore, he would go, walk out of her life, never to be seen or heard from again. He would discard her.

Just like everyone else did.

“Like you said, you’re a big man...”

Luke reached behind Penny’s head and grabbed the butterfly clip holding her hair in place. He released her hair and threw the clip over his shoulder, then slid his hands into the chestnut waves that tumbled down around her shoulders. He pulled her closer until his lips touched hers in a tender kiss.

“I might be big, but I can be gentle. I will be gentle with you, Penny. Let me make love to you. I don’t want you to be afraid of me anymore.”

“I want that, too.”

Luke took Penny’s hand and led her to the bedroom. He stood by her bed and stroked her cheek before leaning down to brush his lips against her the shell of her ear.

“Touch me,” he whispered, his voice harsh with lust.

Penny’s hands moved tentatively across the hard ridges of his stomach, clawed at his chest as it rose and fell with every staggered breath. He wrenched at his loosened tie and she fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. But he grew impatient for the feel of her hands on his bare flesh and his passion quickly overwhelmed all reason. He tore at his shirt, sending buttons flying across the room and pinging off the mirror. He snatched Penny into his arms and crushed his lips against hers.

Penny wound her arms around Luke’s neck and returned his impassioned kiss. She felt his hands leave her body, heard the sound of a belt buckle jingling, the purr of a zipper, and the whoosh and thud of trousers falling to the floor. She began yanking on the belt of her robe but

Luke's hands stilled hers.

"No, honey, let me."

Penny watched Luke as his fingers deftly unraveled the knot at her waist and pushed the light cotton robe from her shoulders, letting it pool at her feet. He licked his lips as he unveiled her pale pink satin and lace camisole and French knickers, as though she was something delicious he couldn't wait to taste.

"You are so sexy," he said.

Penny needed no other encouragement. She threw herself at Luke. She wrapped herself around his powerful body and giggled as he roared playfully and pinned her to the bed. She wriggled under the hard muscles pressing down on her, exciting in her something primal, something deeper than physical need, something so visceral it couldn't possibly be wrong.

She laughed as he tickled her throat with butterfly kisses, gasped as he slid his hands over the thin satin that barely covered her torso, burning her body through the material with his scorching hot fingers. Then his lips were devouring all sense and time as he plundered her mouth once more.

Luke stroked his hand over Penny's belly. He delighted in the feel of the shiny fabric and the way it slid sensuously across her soft flesh, and in the gentle mewling that bubbled from her throat. He groaned with the strain of holding his lust in check. But he would not rush her.

He moved over her and slowly kissed a path leading down, settled his head against the swell of her breasts and showered them with attention. He squeezed and massaged her satin-covered body, he kissed her hardened nipples and sucked the tender peaks until she cried out, then sucked them some more. He simply couldn't get enough of her warmth and softness. Her breasts were like two luxurious pillows, perfect for a wealthy man's head.

Slowly he traveled lower and skimmed over the sumptuous curves of her hips and thighs. Luke felt the scratch of lace against his palms. He tucked his thumbs into the waist of Penny's knickers and slowly pulled them down, kissing and nipping his way along her beautiful body as he went, smiling when he revealed the chestnut curls that lay nestled between her thighs.

He knew it. A real woman.

Penny lay on the bed and whimpered as she felt Luke's hot breath pass over her exposed stomach, gasped as she felt it between her legs, groaned with frustration as he moved lower.

She squeezed her eyes shut and clutched at the sheets beneath her, as though that would somehow ease the tension that had her whole body wound tighter than a clock spring. The slightest touch from Luke had her jumping out of her skin.

Her old insecurities had her going out of her mind.

Luke had been with so many women, so many *experienced* women. What if she disappointed him? Or worse, what if the sight of her jiggly nakedness sent him screaming from the room? Just because he found her attractive with her clothes on didn't mean he'd feel the same way once they all came off.

She bit her lip as she writhed on the bed, Luke's feather-light caresses driving her crazy with wanting, his mouth working its way back and forth along her legs, inching closer and closer to her lips, stopping, always stopping before satisfying her.

Luke groaned as he watched Penny from the corner of his eye. He wanted nothing more than to sink inside his woman and ease the burden of his own immeasurable need, but he'd promised her he'd be gentle, a task she was making increasing difficult whenever he saw her bite her damned lip.

But he continued to tease her, to slowly drag his fingers across her flesh and make her

squirm, to kiss and lick her, tasting every inch of her with such deliberation, wanting to make her so dizzy with need that she would become as addicted to him as he was to her.

He trailed his fingertips lightly over her inner thighs as he pushed her legs apart. She quivered against his hands. Her staccato breathing was music to his ears. He knelt between her thighs, he laid his hands on her soft belly, and then he finally allowed himself the pleasure he'd been denied for too long.

Luke held his breath as he fingered the lacy edge of her camisole, swallowed hard as he slowly pushed the satin up, revealing her breasts one agonisingly glorious inch at a time until the garment sat bunched across the top of her chest.

"Dear God," he said reverently. They were so big, so ripe, so beautiful. His hands hovered over the plump mounds, savouring their feminine heat; his eyes devoured her milky white flesh and her rosy pink nipples still peaked in arousal. "They're more magnificent than I'd dreamed."

Luke couldn't wait any longer. He yanked the camisole over Penny's head, tearing it in his haste, then quickly rid himself of his own black briefs. He grinned as he saw the direction of her wide eyes. He bucked his hips, thrusting his erection at her, showing her the solid evidence of her effect on him, but then he lay between her thighs and buried his head in her chest, greedily savouring her ample flesh.

Penny gasped as Luke feasted. *Magnificent*? Was that truly what he thought of her body? No, he must have meant something else. She wasn't magnificent. Not her. Magnificent was the man showering her with carnal devotion. Magnificent was the way he was making her feel. Wanted. Needed. Adored.

She was in love, and she was ready to be Luke's lover, whatever the consequences.

But when Luke moved to capture Penny's lips in a slow, gentle kiss, making her sigh with a

contentment she'd never felt before, she wondered exactly how painful those consequences would be.

She closed her eyes again as Luke pulled away from her mouth and began licking a trail over her body. He began with her nipples, tonguing the little peaks, flicking them fast, sucking them hard, then cradling them in his lips. Down between her breasts he went, over her belly and down her thigh. She squirmed and she shivered and she tried to catch his hand. She wanted to touch him too. But then her eyes shot open and she saw him wink. His slippery trail was coming to an end, a glorious, exciting end. Between her thighs.

Penny gasped at the contact of Luke's silken tongue as it slipped inside her, though more from surprise or exhilaration she didn't know. She tunnelled her fingers through his hair, holding him to her, reveling in the feeling of complete abandon as Luke licked and sucked her sensitive flesh.

She began to laugh as she realised her fantasies weren't a patch on this. This, Luke Hardcastle—the real one, not the fantasy one—was going down on her. And it felt amazing.

Luke slid his hands up Penny's body and grabbed her breasts, needing to feel the objects of his desire against his flesh as much as possible. He groaned as he felt her own smaller hands on top of his, encouraging him to squeeze the supple beauties. All the while, his tongue worked her into a frenzy.

He knew she was close to coming, could taste her, smell her, and she was driving him crazy. He worked his tongue faster, flicking her clit as he'd flicked her nipples, sucking the tiny bud between his lips and nipping it with his teeth. He groaned when he felt her fingernails digging into his scalp, squeezed her breasts harder as she bucked her hips. She was fucking his face and he was loving every second of it.

Penny whimpered with the effort of holding back. She could feel that coiled-up clock spring low in her belly, tightening with every second that passed, threatening to tear her apart when it finally burst loose. Then it did.

Penny's orgasm ripped from her throat, her cry filling the room. Her thighs clamped around Luke's head, his hands tightened painfully over her breasts in response, but then, ever so slowly through the fog of afterglow, she was aware of Luke kissing her again, imparting the taste of her on her own lips.

"Dolce come miele," he whispered as he rose above her, hands either side of her neck, body taut and strong and hard. He gazed down on her with his glowing golden eyes.

"I want you," he said, and Penny nodded. She wanted him too. Now.

Luke pulled away only long enough to sheath himself with a condom, then he was on top of her again. He hadn't lain with a virgin since he was one himself, but he remembered well the girl's fears. He nuzzled Penny's throat, whispered breathy nothings in her ear, kissed her cheek and mouth, tenderly reassuring her with every loving caress of his lips that he would keep his promise. He would be gentle.

Penny felt Luke's erection, hot and hard as it waited, poised and ready. She felt it begin its intrusion inside her willing body and forced herself to relax, to lose herself in Luke's hot kisses and scorching touch. She felt him pull back and slide in again, sinking deeper this time into her hot, wet centre. Again he pulled back and again he sank into her, all the way into her.

Penny bit her lip to stifle her cry as white-hot pain shot through her. His body had penetrated hers, was stretching it to fit all of him inside of her, and he really was a big man.

Luke didn't miss the look of hurt that briefly blanketed her face, but it was replaced by a look of sheer amazement so quickly that he began to think he'd imagined it. Penny's face was a

picture of bliss as Luke began slowly moving in her. It took all his will to control himself and not pummel her virginal body with his urgency.

She was crushingly tight around him, so hot and slick with her arousal. She felt incredible. Luke had never had sex like this. It had never been this good. He'd never had such a sense of belonging with a woman, to a woman, and of her belong to him. A fierce possession suddenly filled his body and mind and heart as he locked his golden gaze to her stormy blue-grey eyes.

But he didn't dare tell her he loved her.

Not yet, when he knew she would find other excuses for the words.

Penny sighed in unison with Luke's rhythmic thrusts, as though the force of his body penetrating hers was pushing the air from her lungs. She felt his hand slide down her leg and cup behind her knee, lifting the limb around his body. She gasped as she copied the movement with her other leg and felt Luke sink even deeper inside her.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked.

"No. Not...hurting. It just feels...so..."

"Good?"

"Yes. Yes, good. So good."

Luke smiled as he lowered his mouth over hers. "For me, too. So I guess that does it. You really are mine now."

Penny thrilled to hear those words. She was his. Her heart filled to overflowing with emotion as her body overflowed with sensation. She tightened her legs around his hips, she grabbed his ass and pulled him in harder, matching his thrusts with her own, grinding her clit against the hard muscles that were being smashed against her.

Her orgasm tore through her and she screamed his name. She wanted to scream that she

loved him, that she'd been an idiot to deny him all this time, but her head overruled her heart once more. Luke's words were spoken in the heat of passion. He only meant she was his for now, and how was she supposed to respond? She couldn't tell him she loved him, so she would compromise.

Her head would let her heart have a little rope.

"I was always yours," she whispered in his ear as he collapsed heavily on top of her, his sweaty body heaving with every ragged breath.

Just enough rope to hang itself with.

Chapter Twelve

“Hardcastle,” Luke said as he blindly answered the phone beside the bed.

“Luke?”

“Cassie? What time is it?” Luke scowled as he heard his sister’s tinkling laugh tumble down the phone line.

“I have a better question for you, Luke. Why are you answering Penny’s phone?”

Luke’s eyes flew open and he swore softly. He’d forgotten where he was, forgotten he was sleeping in Penny’s bed. Answering the phone had been an automatic reaction. He glanced beside him and smiled, content as he saw Penny still curled up beside him, her hair strewn across the pillows, her wonderful breasts exposed above the sheet.

She was completely undisturbed by the phone call.

“But to answer your question,” continued Cassie, “it’s ten to nine. You two were supposed to pick me up twenty minutes ago.”

Luke swore again. “I’m sorry, Cas.”

“Late night? Or early morning?” his sister said with unconcealed humour.

“Shut up.”

“So when can I expect you two?”

Luke looked at Penny beside him and his body swelled with burgeoning need. “We’ll pick you up at ten for brunch.”

“See you then, lover boy.”

He scowled at his sister’s teasing and hung up the phone, but then Penny shifted beside him

and the sheet fell away to reveal more soft creamy flesh, warm and inviting.

Luke quietly got up and went to the dresser. He selected a long-stemmed rose from the vase and went back to the bed. He trailed the velvety soft petals over Penny's body, dipping into the combe of her waist, trailing across the subtle swell of her belly, following the curves of her breasts, tracing the length of her neck, arousing her from sleep with the sweet scent of spring. He smiled as Penny's eyes fluttered open to greet the day.

"Good morning," he breathed across her lips as he bent to kiss her.

"Yes, it is." She sighed just as his mouth possessed hers.

Luke's kiss was soft and lingered, as though he wanted to take it deeper, but didn't dare. With a dramatic sigh he pulled back.

"What's wrong?" Penny was suddenly worried by that heavy sigh. Was Luke having regrets?

"I'm afraid we have a big problem," he began seriously. Penny's whole body tensed as she anticipated the blow she knew was coming. "After last night...the sex...your body...Exactly how do you propose I deal with this?"

Penny swallowed hard as she stared at the man in her bed, his hard muscled body shadowing hers, his short black hair ruffled from sleep, his tender lips mere agonising inches away from hers. Her heart hammered out a deafening death march and her chest rose and fell with every nervous breath.

"How can I be expected to keep my hands off you now?" he said, a cheeky glint returning to his eyes, the ends of his mouth tipping up in the beginnings of a sensual smile, and then he tossed the rose over his shoulder and cupped both breasts in his big hands to demonstrate his point.

Penny's body responded.

Gone was the nervousness, replaced with expectant excitement. Gone was the fear that he would break her heart sooner than expected and back was the fear that his hot mouth and exploring hands would stop their amorous journey, and she'd be forced back to reality. Because during the night, after Luke had made love to her again from behind, then again by hauling her sweaty body on top of his, impaling her on his giant cock and rocking her hips while he suckled her breasts, she'd decided that such wonderful sensations as these must be pure imagination.

No one could feel this good in real life, could they?

Penny hoped against hope that they could.

But then Luke pulled back and shook his head. "You see? Do you see what you do to me?"

Penny giggled. She could see quite clearly what she did to him. Luke rose from the bed and stared down at her, his sculptured arms folded over his broad chest, his erection obscenely proud.

She reached out and touched the unwieldy arm of flesh, heard Luke suck in a breath as she did. She slid her hand along its silky length and bent forward to place a kiss on its head. Luke cupped her chin and lifted her face, then lowered his mouth to meet hers.

"We're running late, and if we continue down this path, we'll never be on time again." Luke picked up his trousers and began dressing and Penny felt a certain smugness swell inside her. He was panting. *She* did that. Not some skinny supermodel, but her, pudgy Penny. She made Luke pant. "Get dressed, Miss Royale, it's after nine o'clock."

Penny swore. "Cassie's going to kill us," she said. "How do we explain why we're so late?"

"Tell her the truth. We overslept because we were exhausted after indulging in amazing sex. All. Night. Long," he said with a husky growl as he stole another kiss.

Penny blushed bright red. "We can't tell her that. What will she think?"

Luke wasn't sure what his sister thought, besides the fact she seemed to find the whole thing

rather amusing, which was beginning to both confuse him and raise some suspicions that nagged at the back of his mind.

“Cassie already knows,” he said as he examined his tattered shirt. Good thing he always kept a spare in his car.

“What?”

“She rang looking for us. You didn’t wake up.” Luke watched Penny’s jaw drop and her eyes widen in dismay. He shrugged his broad shoulder. “I forgot where I was and answered the phone. Force of habit.” At Penny’s sudden stiffening he added, “Answering the phone, I mean, not forgetting where I am.”

He pulled her into his arms and gave her beautiful ass a playful squeeze, making her smile again. “Now let’s get out of here before I forget we’re on a schedule.”

As they drove through the city streets to the hospital, Luke couldn’t help stealing glances at the woman who sat beside him. The woman who was smiling serenely and blushed every time he caught her eye. He reached over to lay his hand on her thigh, smiled as she threaded her fingers through his.

She was so very beautiful to him.

So vulnerable, so desirable.

When Cassie had asked him to embark on the endeavour of exposing Selina Royale and her means of success, he’d been delighted that some of his rancour had finally rubbed off on his little sister, that she’d finally seen just how much she’d been screwed over by the underhanded bitch. And her suggestion that he use Penny Royale to aid in his mission had seemed like a good idea at the time.

His investigator had discovered that Penny herself had been the number cruncher on the

Cassidy Holdings deal. She had been the one to tell Selina how much profit could be made from the resell, and that little tidbit of information had sealed her fate along with Selina's as far as Luke was concerned.

And it had closed the book on any fantasies he still harboured about the only woman that consistently made his head turn no matter how hard, or often, he fought the attraction.

But now—

Penny had apologised for her part in the deal. Sincerely. Luke believed her. Since their dating-for-show charade had begun, Luke had learned a lot about Penny Royale. Her insistence on friendship first when in private meant they spent most nights talking. About everything.

Luke had been both saddened and angered to discover that Penny's life with Selina had been one long experiment in psychological abuse. Hers really was a life lived in fear. Fear of disappointing Selina, of not meeting her aunt's exacting standards in every aspect of life, of being alone in the world, and that was the bottom line for Penny. She had surrendered her life to her aunt because she was afraid to be alone. She'd spent so much time alone as a small child, waiting for her parents to awaken from their latest drug and alcohol-fueled comas. Selina had taken her in. True, only because the courts ordered her to, but at least the fear had subsided a little, for a while.

Until Selina instilled new fears into Penny.

Luke still had no clue what Penny did to make Selina cut her off and kick her out. The official report said she was fired for misconduct. But that could mean anything, and she wasn't telling.

What did she do?

* * * *

An hour and a half later and Luke had left the girls to their own devices in the Queen Street Mall while he attended to some business. Cassie dragged Penny into every single shoe shop along the mall, and there were more than a few.

"I just can't find the right pair of shoes to match my ball gown," she declared dramatically to every shop assistant they encountered. By the time they reached their dress fitting, she still hadn't found the "right" pair.

Penny liked Cassie. She was everything Penny wasn't. Cassie was petite, slim, and very beautiful. She had black hair like Luke's, cut in a scruffy pixie style to hide the fact that it wouldn't grow back properly after her last dose of chemo, and her eyes were green instead of golden.

Cassie was naturally vibrant, bubbly. She just had one of those personalities that shone like the sun and stars combined, and she always spoke her mind no matter who she upset or how much trouble she got in to.

Penny had to admire that. She'd never been able to stand up to people. She was Selina's perfect yes-man. Until the day she wasn't, and what a spectacular failure that had been. Instead of earning her aunt's respect for standing up for herself and what she cared about, she had incurred her wrath, and found herself sleeping at the local shelter for the next week.

Cassie was currently standing on a dressmaker's pedestal, having her hem pinned. The full-length pale gold satin and chiffon gown fitted her small frame perfectly with its high-waisted Napoleon-style, cap sleeves, and soft flowing skirts.

"Something strappy, I think," said the designer. "Strappy and simple go great with everything. The hard part is finding the right colour."

"What about you, Penny? Have you decided on a dress yet?"

Penny snapped her attention back to the conversation she'd only been half listening to. On her lap was an album of every dress the designer had ever made and Penny had been flicking through it with something halfway between trepidation and nausea. She didn't see anything she thought she'd look good in. She'd felt the same thing at every other designer Cassie had suggested.

Penny was beginning to feel like a complete heel. Cassie had been so patient with her over the past two weeks, ever since that ridiculous article outing Luke and Penny as a couple. Actually, Cassie had been quite supportive of the whole thing, had even applauded Penny's determination in halting Luke's sexcapades until they knew each other better.

"You're not mad about me and Luke, then? You know, him answering my phone this morning?" Penny had asked warily at the third shoe shop they'd visited.

"Why would I be mad? You make my brother happy," had been Cassie's casual reply. She had no idea how wonderful she'd made Penny feel with those few words.

Penny flicked the pages of the album back and forth a few more times and ruefully shook her head. The dresses in the pictures all looked so delicate and fine, much too fine for her big frame. It wasn't as though she'd never been to a formal event before; she'd been to many, but Selina had always chosen her outfits: uncomfortable, unflattering, uninspired creations that covered her pretty much from top to toe and gave away nothing of the woman beneath.

"Maybe Luke would be better off just taking you," she muttered as she closed the album.

"Rubbish!" Cassie snorted.

"I'm not a model, Cas. I'm not one of those girls who could wear a potato sack and make it look fabulous. Stick me in a potato sack and I look like a sack of potatoes."

Cassie sighed and shook her head sadly. "Nina, I think we need a fashion intervention here."

“I agree wholeheartedly. Miss Royale, if you would please step behind the curtain and strip for me.”

“What?” Penny cried as she pushed herself as far back as possible into the replica Louis XIV chair she was occupying. “Oh, no!”

Suddenly Nina had one hand and Cassie had the other and they were hauling her to her feet and shoving her behind the heavy blue velveteen curtain.

“Strip!” Cassie and Nina commanded together. “Come on, love, we’re all girls here,” Nina added when Penny just stared at them, cheeks blazing and eyes wide. But she could see by the way they stood, arms akimbo and chins up, they weren’t taking no for an answer.

“Fine,” she conceded through gritted teeth. Five minutes later she stepped inside a mirrored cocoon that showed off every lump, bump, and dimple on her body, feeling more like a freak every moment she stood there, and more embarrassed than she’d ever been in her life.

“Bra off too,” Nina said.

Penny clenched her jaw but slipped her bra off, slung it over the top of the mirror and fought the urge to cover her breasts with her hands. Nina stood in front of her with her hands on her hips and scoured Penny’s nakedness with her shrewd designer’s eyes, her chunky black-rimmed half-moon spectacles perched on her nose and her orange lipsticked lips thinned in concentration.

“Well now, let me just say for starters...great boobs,” she said and gave Penny two thumbs up. “Fabulous legs, long and shapely.” She made Penny turn slowly. “There’s certainly nothing scrawny on you, is there, love? Hmm...”

Nina vanished but quickly returned with four different dresses for Penny to try on. She shoved the first one at her, a sea green gown with a short train, lace detail, and halter neck. Cassie and Nina ummed and ahed, then screwed up their noses and shook their heads.

The second dress was a disaster from the start. Penny didn't *do* frills. But after seeing her in the third dress, Nina dismissed the fourth completely.

"This one," she said and Cassie agreed. "Simple, chic, stunning. The colour is very you. Not many women can wear Manhattan Red, but with your china-fine complexion and dark hair...beautiful. Simply beautiful."

Beautiful? Her?

Penny took a moment to absorb the award-winning designer's observations as she stared at herself in the mirror.

Beautiful! Her!

She turned to Cassie. "But do you think Luke will like it?"

"I think he'll love it. You look just like his dream girl."

"Who is that?" Nina asked as she began fitting the dress to Penny.

"Jessica Rabbit."

"So that's why he has all those posters," Penny said.

"You're kidding!" The designer laughed.

"Nope," Cassie continued. "The red dress, the sexy curves, the long hair and kissy pout...he adores her. Luke won't be able to keep his hands off you. In fact, we may have to keep you covered up until we get to the ball, just to be sure you arrive unscathed," Cassie teased.

Penny laughed. She was happy, truly happy. It made her realise how empty her life was before Luke Hardcastle. Work and gardening and house renovations and staff barbeques had only filled up her time, not her life.

Try as she might, Penny couldn't stop the tears that fell down her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" asked Nina.

Cassie put her arm around Penny's waist. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Penny nodded as more tears fell. "And it scares the hell out of me."

But then the urge to laugh bubbled up again and her tears dried. How could this man make her feel so many things all at once? Fearful, lustful, happy—free.

She must be in love.

"I have a question," Nina said. "If Luke's dream girl is the very definition of voluptuous, why does he date all of those flat-chested, bony-assed stick insects?"

Luke's deep voice echoed through the curtain. "Call it a hobby."

* * * *

By five o'clock, Luke was bored out of his mind. An hour ago he'd thought to surprise Penny by whisking her away to a nearby hotel for an afternoon quickie; instead he'd turned up to overhear an interesting juncture in conversation.

Why did he date "those flat-chested, bony-assed stick insects"?

Oh, if they only knew—and Cassie did.

Still, his sister hadn't appreciated the interruption to their conversation and scolded him accordingly. "How long have you been standing there?" she'd asked with an accusatory glare, her head alone poking out through the curtain that hid Penny completely from view.

"Long enough," he'd replied.

Long enough, indeed. Long enough to hear Penny say she was scared. Scared of what? Of him? Still? Even after last night?

Soon enough the chatter had returned to outfits and accessories, and Cassie's enthusiastic storytelling of her latest shopping spree with Penny had held centre stage.

By then Luke had pulled out his iPod, stuck the earphones in his ears, and cocooned his

sanity in a protective layer of heavy metal.

But now the women were ready to leave and he was stretching the kinks out of his back. French furniture might look nice but it was a bugger on your spine. Of course, his slouching posture probably hadn't helped.

"Come on, lazybones," Cassie chided, smiling at his disgruntled expression. "We don't want to be late for the party."

At a quarter to seven, as Luke looked anxiously at his watch for the umpteenth time, two of the prettiest girls he'd ever seen exited Cassie's room and graced him with their presence. Luke smiled with brotherly affection as Cassie struck a pose and showed off her emerald green satin sheath.

"Thanks for the earrings, big brother. I adore them," she said as she flicked the onyx and emerald jewelry that dangled from her earlobes.

"You're welcome."

Next he took Penny by the hand and kissed her knuckles, admiring the strapless midnight blue cocktail dress she wore and the way it fit her voluptuous curves. He liked that she wore her hair up, exposing her slender neck and smooth shoulders to his amorous gaze. He liked that her bare flesh was the perfect backdrop for his gift.

"Now for you, honey. You were a little bit harder to shop for. But I do love a challenge."

Luke produced a black velvet box and opened it for Penny's inspection. He delighted in the way her hand flew to her chest as if to slow her heartbeat, and in the tiny gasp that escaped her perfectly painted pout.

Penny gaped at the silver marquissette heart that sat nestled in the box, a dark blue, heart shaped sapphire studding its centre, a fine black silk ribbon looped through its bail. Luke lifted

the necklace from the box and tied it around her neck.

“It’s a locket,” he said. “I found it in that antique shop we went to last week. It’s supposed to be more than a hundred years old.”

His fingers brushed the bare flesh along her spine and she trembled under his touch, just as she had when they’d made love last night, just as she would when he made love to her again.

“I love it, Luke. It’s beautiful.”

“My thoughts exactly,” he murmured against her neck.

Penny turned and stared up at Luke in a way that made the rest of the world vanish. He cupped her face and drew her to him for a tender kiss. A kiss that promised so much more, a kiss that would have easily burned up the air around them and consumed the rest of the evening in fiery passion—except for Cassie clearing her throat behind them.

“I believe we are officially late,” she said as she wrapped a black lacy shawl around her shoulders.

Luke winked at Penny. “I told you so.”

Chapter Thirteen

The party was a promotional affair, a product launch for a local winery. *Kookaburra Queen*, the paddle steamer that traversed the Brisbane River, was the evening's venue and Luke stopped with Penny and Cassie to pose for photos before ushering the women onto the boat.

Luke was immediately greeted by the emcee and was introduced to the winery owner, Grant Bellows, a man no older than Luke with an easy manner and tanned skin that proved he lived his life outside an office.

The men shook hands before the women were introduced and Grant bent to kiss the hands of each of them. Luke noticed the man's eyes lingering a while longer on Cassie before he stretched out his hand to beckon his date to his side.

"I believe you know Charlie York," he said happily as a willowy blonde in a silver sequined singlet top and black sequined micro-miniskirt wrapped her arms around Grant's neck and whispered in his ear.

Luke's grip tighten on Penny's waist as he pulled her closer, whether to protect himself or her he didn't know.

"Luke Hardcastle," she purred. "It's so good to see you again. And you must be...Patty, is it?" she asked with a condescending sickly sweetness.

"Penny," Luke corrected with forced politeness.

"Of course. And you must be Luke's sister. It is so good to see you up and about."

Luke grit his teeth against his ex's sugary barbs. He was seething at Charlie's forthright rudeness, but a warning look from Cassie made him keep his temper in check. Silence ensued,

discomfit followed. Bellows cleared his throat as he spotted more guests arrive, and excused Charlie and himself to greet them.

Penny shifted by his side, tilting her head as she watched Charlie walk away. “Wow. I wonder if her head whistles in a cross wind.”

Luke looked down at her, momentarily stunned, before laughing out loud.

“You’re amazing,” he murmured as he wrapped his arms around her and shuffled her towards a table laden with *hors d'oeuvres*. He picked up a fat juicy prawn, dipped it in sauce and put it to Penny’s lips. He groaned as she accepted the prawn between her teeth and bit down, sauce covering her bottom lip. Luke leaned forward.

“Allow me.”

He licked the sauce away and kissed her. “By the way,” he whispered in her ear, “when we get home, I’m going to rip this dress off you with my teeth.”

He pulled back to enjoy Penny’s blush, slipped his arm around her waist again, and began to circulate in the crowd.

The party progressed as parties do. Food was eaten, wine was drunk, gossip was shared. Penny was never far from Luke’s sight, even while he danced with Cassie or chatted with business associates or just leaned back against the deck railing and pretended to watch the city lights dance on the surface of the Brisbane River.

He watched her constantly.

“I love your rebound girl,” sounded a familiar voice at his elbow.

Luke turned to see Charlie York by his side, her short blond curly hair bobbing in the gentle breeze, the scent of expensive perfume wafting from her throat.

“No, really I do. Lifeless hair, dull eyes, huge ass...I can see why you’re so interested in

her.”

Luke sighed heavily and began walking away.

“You can stop torturing yourself. You can have me back anytime, you know. Just say the word, Luke, and I’m yours.”

Luke turned back to Charlie with a pained expression. “Please tell me you’re not using Bellows to get back with me, Charlie. I think I made it quite clear the last time we saw each other that I wasn’t interested in continuing our little affair.”

Charlie slid her hands up Luke’s chest and adjusted his tie. “And now I’m calling your bluff,” she said with a cocky self assurance.

She tried to press her body against Luke’s but he stepped back from her and removed her hands from his clothing.

“No bluff, Charlie. It’s over. It’s been over for months.”

“Grant is very successful, you know. He has boutique vineyards in South East Queensland and Western Australia. He’s so handsome. Aren’t you even a little jealous?” she asked demurely, her clear blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Nope.”

Mischief turned to malice in a second. “You can’t do this to me, Luke Hardcastle! You can’t just toss me aside like last month’s Cleo. I’m beautiful. And I want you.”

Luke clenched his fists. “I’ve neither the time nor the patience to put up with your childish tantrums. We both know what you want, Charlie, and it isn’t me.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You will stay away from me, you will stay away from my sister, and you will most definitely stay away from Penny.”

Charlie's only reply was to flash Luke a perfect little smile before turning on her thousand-dollar heels and stalking away.

Luke watched her disappear into the crowd before turning to stare at the water. His hands clenched the railing so tightly his knuckles turned white, his thoughts were irritated, and his body tense. The last thing he needed was a gold-digging ex causing trouble.

Luke couldn't even remember why he'd asked Charlie out. She was beautiful, there was no doubt about that, but she was also greedy, spiteful, and mean, and her friends were much the same. But at the time he'd not cared. For eighteen months he'd not cared what type of woman he dated as long as they weren't Penny Royale.

What a fool he'd been.

He should have been rescuing Penny, not trying to eradicate her image from his mind with tawdry women and meaningless sex.

But none of that mattered now that he had her, his sweet, sexy, curvy, beautiful Penny. Penny, who didn't expect Luke to pay for everything and even argued with him over the price of pizza. Penny, who wasn't afraid to drink tea with full cream milk and sugar or eat pasta covered in creamy sauces. Penny, who wasn't afraid to tell Luke off, to say no to him. Penny, who wanted, more than anything else, his friendship.

Luke turned around and walked in from the balcony and saw her. He flexed his hands, immediately calming at the sight of his lover. Her pretty face was animated as she chatted happily with Grant Bellows, the swell of her breasts showed just above the top of her dress, and the little heart-shaped locket he'd given her sat nestled in the hollow of her throat, twinkling under the lights. She beckoned him to her without having to say a word. And she didn't even know it.

The music had slowed down as the night drew to a close and the paddle steamer made its way back to the quays. The guests gathered around tables, talking and laughing, or slow danced on the open dance floor. Luke shoved his hands in his pockets and watched Penny. She was sipping wine now, imitating Bellows as he swirled the golden liquid in the glass and held it up to the light. Luke couldn't wait to get her home, to fold her into his arms and make love to her again.

Just then Charlie sauntered up to them. She draped herself over Bellows like a strangler vine, and took a sip from his glass before huffing and rolling her eyes at what he assumed she thought a dull conversation. Slowly he made his way over to the trio. Luke smiled to himself as he compared the women.

Charlie, for all her traveling and hobnobbing and apparent sophistication, lacked maturity. While her face was considered one of the most beautiful in the world, the rest of her reminded Luke of a porcelain doll. Cold to touch, prone to damage if handled too roughly, and—empty.

Luke had had sex with her only once in the three weeks they were together. And that had been one time too many. The sight of her bony hips and barely-there breasts had turned him off entirely, and his size compared to hers was exaggerated by their nakedness, but they'd had sex anyway, as uninspired and unsatisfying as it was.

Not like last night with Penny, he thought.

Sex with Charlie had been harsh, painful even, for both of them. Sex with Penny had been a lesson in sensuality. He'd reveled in the fact that her soft body had accommodated his entire length without difficulty, especially her first time, and that when he'd lain on top of her, delighting in feel of her body still clenched around his cock and in the smell of sweat and sex, she'd held him close. She'd not insisted he was squashing her, actually laughed when he'd

suggested it.

To a man who didn't know better, Penny looked plain next to a top fashion model like Charlie, but the way her eyes would change from a pale silvery blue to a dark steel depending on her mood, and the way her lips formed such a perfect pout that begged to be touched and kissed, just like the rest of her with those delectable womanly curves begged to be touched and kissed, made her far more desirable than any other woman Luke had been with in the past ten years, and certainly the past eighteen months.

He locked his gaze on hers as he took her hand and kissed her knuckles, his hot breath searing her flesh with his desire.

"You should try this wine," Penny said.

Without a word, Luke took the glass from her fingers and sipped the chardonnay. He sampled the flavour of the wine, savouring the crisp fruity notes and letting the chilled liquid slide down his throat.

"Magnificent," he said, his eyes still locked with hers.

Charlie barked out a laugh of disbelief. Penny lowered her gaze but Luke raised her face again and winked, bringing a shy smile back to her lips.

"You make good wine," he said to Bellows.

"Thank you. I was just telling Penny that you two should visit the vineyard sometime...and Miss Cassidy too, of course," he added with a subtle hint of inquiry.

Luke raised an eyebrow at the mention of his sister. Bellows cleared his throat and continued, "I've just opened up restaurants at both my Redlands and Margaret River wineries. Perfect for a romantic evening out," he added with a smile that exuded honest good humour.

Luke slipped his arm around Penny's shoulders. "We may have to take you up on that. I was

going to lure Penny away to Perth with me in a couple of weeks. I don't see why we couldn't extend our trip to include a tour of the Margaret River. Maybe even stop by the famous Chocolate Factory...?" he added with a sly grin and a raised brow.

"Maybe," Penny said, returning Luke's grin as he bent his head to kiss her lips.

"Blagh! All those calories!" Charlie blurted out. "But I guess some women just don't care about their health."

Penny turned away from his kiss. "Excuse me," she said softly as she moved away.

Luke tightened his grip on her shoulders but she shrugged him off. Charlie threw Luke a gloating look and walked off in the opposite direction.

Bellows cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about Charlie," he offered.

Luke nodded curtly in acknowledgement. "So was I."

* * * *

Penny found the bathroom and leaned against the bench as she stared in the mirror and tried not to cry. She'd been doing so well, too. Not once in almost two weeks had she argued with Luke when he said she looked pretty in that dress or lovely with her hair down—or even more beautiful naked.

Who the hell was Charlie York to tell Penny she was fat?

Okay, so she didn't actually say the F word, but it was implied for all to hear. For Luke to hear. It reminded Penny of that other F word she used to hear a lot.

Freak!

As a girl she'd had never been comfortable in her own skin; as a woman she'd learned to accept her height and curves as an indelible fact and to be proud of them, but over the past two weeks—and certainly in the last twenty-four hours—she'd gained a whole new perspective on

the subject.

Penny was learning that to be beautiful, you only had to feel beautiful. And no one had ever made her feel as beautiful as Luke did.

And in less than two minutes Charlie York, supermodel, super bitch, had destroyed her budding high self-esteem and Penny found herself floundering back at square one.

Charlie had made Penny look foolish in front of Luke. Worse, Penny had let her. She'd just walked away without so much as an angry glare. Chris Marks had put his hand on her and she'd threatened to shove it up his ass. Charlie York insults her and what does she do? Hide in the bathroom.

"Penny?"

Luke's voice preceded a gentle rapping on the bathroom door and a quiet creaking as the door opened. Luke's head appeared around the edge of the door. "Are you alone?"

Penny nodded and he came in.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he drew her to him and held her against his chest.

She snuggled against Luke's warm body and let the sound of his heartbeat soothe her nerves.

"Don't let that spiteful brat spoil our night," he said.

"It wasn't just Charlie. I've been hearing whispers all night. I've tried to ignore them but Charlie was the last straw."

"Whispers? About what?"

"About us. How you're using me for rebound sex, how I'm using you for your money, how you must be either blind or desperate or both to be sleeping with a frumpy cow like me..."

Luke's jaw clenched so hard his skin paled. "Charlie," he ground out. He tilted Penny's face up so she had to look at him. "Well, we can discount the first two comments, to begin with. We

both know I'm using you for revenge and you're the one using me for sex," he said with such a straight face that Penny burst out laughing.

Luke's face softened and he smiled. "Much better," he said as he wiped away an errant tear from her cheek. "As for that last comment, I am neither blind nor desperate, and you, my sweet woman, are beautiful."

Luke's words wrapped Penny up in a world of confusion. She wanted to believe him, she wanted to shrug her shoulders and shake it off and be the confident woman she'd been at the beginning of the night, before Charlie's little barbs started sticking in her flesh and stinging her pride.

But the simple fact of the matter was that Charlie's words sounded so much more familiar to her than Luke's.

All her life she was told how unwanted she was for one reason or another, and apparently it was going to take more than two weeks of being told otherwise to change her psyche's mind.

Luke sighed. "You don't believe me, do you?"

Penny opened her mouth to answer but no words came out. She shook her head, unable to speak.

Luke cupped her face in his hands and stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "Is it because Selina took every ounce of self worth you ever had and ground it into dust? Is it because that self-serving, sanctimonious, miserable bitch forced all of her own insecurities down your throat, raising you to believe you're not worth a damn just so she could feel good about herself?"

Penny opened her mouth again but closed it when she felt the tears filling her eyes. Her chest felt tight and her stomach churned but she nodded her head, acknowledging her shame.

"You are a beautiful, sexy, passionate woman, Penny Royale. I'm going to tell you that as

often as I have to. Until you believe me.”

She searched Luke’s eyes, looking for the truth in his words. “Why?”

“Because you *are* worth a damn, Penny. No matter what anyone else tells you, you are worth a damn to me!”

Without another word Luke slashed his mouth over hers, telling her he believed what he was saying to be true. He believed she was beautiful. He believed she was sexy. He believed she was passionate. Then she believed it too.

Penny leaned into Luke’s kiss, deepened it and entwined his tongue with hers. Luke growled against her mouth as he backed her against the bench and lifted her onto its edge. He slid his hands under her skirt and up her thighs, spreading them wide, nestling himself between them, and then his fingers curled around the edges of her knickers and yanked at them so urgently they ripped apart.

“I’ll buy you more.” His lean fingers made short work of the zipper at Penny’s back. “Oh, honey,” he groaned as he tugged her dress down and revealed the black silk and lace strapless bra that she’d finally had the guts to wear, and no longer had the knickers to match.

Penny clawed at Luke’s chest. She wanted to rip his shirt off, his pants off, to feel the heat of his potent masculinity inside her, filling her. Burning her up from the inside out. She gasped as his fingers slipped inside her and stroked her wet, hot centre, penetrating her body, pistoning into her with the same forceful determination that he’d seduced her with the night before, bringing her easily to orgasm, his mouth muffling her cry of ecstasy as her hips bucked against his hand.

Luke held her tightly as her pleasure subsided, but before her trembling ceased he bent his head to tease her nipples from their silky prison with his teeth, and she shivered with renewed anticipation, biting her lip so hard to stifle her lustful moan she was amazed she didn’t taste

blood.

She watched as Luke pulled back and released his rock-hard cock, exposing it to her appreciative gaze and eager caresses. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a condom, violently ripped the packet open with his teeth and quickly sheathed himself, then yanked her forward, tilted her hips, and thrust inside her.

“You’re so tight,” he said as he wrapped one arm firmly around her back and held her close. “Feels so good.”

His mouth crashed against hers in awkward, jerky movements, mimicking their bodies as he slammed himself deeper inside her. Penny slid her hands under his jacket and raked her nails down his back, drawing him closer still, wanting all of him—his heart, his soul. But she would settle for his body. For now.

Luke kissed a trail across her cheek, his tongue flicked out and circled the shell of her ear before licking a path down her throat. The ensuing sensation was that of unrepentant desire, desire that was demanding release, making her want to scream with the frustration of keeping quiet. She tunnelled her fingers through Luke’s hair and forced his mouth back to hers, the heat of his twisting tongue the only thing capable of ensuring her silence.

All too soon the tension of her building climax made her whimper and writhe. The hurried, powerful thrusts of her lover’s hips, the thought they might be discovered at any moment, the heat of his breath against her neck and face—

It was all too much.

Her body began to spasm, her breasts heaving with every gasping breath. Luke tightened his grip on her and jerked his body into hers one, two, three times. He rested his head against her sweat-slicked breasts and she held him there with shaking hands.

Slowly the blood stopped pounding in her ears and her breathing calmed to normal. Luke lifted his head and Penny reached up to stroke his cheek. She snaked her hand around his neck and pulled him back for one last lingering kiss, and then he helped her to her feet and they made themselves presentable.

Luke zipped up Penny's dress while she checked her hair and makeup in the mirror, then realised in wide-eyed horror that Luke had been facing the mirror the entire time.

He hadn't only participated in their tryst, he had watched it, too.

At first the thought mortified her, but then she saw his reflection grinning at her and she couldn't help laughing at herself, at him.

At the torn knickers he was shoving in his pocket.

Luke nuzzled the back of her neck and slid his hands under her skirt again, squeezing her naked ass with one while slipping a long, lean finger through her slick curls to rub at her clit with the other.

Penny slapped his hands away even as she giggled, then thanked God the skirt of her dress came down to her knees. All she had to do now was avoid sitting down. And strong updrafts.

Chapter Fourteen

Luke awoke alone.

He didn't like it.

Last night in his bed, he and Penny had made love. Passionate, intimate, devoted love. And Penny had finished what she'd started in her bed. Luke tucked his hands behind his head and grinned at the ceiling as he remembered Penny's luscious mouth wrapped around his cock, devouring him with the same gusto with which she'd sucked down those sticky pastries at Mama's Table, his hands fisted in her hair as her mouth jack-hammered up and down his erection.

His already stiff cock hardened even more.

He groaned. He needed her deep, soft, tight body. He wanted her back in bed, under him, on top of him. As long as she was naked and in his arms he didn't care. He just wanted her. In his life. Forever.

He threw back the sheet and moved to sit on the edge of the bed, leaning his arms on his knees and resting his head in his hands.

Life was so much simpler without women.

If they weren't trying to steal his money, they stole his heart. And so far there was only one woman who couldn't care less about the size of his bank account, who knew that there was more to life than money.

Penny valued friendship and honesty. She trusted him. Even after everything he'd put her through, she trusted him. There was nothing Luke wouldn't do to keep that trust.

Almost nothing.

He wouldn't give up his plans for revenge, not only because Selina Royale deserved to be knocked off her perch, deserved to be revealed and reviled for the mendacious bitch she was, but as long as he sought that plan of action he could keep Penny by his side, and in his bed.

Once all of this was over, once Penny got the evidence Luke needed, he wasn't altogether sure he wouldn't lose her. Was she just playing along until she knew her business was safe? Luke had assured her he would protect her but there was every possibility—

No. Penny trusted Luke. He was certain. He had to be.

He had to trust her too.

Luke stood up and stretched, then fell purposefully to the floor with a thud. He hadn't liked waking up alone, his body so tense with need. He knew of only three things that helped relieve that tension. He couldn't face a cold shower, Penny had already left the bed, and that left push-ups.

If he'd been single or gone to bed alone it wouldn't have been a problem. Luke would happily push out fifty or more reps just to wake himself up properly before facing another punishing day in the corporate world. Hell, he'd done push-ups almost every morning since he was thirteen just to try and bulk up his already freakishly tall frame. But he'd discovered they had other benefits when he was sixteen and started dating girls, before he'd discovered sex was a much more satisfying way of relieving tension.

But going to sleep with a beautiful woman in his arms meant his body expected a beautiful woman to be beside him when he woke up, and that meant his arousal was more demanding and tense than usual. But pushing out a solid fifty was enough to take the edge off anybody.

Luke slowly rose to his feet again and listened hard. No noise. Cassie must still be asleep.

But where was Penny? He pulled on an old pair of board shorts and went in search of her. He found her in the large open living space, her feet together, legs straight, hands on the floor, eyes closed, her glorious ass pointed squarely at him.

He hadn't heard Penny because she was doing yoga in the lounge room.

Luke just stood in the hallway and watched. She looked so sexy in her indecently short candy striped boxer shorts and tight, pink curve-hugging singlet as she moved from one impossibly twisted position to the next.

He thought about doing more push-ups but he really didn't think they'd help at this point. Slowly he stalked towards Penny. She turned at the sound of creaking floorboards and greeted Luke with a smile.

"Good—"

Luke stole her greeting with a volatile kiss, his tongue lashing against hers, his lips crushing her lips, but before he could push her to the floor and satisfy his lust right there on the lounge room rug, he heard the sound of a throat clearing. Luke released Penny's lips and turned his head towards the dining table.

So much for Cassie sleeping in, he thought irritably.

She was reading the Sunday morning paper and sipping orange juice. Her eyes danced with good humour. She turned the newspaper around so he could see why. The social pages were filled with pictures of couples at various events from Saturday night, including Grant Bellows's wine launch.

Luke took the page from her and looked at the photos. He grinned at the one of him and Penny in a passionate embrace, oblivious to the camera. Their lips were locked, his hands groping her ass, a filmy scrap of lace protruded from his pocket, and under the photo were a few

words describing how the couple-of-the-moment was more steamy than the balmy Brisbane nights.

There was also an interesting shot of Grant and Charlie. While Charlie was clinging to Grant for dear life, the wine maker's eyes seemed bashfully engaged elsewhere.

"Poor bloke," grunted Luke. "I hope he's as sensible as he seems and gets rid of that gold-digging twit quickly."

"Oh, he is," Cassie said, "and he has."

"How do you know?" Luke asked with a frown as Penny sidled up to him and slid her arms around his middle. He draped his arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to her temple, loving the natural easiness they'd fallen into over the past couple of weeks, and loving even more that he no longer had to drag her out into public to get her to touch him.

"Because after you two...*disappeared*...Grant followed Charlie outside to have a few quiet words, only they didn't stay very quiet. He called her a 'childish, money-grubbing poser' and she called him 'an old leather handbag.' Then he told her it was over and she told him to jump overboard. Then Charlie teetered away on those *ridiculously* high heels of hers and began drinking whatever she could lay her hands on, and Grant asked me to dance. He's going to be my escort for the ball, by the way."

"I see," Luke said slowly as that last tidbit of information sank in. "Does he know about...?"

Cassie stiffened defensively. "Yes, he does, and no, he doesn't care."

Luke nodded and said no more on the subject. "Well, my lovely ladies, what do you wish to do this morning? The sun is shining, birds are singing, and my stomach is grumbling. Got any more of that juice?"

* * * *

The barbeque was just getting under way when Penny ushered Luke and Cassie through the dark brown brick house to the extensive garden beyond. Angie spotted them as soon as they exited the kitchen door and rushed forward to welcome them to her home. She hugged Penny and Cassie, then spoke in a flourish of Italian to Luke, who laughed in response to whatever was said.

“Come, come, eat, drink. We have much to celebrate. And you,” she said to Cassie as she put her hands on her hips. “You need fattening up. Come.”

Penny and Cassie laughed as Angie dragged Cassie away to a trestle table overloaded with the usual fare of pasta and salads and wine, but Luke was frowning again.

“Let her have some fun, Luke. She isn’t dead yet,” Penny said, more bluntly than she’d intended.

Luke turned his intensified frown on her, his golden eyes glazed with pain and irritation. “Don’t presume to know my mind just because we’re sleeping together.”

Penny grabbed Luke’s hand and dragged him back into the kitchen. “I don’t presume anything. I’m only telling you what Cassie is too afraid to tell you herself.”

“Cassie tells me everything,” he argued stubbornly.

“Not when she thinks it’ll upset you more than her, she doesn’t. She loves you so much, Luke. She wants to protect you just as much as you want to protect her. She knows she’s dying. She doesn’t need you telling her she can’t do things just because she’s sick. Let her have some fun.”

“I don’t tell Cassie she can’t do things just to be a killjoy, Penny. Every time she overdoes it she weakens just that little bit more, steps a little closer to death’s door, and call me selfish if you like, honey, but I want my little sister to hang around for as long as possible.”

“Of course you do,” Penny said quietly as she stroked his stubbled cheek. “Cassie wants that too, but don’t you think she should have some say in how she spends the last of her time?”

Luke bowed his head. Penny took his hands again.

“Look at her, Luke,” she said as she led him to the kitchen door. “She’s the same vivacious Cassie she’s always been. She’s a people person. She needs to be around people. How do you think she got Cassidy Holdings back on top so fast? Because she’s good with people and people are business. She spends most of her time confined to a hospital, Luke. If she wants to let loose on the weekends, then why shouldn’t she? She’s earned it.”

They watched Cassie for a moment, talking and laughing, easily conversing with people she’d never met before. Luke leaned back against the door frame and pulled Penny into his arms. He held her close and rested his chin on her head.

“I know you’re right,” he said quietly, “but she’s all I have left, Pen.”

Penny stiffened in Luke’s arms and she felt the sting of tears fill her eyes as she remembered the truth of their relationship.

None of this was real. All of it was temporary. *Cassie* was all he had left.

Even so, she empathised. Luke had never been alone. But Penny had. She’d spent most of her life alone, dreaming of the family that would never be hers.

“I never really had a family, so I don’t know how it must feel to lose the people you love one by one, but I do know that when you find people who make you feel as though you belong, who are willing to go out of their way to help you...people who make you feel safe and actually give a damn—” Penny stopped as Luke hugged her tighter. “Those people are your family, Luke. It doesn’t have to end with Cassie.”

Luke tilted Penny’s chin up and gazed into her eyes. He smiled and stroked her cheek, his

warm knuckles gently grazing her flesh, making her shiver with longing, with need.

“Penny, I want to—” Luke’s mobile phone started ringing. He swore softly as he pulled the phone from his jeans pocket and looked at the caller display. “I’m sorry, honey, I have to take this. Business.”

Penny nodded and he moved away. Two minutes and several grunts of acknowledgement later, Luke shoved his phone back in his pocket. “Is everything all right?” she asked.

“Yeah. Great, actually. I just received some very useful information on a project I’m working on. A friend of mine in Hong Kong has been doing some consulting work for me. I have to fly over and see him next week.”

“Next week?”

“Just for a few days,” Luke assured her.

“Will you be back in time for the ball?”

“Definitely.” Luke smiled as he pulled Penny into his arms again. “After all the teasing Cassie put me through last night, I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Teasing? she thought. What teasing?

* * * *

Penny sat in near silence during the drive home. Friday night seemed like a lifetime ago. She tried to imagine what Luke would have said, what he would have done if she’d let those three little words slip out.

I love you.

Would he have laughed at her? Would he have gone home instead of spending the night and making love to her twice more, gently nudging her awake by nuzzling her breasts and stoking her inner heat back to flaming glorious life with a strong, lean finger?

It didn't bear thinking about. That night she'd decided to live in the moment, because when all of this was over Luke would be gone and she would be alone again.

Only she didn't want to be alone anymore. Penny wanted Luke in her life. As more than just a friend.

At the barbeque, she'd watched him laughing with Angie and her family, his manners all charming and easy. Angie had told Penny that Luke was perfect for her, and she knew the old woman had offered to find Luke a wife.

Did Angie tell Luke to marry her? If Angie had her way she'd be planning the wedding already. She wasn't to know their relationship was a farce. She wouldn't understand the pretence of love being used to seek revenge.

And what a revenge it would be now that Penny had given in to her lust and made love with Luke. Sure, he said he didn't want revenge on her now, said he believed her remorseful apology for her part in the Cassidy Holdings deal, but what if he was lying?

Luke used women up and tossed them aside like old news, and he didn't even have vendettas against them. Now that he'd taken her to bed, and taken her virginity no less, his revenge would be sweet, indeed. When all of this was said and done, he would leave her and take her broken heart with him.

After dropping Cassie off at the hospital, Luke decided he would rather stay at Penny's house for the night than go home to his cold, empty penthouse. Funny how it never seemed that way before he took Penny there. Now he couldn't stand being there unless she was there with him, filling it with her warmth and laughter.

"I actually have a slow Monday for a change. Thought it might be nice to sleep in, start late, maybe go to the book shop with you for coffee before I start work."

He watched Penny open the door and stroll inside, tossing her keys in a shallow crystal bowl on the dresser by the door. She went to the kitchen and deposited barbeque leftovers in the fridge, then turned around to lean back against the fridge door.

Luke reached for her and pulled her into his arms. Her resistance, while token, made him nervous. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

Penny nodded and hid her face in his chest.

"Are you sure?"

"It's been a very long weekend. I'm just tired."

Luke scooped her up in his arms and carried her down the hallway.

"What are you doing?"

"Relax," he said softly. He carried Penny to the bathroom and gently placed her on the padded wrought-iron stool beside the old claw-foot bathtub. "Don't move." Soon hot water and bubble bath filled the bathtub and lavender-scented steam filled the air.

Luke knelt in front of Penny and removed her shoes, then thumbed open the buttons of her pink cotton blouse. He pushed the garment from her shoulders and smiled at the plain white bra beneath, then leaned forward and pressed his lips to the warm fleshy crescents that showed above the cups.

"Stand."

She stood as commanded. Luke unfastened her denim shorts and eased them down her legs to reveal white cottontail knickers. He gazed up at her and thanked God she didn't have her hair in ponytails today. It would have been his undoing to see her wearing such virginal garb teamed with those schoolgirl ponytails she used to wear. Too much like his old fantasies. Exactly like his old fantasies. He curbed a wicked grin as he wondered if she owned any knee-high socks and

patent Mary Janes.

Luke slowly slid her knickers down, leaned forward to press a kiss on her lips, then stood to remove her bra, slowly dragging it down her arms and casting it aside, admiring the way her full breasts fell naturally against her chest, how they beckoned him to touch, to suckle.

His own clothes came off with a lot more haste and a lot less grace before he helped her into the bath and slid in opposite her.

It was a tight fit in the big antique bathtub. Either occupant would have filled it quite nicely just by themselves, but the way in which limbs had to be placed and bodies had to touch to make room for them both made for some very delightful friction. Luke grinned at the sight of himself squeezed into the tub with her, his feet on the bath rim both sides of her shoulders.

He held Penny's feet against his chest and massaged them. His strong fingers kneaded and rolled her toes and arches until her head fell back, eyes closed, a sensual smile playing around her mouth.

"You know, for a tall woman you have very small feet," observed Luke with a teasing tone.

Penny laughed and opened her eyes as she played with Luke's toes. "And for a big man you have enormous feet."

Luke grinned broadly and waggled his eyebrows. "You know what they say about men with big feet..." Penny returned his grin. "Come to Hong Kong with me."

"I can't go to Hong Kong."

"Why not? It's only for a couple of days and Karen is more than capable of running the shop while you're away."

"It's not that, Luke. I don't have a passport. Selina would never let me get one and even after I was on my own...where would I go?"

“Haven’t you ever wanted to travel?”

“Of course I have. I’d love to see Britain and Canada...”

“Italy?” he asked hopefully.

“And Italy.”

“Then it’s agreed. You get a passport sorted out and I will take you to Italy. Then we can compare the wines of *Italia* to those of Western Australia.”

“Western Australia...?”

“Margaret River wine region, remember? The Chocolate Factory? I thought we’d go the week after the ball.”

Penny’s brow creased as she stared hard at Luke. “But, I thought...wasn’t that just part of our cover story?”

“And what cover story is that, then?” he said carefully.

“That we’re lovers.”

“We are lovers, Penny.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. This isn’t a real relationship. It’s all for show. Isn’t it?”

“Honey, this has been a real relationship since I stopped blackmailing you.”

Penny’s frown deepened. “But Friday night was the first time we...*you know*.”

Luke sighed even as he smiled. “Sex has nothing to do with relationships, Pen. As tortuous as the past two weeks have been, keeping my hands to myself and getting to know you better has only made me want to be with you even more. The sex is just a bonus. If you think about it, it was a very old-fashioned way of doing things, but then everything about you, Penny Royale, is a little old-fashioned,” he said with a grin and a sweep of his arms that encompassed her house

filled with antiques.

Penny blushed and smiled. "I like older things. They're more homey."

"Does that include me?" he teased.

"I'm not sure I'd call you homey," she said.

"Then what am I?"

"Provocante."

Luke laughed as he hauled her into his lap and splashed half the water out of the tub in the process. "You think I'm sexy, huh?"

"You know you are."

"Do I?" He chuckled as he tickled the side of her throat with his feathery kisses and seized both of her big soft breasts in his hands, gently squeezing, making her wriggle against his chest, making his cock thicken with lust.

"You like my breasts, don't you?"

"What gave me away?" he said as he rolled her nipples between his fingers.

He felt Penny draw in a deep breath. "Why do you only date skinny women?"

Luke sighed heavily. He knew this would come up again sooner or later. How should he answer? How could he possibly explain it, to her of all people?

"I'll make you a deal. If you promise to come away with me to Western Australia for a week's holiday, I promise I'll tell you why I dated so many curve-challenged women. What do you say?"

Chapter Fifteen

The week before Luke left for Hong Kong passed too quickly. The week he was gone passed too slow. But Penny had plenty to keep her body and mind occupied and off her problems. All except one.

How the hell was she going to get Selina to admit her wrongdoings?

The week before Luke left, Penny had lunch and dinner with Selina twice, and the only thing she'd accomplished was to finally get Selina to hand over her money. But as Luke said, that at least was something.

Penny still recorded their conversations and Luke still listened to them to try and catch Selina out in a lie or decipher any double entendre in her words. But it was just as Penny had warned: Selina had been doing this for a very long time and was very good at keeping secrets.

"I could try making her angry," Penny had suggested over dinner the night before Luke left. "Selina lets all manner of secrets slip when she's angry enough."

"I didn't think the ice queen could get angry."

"She just needs the right motivation, like insulting her appearance or business acumen."

"Really?"

"Really. When I was about sixteen, Selina went to one of those Brisbane-heads-of-industry-luncheon things. I remember her being all excited about going, something about some sexy young entrepreneur she was intending to seduce, but when she came home she was furious. She raged about how he had dared to reject her and how she would get even with him for slighting her...oh, how did she put it? Her delicate sensibilities!"

“Delicate?” Luke had snorted derisively. “That woman is about as delicate as a sledgehammer on glass.”

Then, while Luke was in Hong Kong, Penny had dinner with Selina again, and this time it was Penny who went home furious. With Luke away, Selina obviously saw an opportunity to make mischief. She’d kept on pestering Penny about what men get up to when they’re away on business trips, and that a man with Luke’s reputation for the ladies was bound to stray eventually. After all, most of his relationships only lasted a month or two and he’d already been with Penny for five weeks.

That morning, four hours before Luke’s flight was set to land at Brisbane International Airport, Selina actually entered Royale Teas with a stricken expression on her face. Penny had thought the worst. Luke’s plane had crashed.

But no. Selina had merely come to see if Penny was all right after hearing that Luke had dumped her for one of his exes while away in Hong Kong. At seeing Penny’s blank face she’d then produced the daily newspaper’s gossip page, featuring a colour photo of Luke...with his arms around Charlie York.

* * * *

Penny waited in the back of the black stretch limousine with the window shades raised while the driver waited inside the terminal for Luke. She had wanted to greet him herself but for the first time in weeks cameras seemed to dog her every step, and they too seemed to be awaiting Luke’s return.

No doubt so they could capture the gloriously fiery demise of Brisbane’s steamiest couple.

Penny hid deep inside the limousine’s interior away from the flashing cameras that captured Luke’s every step as he walked from his private jet to the car.

“Where did the paparazzi come from? What the hell is going on?” Luke said, scowling as he slid inside the car and shut the door.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Penny said as she tossed the newspaper article at him.

“What’s this? What the hell is this?” Luke frowned at the article in his hand. “Honey, I have no idea what this is. I haven’t seen Charlie since the wine launch.”

“Really? Because according to that article you spent every night of your trip flitting from one party to the next, *with her*. She’s been over there shooting a photo spread for a magazine or calendar or something.” Penny pinned Luke with a jealous glare. “Are you leaving me for Charlie?”

Luke stretched his arms across the back of the seat, his eyes glowed, and his lips tilted up in that grin she loved so well. There was not even the slightest hint of displeasure in his voice.

“If you thought I was leaving you, then why did you go to the bother of hiring a limo and chilling champagne?” he said, with a nod at the bottle in the ice bucket.

“I organised this before I saw the article. I didn’t see the point in wasting my money by cancelling the service,” Penny said stiffly.

Luke smiled as he sidled closer to Penny on the long cream leather seat that stretched along the interior. She moved further away.

“I promise you, Penny, I did not see Charlie in Hong Kong, nor did I *flit* anywhere. I’ve spent the last four days in airports, on planes, and in meetings.” Luke picked up the article and tapped his finger on the photo. “And this isn’t Hong Kong,” he said. “It’s Sydney.”

“What?” Penny grabbed the newspaper. “How can you tell?”

“The tie. Charlie bought it for me. It was the one and only time I’ve ever worn purple,” he said with a grimace. “The article is bogus, Penny. I’m not going anywhere.”

Penny thought she'd cry, and she wasn't sure if it was from relief or embarrassment. "Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. Selina played me. I've been away from her games for too long. I didn't even see it coming. I'm such an idiot," she groaned.

"No, you're not," said Luke as he took advantage of her distraction and pinned her beneath him on the seat. "I'd probably think the same thing if I was in your shoes. Rest assured, honey, if I was going to leave you, not that I have any intention of doing so, I wouldn't be so cowardly as to do it via a gossip column."

Luke looked around the limo and back at Penny, his golden eyes pools of molten lust. She bit her lip as he slid his hand down her leg and dragged her skirt up her thigh.

"So, why did you hire such a comfy mode of transportation?" he murmured in her ear, his breath like a warm spring breeze on her skin.

"What can I say? I've missed you," she gasped as he slid a finger inside her. "I...I didn't think I could wait until we got home...before the urge to rip your clothes off got the...the better of me."

"All my clothes? I'm not sure we'll have enough time for that."

"I paid him extra to take the long way home."

"Did you, now?" Luke chuckled as he sat up again, unzipped his trousers, and released his rock hard cock. "Well, then, let's not waste time."

An hour later the driver announced they were only five minutes away from their final destination.

"I'll give you ten thousand dollars to keep driving," Luke rasped through the intercom.

"I'm sorry, Mr Hardcastle, but this is the end of the line."

"Make it twenty."

“I’m sorry but—“

“Screw it! How much just to buy the bloody limo?”

The driver’s good-natured chuckles echoed through the intercom. “Let me make a call.”

* * * *

The next day was Saturday. The day of the ball. Penny and Cassie spent the day at a spa being pampered before their big night, and Luke met up with Grant Bellows to do some male bonding and brotherly intimidating before collecting the girls. Final preparations were checked at the Brisbane Convention Centre’s Plaza Ballroom and then the women disappeared again to get ready.

Cassie emerged first. Luke smiled warmly as his sister showed off her soft gold satin and chiffon gown that brushed the floor and floated around her delicate frame like a golden breeze. He had to clear his throat twice before Grant realised he was being handed something.

“I believe this honour is yours now,” said Luke as he handed the man a black velvet box.

Grant fumbled with the latch. He looked so nervous. When Cassie laid her hands on his to steady him, Luke thought he’d drop the box altogether.

“Relax,” she said.

“How can I relax,” Grant whispered, “with you looking like a goddess?”

Luke had to stifle a chuckle. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen his sister blush. Grant opened the box and presented Cassie with beautiful pearl earrings and bracelets. He waited for her to put the earrings on herself, then fastened the wide bracelets, made from strings of cream- and champagne-coloured pearls, to her wrists.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known,” he said as he bent to kiss her.

“Where is Penny?” said Luke impatiently as he checked his watch.

“I’m here.”

Luke turned with a mind to admonish her tardiness, but when he saw her all thought and speech deserted him. There stood the woman he loved, with her beautiful body outfitted to perfection in a red silk satin creation that would have put Jessica Rabbit to shame.

“I told you so,” Cassie teased.

Luke took a moment to absorb the vision standing before him. The halter dress left nothing to the imagination as it clung to every luscious curve of Penny’s body. The plunging V neckline showed her gorgeous breasts off to perfection, and a series of high splits in the flowing red fabric that cascaded from her hips revealed one long, smooth leg after the other as she glided towards him on red satin stilettos that were laced up her calves with red satin ribbons. Her long chestnut brown hair had been styled in soft 1930s waves and her sensual pout was painted as red as the dress.

It was a full minute before Luke found his tongue. “You know, no one would miss us if we didn’t go,” he said, trying for all he was worth to sound nonchalant.

Penny smiled and took Luke’s breath away for a second time.

He had to touch her, he had to hold her in his arms and feel those soft curves pressed against him. He slid his hands into her silky hair and pulled her to him.

He had to taste her. He gently brushed his lips over hers, savouring the softness of her delicious pout, the sweetness of her breath, then he kissed her brutally, not caring about their audience, not caring about anything but the feeling of all-consuming love he felt whenever this woman was in his arms.

When he finally let her go, he presented her with the jewelry he’d bought her for the occasion. Diamonds.

Lots and lots of diamonds.

“Are those real?” Penny gasped. Luke smiled as he fastened the Art Deco drop earrings through her ears and then fastened two wide matching diamond cuffs to her wrists.

“Every carat. All forty-seven of them.”

Penny’s eyes widened impossibly. “Luke, I couldn’t possibly wear these. I’ll be terrified of losing them.”

“Nonsense.” He stroked a finger along the side of her throat and down the expanse of her décolletage, brushing against the side of her breast. “You look absolutely breathtaking.”

* * * *

When they arrived at the ball they were confronted by the usual media storm. The red carpet was lined with reporters and photographers and filled with their fellow guests. Penny was overwhelmed by the spectacle but Luke kept one strong hand firmly on the small of her back and guided her ever forward until they were safely inside.

If inside the ballroom could be called safe.

Even upon entry, Penny could hear Selina laughing like a jackal, fawning over some young man too stupid to know a succubus when he saw one.

Then there were the models.

Penny hadn’t seen the revised guest list until she and Cassie had come by to check the final details. One whole table had been bought by Mod Dolls Modeling Agency, the agency that Charlie York was contracted to, as well as three other ex-girlfriends of Luke’s. Penny could see them lapping up the attention of the crowd of men that had flocked to them. Charlie in particular looked incredible.

Penny’s old insecurities began creeping sideways through her brain, but just as she lifted a

hand to fiddle nervously with her hair, Luke took her hand and skirted the edge of the room. He pulled her aside into the concourse off the main ballroom and, ignoring the comings and goings of the wait staff, he quickly pressed her up against the wall and slashed his mouth over hers.

Penny forgot all about feeling nervous and insecure. Now she just felt like crawling all over Luke, this amazing man who held her like she was the most valuable thing in the world.

She slid her hands under his jacket, over his chest, and around his back, feeling his strong, taut muscles flex under her fingertips. Luke's offer to ditch had been tempting. In a black Armani dinner suit with a crisp white shirt and white bowtie, he looked good enough to eat. And his spicy scent was driving her wild.

Luke groaned as she worked her lips down his neck and back again before nibbling on his earlobe. He slid his hand down to the splits in her dress and eased the satin aside, then hooked her thigh in his hand and hoisted her leg around his hip. She tried to resist him. She really did.

"People are watching us."

"I don't care. I want you," he breathed on her neck.

"Luke," she whimpered as he licked the hollow of her throat. "We can't."

"We can. There's a hotel next door. Let's get a room. No one will miss us."

"Your apartment is only ten minutes down the road."

"I don't think I can wait that long," he said. "I just want to strip you. This dress is disturbingly arousing, and I just know you'll be wearing equally inspirational knickers," he added as he pressed his thigh hard between her legs, the instant sensation of hard muscle and soft lace being smashed against her clit making her weak at the knees.

"What about my shoes?" Penny said raggedly as she squirmed against Luke, her hips gyrating of their own accord against his body.

“The shoes stay,” Luke said against her neck. “And the diamonds.”

“We can’t. Cassie’s counting on us.”

Luke made a frustrated noise. Slowly he released her leg, then leaned his forehead against hers as their breathing calmed. He shifted against her and she felt him adjust himself.

“Then, shall we?” he said with a resigned sigh as he held out his arm.

It didn’t take long for Penny and Luke to be separated, and once separated, it didn’t take long for the vultures to start circling.

Selina was the first to swoop.

“So he took you back, did he? I must say I am relieved.”

“Oh?”

“Of course I am, darling. How else are you going to keep spying on him for me if you’re not sleeping with him?”

“Of course.” Penny sighed.

“But I am impressed that his floozy would turn up to the same event he takes his lover to. I can’t tell if she’s incredibly brave or just downright stupid. And my, my, haven’t we been decked out to the nines tonight? What’s all that bling worth, do you think? Two, three hundred thousand? A cool half million, perhaps?”

Penny couldn’t miss the acidic note of resentment in her aunt’s voice. “I didn’t think to ask.”

“It must be nice...but no, I shouldn’t say anything.”

Penny tried her hardest not to roll her eyes. She was not going to fall for Selina’s tricks again.

“Yes, you should, Aunt Selina. What were you going to say?”

“Well, it’s just that with all the money he throws at you, the dresses, the jewelry...your house, well, you’ve finally stepped up.”

“Stepped up?” Penny’s jaw was beginning to hurt from clenching it so tightly while forcing the smile to stay on her lips.

“Yes, after all the fuss you made over the man when you left Royale Industries, about morals and codes of ethics, et cetera, it’s just good to see that you’ve realised what utter foolishness it all was.”

“How exactly did you come to that conclusion?”

“Because you’re taking him for all his worth, darling. The ice dripping from your every limb tonight proves that, and I must say bravo! Gold-digging whores the world over will be clamouring to learn your secrets. Tell me—”

“Penny, here you are. I need you.” Cassie tugged on Penny’s arm and dragged her away from Selina. “Are you all right, Pen? You look about ready to explode.”

Penny took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I think that’s what she had in mind.”

“Maybe you should go find Luke. From what I saw of him earlier, I think he could use your company, too.”

* * * *

Luke lost sight of Penny just as she was accosted by Selina. He was introduced to a number of people from the Cancer Foundation and chatted quietly with one of Cassie’s doctors. But just as he was accepting a glass of champagne, he found himself being confronted by two men he didn’t know.

“Matt Taylor,” announced the first man. “Royale Industries.”

“Doug Sands.”

“Luke Hardcastle,” Luke said coolly as he recognised their names and shook their hands a little more firmly than necessary.

“Oh, we know who *you* are,” Matt said with a leering grin. “And we just wanted to ask you, how did you do it?”

Luke regarded Matt Taylor with unabashed disdain. The man was at least four inches shorter than Luke and very thin. Definitely not man enough to handle Penny when she was in a passionate mood.

“Do what, exactly?”

“Transform Penny Royale from virgin to vixen,” chimed in the other one. “Who knew she could look like that?”

Luke narrowed his eyes as he weighed and measured Doug Sands. This one reminded Luke of a bulldog: short, brawny, and tactless.

“Penny is not a subject open for discussion,” Luke said tightly. Taylor and Sands grinned at each other.

“So she’s giving you the runaround too, huh?”

“Can’t say I’m surprised. Bloody virgin. I dated her for a month and got nowhere, although if I’d known she could look like that I might have persevered.”

“I tried every trick in the book and got little more than a kiss out of her. Six weeks I wasted on that fat—”

Luke’s glass stem snapped and the flute smashed on the floor, splattering his shoes with glass and champagne.

“One more word about Penny and I’ll personally throw you both out on your asses,” he menaced through gritted teeth. “Stay the hell away from her or you’ll deal with me.”

Both men cringed and backed away. Luke was a big man and knew his ferocious temper had become the stuff of legend. He didn’t lose it often, but when he did it was spectacular. The two

smaller men scurried away like rats under Luke's blazing glare.

Luke looked down at his hand. He was bleeding. After asking for directions to a first-aid kit and assuring an overly friendly waitress that he was quite capable of applying a Band-Aid by himself, Luke patched up his hand.

"Hardcastle, I've been looking for you."

"Chris Marks." Luke closed the first-aid kit with a bang. "Well, doesn't this night just get better and better?"

* * * *

Penny wandered around the ballroom searching for Luke until she spied him disappearing into the concourse again with another man. She followed after them, but as she reached the entrance to the concourse she slowed her pace. She could hear raised voices. Luke's voice. Penny quickly looked about to see if anyone else had heard the commotion but no one seemed to be paying any attention.

Good, she thought, I can stop them before it escalates into something newspaper-worthy.

She stuck her head around the corner to see Luke standing over that bastard reporter. He looked furious. She pulled back a little and remained hidden. If Chris Marks was about to get a dressing-down from Luke, then Penny wouldn't dream of interrupting.

"Stay away from Penny, Chris. I won't have her upset. Not tonight."

"Oh, come off it, Luke. Everyone knows your whole relationship is a lie. Just admit it."

Luke was quiet for a moment. "What's in it for you if it is?"

Penny frowned.

"Money. I don't know why you and that fat sow are playing happy families and I don't care, but if you want me to stay quiet and keep your little secret out of the papers, then you will pay

me for the privilege.”

“I see,” Luke said.

“It is, isn’t it? This is all some elaborate set-up. I knew there was something screwy going on that night I saw you at the quays. The way you watched her. It just wasn’t right. And the anonymous e-mail I got that night just before leaving work, tipping me off to a juicy story...it was you, wasn’t it?”

Penny stifled a gasp behind her hand. An e-mail tipping Marks off? No one but Luke knew she was going to his house that night. Penny hadn’t even known herself. It had to have been Luke. He’d lied to her. He had set her up. Did that mean everything else was a lie, too?

“But why? What’s in it for you? A little payback perhaps for what the Royales did to your sister?” Chris continued.

“I thought you said you didn’t care.”

“I care if it means a front-page article. But I’d be willing to console myself with cold hard cash.”

“How much?”

“To keep it out of the papers? Or to keep it quiet from Miss Royale, too? I’ve seen how she looks at you, all doe-eyed. She doesn’t have a clue, does she?”

“How much?”

Penny clutched her chest. Her heart was breaking. She could feel the sting of tears welling in her eyes and heard nothing more over the pounding of her blood in her ears. So Luke had gotten his revenge after all.

But not completely. There was still one Royale standing, and Penny would be damned if she was going down alone. She took a deep breath and turned back to the ballroom. She surveyed the

crowd. Laughing, happy people stood in every direction, mocking her in her despair.

Then she saw her. Selina.

Sudden anger rose up in Penny like a rebellious teenager as she stormed towards her aunt. This was all her fault. All of it could be laid at that harpy's feet. It was time to put an end to this. It was time to knock that vulture off her perch.

It was time to make her angry.

Chapter Sixteen

“You pathetic old hag!”

“I beg your pardon!” Selina spluttered at Penny’s opening volley.

“You heard me.”

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that, you ungrateful—”

“Ungrateful? Ungrateful!” Penny spat, her voice growing louder every second. “What exactly should I be *grateful* for, Aunt Selina? Huh? You tell me!”

“Well, for start—”

“Should I be grateful for the constant insults you threw at me every chance you got, or the impossible standards you set so you could watch me fail, or maybe it was the daily slaps across my face that you think I should show you gratitude for?”

* * * *

“Luke? Luke! Where the hell is my brother?” Cassie snapped as she searched the ballroom. She turned the corner into the concourse just in time to see Luke’s fist connect with Chris Marks’s face. The reporter crumpled to the floor and cradled his bleeding nose.

“Stay the hell away from my family, in person and in print! If you ever try to blackmail me again I’ll bury you.”

“Luke?” Cassie’s tentative voice broke through the testosterone-soaked air and made her brother turn on his heel.

“What?” he snapped.

“It’s Penny.”

“What’s wrong?” His temper receded, instantly replaced with concern.

“Come on,” Cassie said as she grabbed Luke’s arm in one hand and her skirt in the other and ran back to the forefront of an all-out war.

* * * *

“I took you in! I gave you everything!” Selina screamed, her face turning blotchy with rage.

“Saint Selina.” Penny sneered. “You only took me in because the courts forced you to.”

“And didn’t that turn out well?”

“Oh, very well, indeed. You got a slave and I got a first-class ticket to hell.”

“Oh, boo-hoo,” Selina jeered. “You lived in luxury.”

“I lived in a museum. Don’t touch! Don’t talk!”

“Children should be seen and not heard!”

“That’s rich! A whole week would pass and the only communication between us would be via Post-It notes on the fridge. You were never home to see or hear me.”

“Most kids would see that as a blessing.”

“I was nine!”

“What you were was a waste of space! I took you into my home, I educated you at the best schools money could buy, and what did it get me? A useless, good-for-nothing traitor. You were more interested in mooning over the competition than running Royale Industries. How many times did I catch you wasting time staring out the window at Hardcastle Tower? You’re the pathetic one, darling, dreaming of your knight in shining armour. Well, let me clue you in to a few things about Luke Hardcastle—”

“Don’t you dare drag Luke into this! He’s never done anything to you!”

“Oh, hasn’t he? Did he tell you that?” Selina said with a smug smile that promised Penny

wouldn't like what was coming next. "I wonder what other lies he told you to get you into his bed. And you would have swallowed them whole, you stupid girl. Luke Hardcastle is a consummate womanizer. He even tried seducing me a few years ago."

Penny grimaced. "Luke would never stoop so low as to waste his charms on a ridiculous woman like you."

"You doubt me?"

"I doubt everything you say, Selina. You've been telling lies for so long I doubt you'd know the truth if it walked up to you and slapped your face."

"You little bitch! How dare you preach to me? Where are your noble sensibilities now, Penelope? You're his whore, a gold-digging slut, useful only for keeping his bed warm at night!"

* * * *

"Shouldn't you stop them?" Cassie asked anxiously as she clung to her brother.

Luke folded his arms over his chest and shook his head. "Penny knows what she's doing."

"Do *you* know what she's doing?"

* * * *

"What's wrong, Selina? Jealous?" Penny taunted.

Selina stumbled for a retort. Penny went in for the kill. "That's it, isn't it? You're jealous! But what of, I wonder? Maybe that I'm actually making something of myself despite your best efforts to see me fail? Or does it just come down to the fact that a man, this man, actually wants me more than you?"

Selina gasped and stared at Penny with wide eyes, frightened eyes. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

Penny's eyes narrowed as she finally understood Selina's motivation, and then everything

fell into place. All these years, Penny had thought it only coincidence, but there was definitely method to this madness. She spoke slowly, as though weighing the truth of what she was saying.

“At that luncheon, all those years ago, it was Luke that rejected you, wasn’t it?”

“I rejected him!”

“No, it was the other way around, wasn’t it, Selina? Luke rejected you, and we all know what happens when Selina Royale doesn’t get her way. You always said revenge was a dish best served cold and there’s none colder than you. You systematically sought the destruction of everything dear to Luke. You destroyed his family. You could have just tried to take over his company but no, that would have been too easy, too soft.”

Selina leveled a warning look at Penny. She ignored her aunt and continued. “You went after his father first, messed with his suppliers, made it hard for him to finish jobs, forced him into early retirement, then you went after Cassidy Holdings.”

“That is confidential information! You have no right—”

“No! *You* had no right! You did the same thing to George Cassidy that you did to Bill Hardcastle.”

“I did nothing illegal!”

“But you knew it was wrong! You made it hard for Cassidy to stay in business, you squeezed him until he started to fold—oh, but you were so clever, weren’t you, Selina? You took your time, you hid your tracks.”

“Obviously not well enough,” Selina said through gritted teeth, her hands fisted by her sides in rage.

“But then the unthinkable happened. Cassie took over from her father and exacted a turnaround. Cassidy Holdings was profitable again and their share prices began rising. It was

going to cost you a lot more to buy them out and dismantle them. And that really pissed you off. But you found a solution to that problem, too, didn't you?"

Selina's bubbling rage boiled over. "Damn straight I did! That little upstart's cancer was the best thing that ever happened to me. I knew share prices would plummet if the company's CEO was in doubt. I wanted to shout it from the rooftops, but why do that when I have contacts at every television and radio station in town?"

"You disgust me," Penny said.

"The feeling is mutual, I assure you," Selina said, then raised her hand to her chest in a gesture of innocence and mimicked Penny. "Oh, please don't do it, Aunt Selina, it's not ethical, at least pay her a fair price for her family's legacy. Haven't you done enough damage already? Isn't it enough that she's dying? Oh, poor Luke. What he must be feeling..."

Penny glared at her aunt's derision.

"It's no wonder I kicked you out. You were more concerned with protecting Hardcastle's sister than you were with supporting me. I get more loyalty from his secretary than I ever did from you!"

"Luke's *secretary*?"

"Who do you think told me about Cassidy's cancer, you twit? I have spies in every one of my competitor's camps. And don't try to make out that you're an innocent party, Penelope. I'm guessing Mr. Fabulous standing over there doesn't know your part in all of this."

Penny turned her head and saw Luke standing to the side looking even more furious than the day he'd stormed into Royale Industries and demanded to speak with Selina. Cassie stood beside him clutching his arm, her face pale, her mouth open. Penny turned back to Selina.

"Actually, he does know, and he's already punished me for it. More than he knows."

“Oh. My. God!” Selina cackled. “You’re in love with him! You stupid, stupid girl. Have you learned nothing?”

But Penny didn’t stay to hear the rest of Selina’s tirade. She turned and surveyed the silent crowd that surrounded them, eyes wide and mouths hanging open like a hundred goldfish, except that she was the one in the glass bowl.

She ignored the sound of a hundred cameras sounding for all the world like a hundred guns being fired at her public execution and she stood before Luke, her chin raised with the last ounce of dignity she possessed.

“There’s your evidence,” she bit out quietly. “And I hope you bloody well choke on it.”

Just as the telling tears escaped her eyes, Penny shoved her way through the crowd and ran out to the balcony, away from Luke, and certain she’d lost everything she’d ever cared about.

* * * *

Luke glared at Selina with pure hatred. He’d not known about her dealings with his father and stepfather, and Penny had actually broken her confidentiality agreement to tell him. Not only that, but she’d been fired for trying to protect Cassie, a woman she’d never met. Because she loved him.

“I was always yours,” she’d told him once.

He marched toward Selina, his golden eyes shining like the devil’s as he towered over his adversary. “If you even think about retribution against Penny for any of this, I will have you arrested. You should have left well enough alone, Selina.”

“You shouldn’t have said no,” she spat.

“Penny was right. Why the hell would I waste my time with someone like you when I could be with someone like her?”

“What’s she got that I don’t have?”

“That you have to ask, Selina, means you’ll never understand.”

Luke turned his back on Selina Royale, on his hate, on his revenge, and on his past sorrows. Instead he faced the balcony and searched for Penny, his love, his future.

He found her staring out at the city skyline, staring at one of his cranes lit up like a beacon with his company logo. He stood behind her. She was shaking, her body wracked by sobs, her tears falling freely now. Luke wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against his broad chest, holding her even tighter when she fought to free herself from his grasp.

“Leave me alone,” she wept.

“No. Not until you tell me if it’s true.”

“Yes. I wanted to tell you but I was too afraid of what Selina would do to me if I broke the agreement.”

Luke smiled into her hair. “Not that. The fact that you were willing to break your agreement tells me those things were true. I was talking about you loving me. Is that true? Do you love me, Penny Royale?”

“Why? Isn’t it enough that you got revenge on Selina? Do you really need to hear you got your revenge on me, too? I can’t believe I trusted you. Selina’s right. I am a stupid girl.”

Luke spun Penny around and forced her to face him. Her tearstained face wrenched at his gut and he just had to hold her, to comfort and protect her. He tried to pull her into his arms but she put her hands to his chest and shoved him away.

“Honey, I don’t know what you think is going on here—“

“You lied to me, Luke, you betrayed my trust. I overheard your little conversation with Chris Marks.”

“Ahh...what did you hear?”

“Enough.”

“But not all, I’m guessing.”

“No, not all. After you asked him how much money he wanted for his silence I couldn’t stomach listening to anymore. You said it wasn’t a set-up but it was. You set me up and I fell for it. Twice! So how much did it cost you, Luke? How much did he ask for?”

“Half a million dollars.”

“Half a million dollars? I’m worth that much?” she scoffed as she moved away from him.

“You’re worth a lot more than that,” he said as he grabbed her arms to prevent her escape. She struggled to free herself from his grasp but he wasn’t about to let her go. He stilled her and stared into her stormy eyes, determined to make her understand.

“I didn’t pay him, Penny. I punched him. If you had bothered to stick around for the finale you would have heard me say to him what I’ll now say to you. I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.”

“You punched him?” Penny asked, her brow scrunched in confusion. “Why would you punch him?”

Luke smiled and lifted a hand to stroke her cheek. “Because you’re mine, Penny, and I protect what’s mine.”

“But I heard Marks say he received an e-mail...”

“Not from me he didn’t, honey.”

“Then who—”

“It was me. I sent Chris Marks the e-mail divulging your *affair*.” Cassie stood behind Luke, her chin raised defiantly, ready to defend her actions.

“What? But you...Cassie, why?” Luke stared at his sister as though she’d just grown another head. What possible reason could she have for doing such a thing?

“Because you’re an idiot too stubborn to go after the only woman you’ve ever truly wanted to be with. Don’t look at me like that, Luke, you know it’s true. Have you told her yet?”

“I...ah...”

“No, I thought not.”

“Told me what?” Penny asked fearfully as her eyes flicked between Cassie’s cross expression and Luke’s look of warning.

“Why he dates skinny women.”

“No.”

“No time like the present, eh, Luke?”

Luke sighed heavily and knew there was definitely no escaping the question this time.

“Because they’re the complete opposite of you,” he said as he stared into Penny’s turbulent blue-grey eyes, eyes that widened and filled with tears of misunderstanding. “Penny, it’s not what you think,” he hastened to add. “I was infatuated with you. I’ve wanted you since you were sixteen.”

Her brow scrunched in obvious confusion. “You wanted...*me*?”

Luke smiled warmly. “Yes. You. At first your age kept me away, but even as you got older and became more accessible, I still couldn’t bring myself to approach you...because you were Selina Royale's niece.

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but the thought that you might be just like Selina kept me away. It was easier for me to hold on to the fantasy of you than it was to discover what I assumed was the truth. But then the fantasy became too much of a distraction too, so I did everything I could think

of to get you out of my system. So even though I'm attracted to curvy brunettes, I dated women who were your complete opposite. Skinny blondes."

Penny stared at Luke like he was a complete moron. "What on Earth for? Why not just date curvy brunettes?"

"Because they wouldn't be you," he said softly as he stroked her hair, "and that wouldn't be fair to them or me. So tell me, Penny Royale, do you love me?"

Penny bit her lip and nodded. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I love you."

Luke reached inside his jacket and produced a small black velvet box before going down on one knee.

"And will you marry me?" He opened the box to reveal an antique four-carat diamond and platinum ring. Cassie cried and fanned her face with her hands like an overexcited pageant queen.

Penny simply gasped. "Luke, I..."

"Please say yes, honey."

"Yes," she said as the most magnificent smile adorned her face. Luke smiled as he slid the ring on her finger, then stood to pull her into a crushing and passionate embrace.

All around them the sound of applause and cheering erupted like a sudden burst of thunder, the flashing of cameras like lightning accompanying the storm of emotion that had just been witnessed by the Plaza Ballroom.

Grant Bellows appeared by Cassie's side and put a comforting arm around her shoulders, only to have it thrown off as she turned to him and kissed him wildly.

Luke pulled back so he could gaze at Penny. "I wasn't going to ask you until we went to Margaret River, but when I saw you in this dress...Honey, I thought my heart would explode if I

didn't propose to you tonight. I love you so much, Pen," he said as he stroked his thumb over her pretty pout.

A distant voice recalled Luke and Penny to their surroundings. The event's emcee was announcing the evening meal and asking everyone to take their seats.

"Come on, let's go rub Selina's nose in it," Luke said with a wicked twinkle in his golden eyes.

"You'll have to hurry," Grant said. "I saw her running for cover after your...ah, whatever that was. What was that all about anyway?" he asked with a knit brow as the four of them made their way back to the ballroom.

"Love," Cassie sighed.

"I thought it was about revenge," Luke said, looking as confused as Grant.

"Nah, not so much."

Luke stopped and pinned Cassie with an irritated stare. "Then what the hell did we do all this for?"

"Well, I had to bring you two together somehow and submitting to your quest for revenge seemed like the most suitable means of accomplishing that."

"You mean everything Luke and I have done to get Selina's admission of guilt was just a ruse to get us together? Even before you tipped off that horrid reporter?"

Cassie grinned apologetically and shrugged her shoulders. "He loves you, he always has, and I'm not going to be around much longer. I couldn't bear the thought of Luke being on his own, so I did what was necessary."

Grant hugged Cassie tightly. "My little love goddess."

Luke sat down at their table and hauled Penny into his lap. "From now on neither of us need

be alone. Never again, honey. You're my family now, and I'm yours. Forever."

"Forever," she agreed as she snuggled against his shoulder. "I think we can do forever."

"I know we can."

THE END