



# *Playing with Barbie*

*Wynter Daniels*



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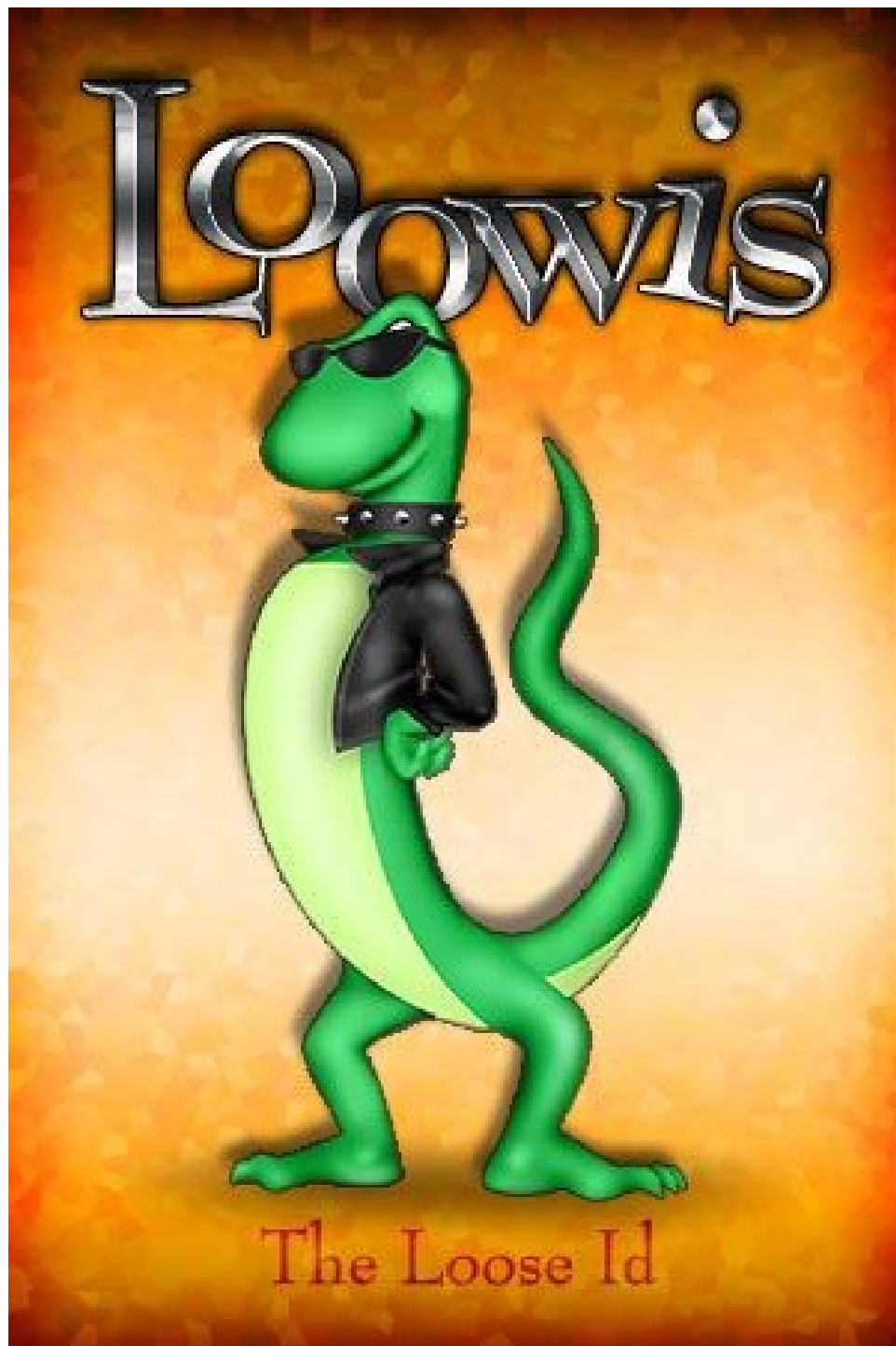
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## Chapter One

Barbie Turner's future hung precariously from a string held by her eighty-year-old grandfather. Emmett Hargrove had trotted into her life fewer than two years ago like a shining white knight or a fairy godfather.

Make that fairy *grandfather*.

"I've booked my reservation." His gravelly cough—the result of a lifetime of cigar smoking—seemed worse than the last time they'd spoken.

She tightened her grip on the phone. He couldn't die yet. She'd only recently learned of his existence, had only had one visit with him. Since her mother's death from lung cancer last year, she had no other family left. "I can't wait to see you again, Grandpa. When will you be here?"

The sound of rustling papers filtered through the line. "Let's see. The twenty-eighth. Three weeks from today. Can you pick me up at Miami International, or must I take a cab?"

Smiling from ear to ear, she crossed the room to the dollhouse she'd picked up at a yard sale. Just like her home, it lacked the warmth of a family. She snatched the grandfather doll from the attic and moved him into the parlor, right beside his blonde granddaughter. "I wouldn't dream of making you take a taxi. I'll be there. Wild unicorns couldn't keep me away." She'd grown to love him in the short time she'd known him, and wished he'd take her offer to have him move in with her more seriously. But he insisted on living out the rest of his life in Connecticut, where he'd been born and raised.

"I'm looking forward to meeting your fiancé. I'm not getting any younger, you know. If I'm going to walk you down the aisle, that wedding had better take place soon." Another hacking cough punctuated his point.

Her stomach roiled. She thought about the steel-reinforced strings that came with Emmett's offer of an early inheritance—she had to be married by her thirtieth birthday. And that day neared, only four months from now. She'd have to find the man of her dreams in a hurry.

Absently she sat the boy doll on the miniature sofa at the other side of the girl. Eventually she'd buy a few kids to complete the house, but for now, she had to squirrel away every penny.

Growing up the only child of a single mother with few marketable skills, the prospect of adding half a million dollars to her bank account meant an end to her constant financial struggles. She could pay off the loan she'd cosigned for her mother, and even pay off part of her own mortgage. Emmett's generous gesture meant her worries of living in a homeless shelter would never again plague her. She and her mother had lived in enough of those miserable places to last a lifetime.

She glanced at the clock. If she left in the next few minutes, she'd be able to make the later service at the Methodist church. Hopefully she'd have better luck finding suitable husband material there than she had at the Baptist, Lutheran, or Episcopalian churches.

"You there, Barbie?"

"Sorry, Grandpa. Just thinking about the wedding." She walked to her desk and slid the drawer open. Two black velvet boxes sat side by side, each containing a gold band. She thought about the size 14 wedding dress she'd bought at the thrift shop, sequestered in a pink zippered bag in the back of her closet, awaiting that special day. Her bridesmaids would wear pink, of course, to match the groomsmen's cummerbunds. She'd meticulously planned every detail.

The only thing missing was the groom. Hopefully she'd meet Mr. Right in a few short minutes.

\* \* \*

Keno Jensen lowered the speed of the treadmill the instant he saw the blonde enter the cardio area of the gym. He grabbed the towel from the side railing and covered his head with it. His long braids made him way too conspicuous. With a little luck, he might escape the place without her notice. How many times had he told himself not to pick up women at places he frequented? Sometimes that behavior bit him in the ass.

He stopped the treadmill, then yanked the towel forward to shroud his face. Turning off Bob Marley on his music player, he stepped off the exercise machine and headed through the long, narrow room toward the door. He avoided looking up at anything. Rather, he stared at the floor and held his breath when he passed the elliptical trainer.

"Keno!"

The shrill voice rattled through him like bad brakes making an unplanned stop. Resigning himself to his fate, he folded back the towel and tried for a surprised expression. “Hello. How are you?” Damned if he could even remember her name. They hadn't spent much time talking that night he'd gone home with her. At least not sober.

Something about her reminded him of his mother, the woman responsible for most of the scars that marred his skin—and his soul.

She squeezed his arm. “I just love that exotic accent of yours.” Hers rang of the South, all twangs and drawls and tea parties.

“Thank you.” He took a step away, freeing himself.

She twirled a bleached curl around her index finger. “I forgot where you told me you were from. Was it Jamaica?”

He cringed. “Trinidad, actually.”

She waved a hand in the air. “I knew you'd said one of those tropical places in the Caribbean.”

Her grating laugh stoked Keno's building headache. “Nice to see you again.” He sidestepped away, but she hooked her arm through his and moved closer.

“I thought you'd have called me by now.” She ran a finger along his arm and met his gaze. “I had a real good time with you last week.”

“Yes, thanks. And I with you.” He took back his arm and winked at her. “Good to see you.” He tried not to lie to women, so he knew he hadn't told her he'd contact her after their...date. He always stuck to his policy—absolutely no strings. Which usually meant no more than one night with a woman. No emotion, no jealousy, and no fights.

He hurried from the room without giving her a chance to respond. His shoulders relaxed as he strolled toward the exit.

“Keno Jensen.”

*What now?* He tensed as he turned toward the husky female voice.

*Aw, shit.*

The club's manager stood behind the reception desk, wearing a scowl. She crooked her finger at him.

His headache flared again. “Good morning, Miss Hewitt. To what do I owe the pleasure?” He gave her a wide smile.

Clair Hewitt paid no heed to his charm. Lesbians never did. In fact, they seemed to genuinely dislike him for some reason.

“We still need to settle this issue of your membership payment. Every month it's something new, isn't it? You know we require automatic debits from a bank, yet you closed your account.” She crossed her beefy arms over her chest.

“How thoughtless of me to move my account to another bank without consulting you first.” He winked at her, hoping she'd lighten up. “I'll bring you my new bank information next time I come. Or if you prefer, perhaps we could make a trade.”

“A trade?” She lifted a bushy eyebrow.

“I'm an artist, you know. I could draw you. In exchange for, say, a few months' payments. If I may be so bold, you'd make a lovely subject.”

Her gaze drifted away, and he suspected she considered his offer. But just as quickly, a scowl marred her harsh features. “I think not. Automatic debit. Period.”

Damn. “As you wish.” With a bow and a flourish, he excused himself.

“No more second chances, Mr. Jensen. I run a business here.”

“I understand perfectly, fair lady.” He made it to the door in seconds flat. So much for the de-stressing effects of exercise.

He'd nearly made it to his car when he spotted two perfect Lycra-covered orbs sticking out of the backseat of the compact parked next to him. Had to be the best ass he'd seen in days. The woman stood and hiked the strap of a gym bag over her shoulder.

Lucky for him, her tennis racket crashed to the asphalt. He raced over and bent to retrieve it before she could.

“Oh, thanks.” She took the racket as her brown eyes quickly swept over him. “I'm such a klutz.”

“My pleasure.” He focused on her lips, usually all he had to do.

“I've seen you here before.” She tilted her head and fluttered her eyelashes. Her glossy dark hair brushed the tops of her shoulders. When she tucked a few pieces behind her ear, he



noticed some silvery roots—and no wedding band on her finger. “Usually in the weights room. I’ve admired your biceps from afar.” A little giggle, light as a feather.

He offered his hand. “Keno.”

She shook with him and took a step closer. “I’m Anne Marie. Very nice to meet you.”

Gesturing past her, he smiled. “I’m parked right here. Have a good workout.”

*Three, two, one...*

“Hey, if you’re interested, here’s my number.”

He turned around, and she handed him a business card.

“See ya.” She lifted an eyebrow, then walked off, swinging her hips.

He shoved the card into the pocket of his shorts.

*I’ve still got it.*

Inside his car, he turned on his cell, then backed out of the parking space. He pulled onto the street and made a left. His phone rang when he stopped for a red light. Glancing down at the display, he saw his agent’s name. Praying Jeff had some work for him, he hit the Send button. “Good morning.”

“Hey, Keno. What’s up with disconnecting your landline?”

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “Decided I didn’t need it.” More accurately, he didn’t need the bill.

“Hmm. I have a last-minute job.”

Thank God. “What is it?”

“I know your first instinct will be to turn this down, but hear me out.”

His mood sank. “That sounds promising.”

“Hey, you want to work or not? Ever hear of Building Blocks Publishing?”

He took a right onto his street. “Sure. Who hasn’t? They publish, like, half of all the children’s books put out.”

“Well, not quite, but they’re huge. One of their illustrators is leaving, and he works with an up-and-coming author, illustrating her books. Real short notice sort of thing. Anyway, they need someone to work with the author on her next book, starting tomorrow.”

"Tomorrow?" He needed the money, but he'd never even done anything like that. "Don't you have anything more in my field?"

"Look, Keno. Everybody and their brother is doing computer graphics for games. You've got way more talent than that. I've seen your paintings and drawings. This could be the start of something huge for you."

He shifted in the seat, mulling over the offer. Parking in front of his apartment building, he sighed. "I don't know."

"The company's seen your work, and they're impressed. Only thing is..."

Damn it. He knew there had to be a catch. "What?"

"It's nothing, really. Only the author is a bit of a control freak. Insists the illustrator work with her at her house." He let out a loud breath. "I know how you are, my friend. She's a young, single woman. And I'd hate for you to screw this up by sleeping with her."

He slapped a hand to his chest, laughing. "What are you accusing me of?"

"Hey, I've partied with you, man. I know how the ladies go for your long hair and your flowery accent."

"Flowery accent?" He climbed out of his car, grinning.

"Yeah. And I know you're a love-'em-and-leave-'em kind of guy. Wouldn't be smart to play this one that way."

He rolled his eyes toward the heavens. "Give me some credit, Jeff. I know where my bread is buttered." And he knew all too well that if he didn't find a paying job quickly, he'd be in deep guano. He could work around a woman without bedding her.

"As long as you're not buttering this lady's snatch, you'll be fine."

"You're a crude man, my friend. But trust me. You have my word." If this woman wrote children's books, she probably resembled a mousy librarian. He'd have no problem keeping their relationship platonic and professional. So what that he'd slept with every woman he'd ever worked with.

Crossing the threshold into his flat, he glanced at the large canvas leaning against the wall. He yearned to complete the painting, which promised to be one of his best ones yet. But he'd run

out of supplies—expensive supplies. He'd never been so desperate to make money before. Certainly he could banish his libido between nine and five each day.

*I hope.*

## Chapter Two

Barbie buzzed through her house Monday morning, straightening in preparation for Michael's arrival. He'd illustrated her first two Honey Bunny books, and they were nearly through with the third.

She tried to put on a cheery face, but after leaving the Methodist church alone yesterday, she could barely manage a smile. All the single men had gravitated toward the thin women. She'd ended up sitting in a pew with two other plus-sized parishioners.

Her grandfather would arrive in a few short weeks, and she'd be forced to confess she had no fiancé. His half-million-dollar gift would disappear like a puff of smoke, and she'd have to sell her precious house.

*Unless...*

An idea materialized in her mind. Could Michael be the man she'd been praying for? Sure, she'd only known him less than a year, and he hardly ever said a word, but he seemed kind and gentle. And she'd caught him checking out her cleavage on numerous occasions. Of course!

She smacked her forehead. Michael had been right in front of her all this time. Why had she overlooked him?

She raced to her bedroom and stripped off her T-shirt and shorts in favor of a skirt and a low-cut blouse. The doorbell chimed as she slipped on her sexiest spike-heeled sandals. She checked the clock on the way to the living room. Three minutes to nine. Michael found punctuality as vital as she did. She prayed he also opted for expeditious courtships. No sense wasting a bunch of time dating when you knew you'd be spending your life with someone. Some things a girl knew instinctively. And Barbie was sure they'd be perfect together.

Had to be his shyness that prevented him from asking her out. He never said much, but she knew behind that pale, neurotically groomed exterior lurked a sexy, dynamic hunk of a man.

Her instincts assured her he'd prove a loyal husband, one who'd never abandon her as her own father had. Flashing on the tattered photo her mother had carried with her until the day she died, Barbie cringed. She forced the unpleasant thought from her mind as she let Michael in. Leading him into the study, she gestured toward the sofa.

He took a seat and smiled at her, perfectly dressed as always, from his meticulously pressed polo shirt to his coordinating socks. His belt and shoes always matched the horn-rim frames of his glasses. She imagined he ironed his underwear, the sign of a truly fastidious person. Yes, theirs would be a perfect union.

His gaze slid over her. "Are you going somewhere?"

She tugged at the hem of her flowered skirt. "Course not. A girl can dress up every now and then for no special reason, can't she?"

*No special reason like attracting my future husband.*

He lifted a blond eyebrow and shrugged. Setting his sketch pad on his lap, he yawned. "Sorry. Didn't sleep much last night."

"No problem." She scrubbed her hands together and sucked in a steadying breath. Grabbing the file folder that held her latest manuscript, she smiled demurely. "I think we left off on page twenty-eight, where Honey Bunny discovers Malicious Muskrat hiding in the closet." Joining Michael on the sofa, she scooted as close as she could. She breathed in his scent, a blend of coffee and eucalyptus, maybe a minty dandruff shampoo. Perhaps she'd spring for a bottle of good cologne for him. Something spicy and exotic.

He slid a few inches away and opened his pad. "Right." He flipped to a pencil sketch near the middle of the tablet. "I drew Malicious in his pajamas since it's supposed to be early in the morning, but I can change that if you want."

She eyed the picture. They'd make such a terrific team, she writing her books, he illustrating them. Only they wouldn't earn much together. Not unless the Honey Bunny series started selling better and she could ask for larger advances. Good thing for her grandfather's generosity.

"The pajamas are fine. You're so talented, Michael." She set her hand on his denim-covered thigh.

He jumped off the couch, sending his sketch pad crashing to the floor. His face blazed bright red and sweat beaded on his upper lip.

Maybe she'd embarrassed him with her forward approach. Or perhaps he preferred to play the aggressor. She set the folder on the coffee table, then leaned over to retrieve the tablet. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught him checking out her cleavage, so she took her time before sitting upright. She hoped he got a good long look at her lucky pink bra.

"Barbie, I have to tell you something." He wrung his hands and avoided her eyes.

*How adorable. He's too shy to say he wants me.*

She stood and closed the distance between them. "I understand, Michael. I understand everything. A change in our...situation is long overdue."

"It is?" His eyebrows lifted, giving him a lost puppy look.

She nodded once. "Totally. But you can't allow your shyness to keep you from what you want in life."

He squinted at her. "What I want in life?"

She stepped closer. "I've seen the way you look at me, Michael."

He started shaking his head and backed away. "I'm afraid you've got me all wrong."

She straightened, tamping down the familiar sting of rejection. Her throat tightened, and heat suffused her face and ears. "I...I do?"

He dropped her gaze, and his jaw went slack. "I'd hoped not to have to tell you. Your editor said she'd take care of it."

She swallowed hard, and her stomach fluttered uncomfortably. "Take care of what?"

"My calling." His Adam's apple jumped wildly. "I've decided to devote the rest of my life to God. I'm registered to begin at a seminary in Pennsylvania."

*A seminary? In Pennsylvania?* An invisible boot kicked her in the gut. All the wind was instantly sucked out of her body. Her lips moved, but she couldn't form a single word.

How could she have gotten this so wrong? None of this made sense. Why were her plans going so far off course? "But...but..."

"I never said or did anything to lead you on, did I? I mean..." He looked as if he'd say something else, but he sucked his lips into his mouth.

Her heart pounded. "What were you going to say?" She didn't want to know, not really.

"Well, I've never been attracted to..." He bent to retrieve his sketch pad. "I ought to go. I'll finish the last drawing and fax it to you."

She gritted her teeth and turned her back to him. No need to ask him to finish telling her why he didn't want her. "You'll make a great minister, Michael. Your sensitivity is mind-boggling."

She wanted to be angry, to shout at him, yet she could only muster pity. Pity for him, pity for herself. The familiar thump of the front door closing made her jump.

Had she just lost her shot at half a million bucks? Not to mention a husband and kids, the family she'd always dreamed of with two parents and a real home? She crumpled onto the couch and swallowed back the bitter taste of bile.

\* \* \*

Keno did a double take at the flower beds flanking the porch of the pink bungalow. Each had three rows of perfectly spaced pink flowers, as if someone had measured out exactly how far apart to plant them. The artist in him found the arrangement aesthetically disturbing.

Gripping his portfolio tighter, he rang the bell. Footsteps clacked inside, then stopped. The door opened, and a curvy blonde in a white sundress stood there. Pretty face. Very pretty. Her smile faded.

Chilly air escaped from the house along with a floral scent. He waited for her to say something, but her green eyes looked wide with fear, as if she thought he'd attack her or something. She inched behind the door, poised to shut herself inside on a moment's notice, no doubt. "Yes?"

Not like he'd never seen that reaction before. "I'm Keno Jensen." When she didn't respond, he continued. "We spoke last night. Remember?"

Understanding sparked in her eyes. She nodded and swallowed. "Right. Forgive me. Barbie Turner." She cleared her throat and offered a stiff hand.

He shook her hand and drew in a whiff of her perfume—lilac. Her skin felt cool but soft. When she didn't invite him in, he glanced past her into the house. Wood floors, pale pink walls, white wicker furniture. Typical, unimaginative Miami. He shifted from foot to foot.

Finally she got the hint. “Oh, come in. Please forgive my manners.” She stepped aside and dropped her hands to her sides.

He could hardly deny her beauty, but she radiated about as much warmth as the salmon fillet in his freezer. No problem to keep their relationship purely professional. Still, his gaze fell to her full breasts. A ponytail of flaxen waves spilled over her shoulder.

“Come this way.” She turned and led him through the house. Her well-rounded derriere called to him. He nearly crashed into her when she stopped, but caught himself at the last second.

She gestured toward an overstuffed sofa. “Make yourself comfortable.” Only she looked anything but. He’d always assumed writers were loose and laid-back, much like so many of his artist friends. But this woman couldn’t be more stiffly buttoned up, as if she had a granite stick up her ass.

He sat and laid his portfolio on the glass-top coffee table. “I understand this will be your fourth book. Congratulations.”

Nodding curtly, she reached into a bookcase and withdrew two books. “Thank you. Michael, my former illustrator, and I just finished work on *Honey Bunny’s New Best Friend*.” She set the books on the table in front of him. “Feel free to look through those so you get a feel for the illustrations.”

He picked up the top one, *Honey Bunny’s Adventure*. The cover depicted a white rabbit with big, floppy ears and a mischievous grin.

“You think you can do that?” She sat on the edge of a chair and folded her hands on her lap. If he wanted to draw her portrait now, he’d make her a buxom blonde Scarlett O’Hara, complete with white gloves and overpulled corset.

*None of my business. I’m here to work.*

Flipping through the pages, he took note of each character and their surroundings. Yeah, he could improve on it, but he’d have to be consistent with the previous drawings. “No problem. Have you finished writing the next one?”

“Not quite. But Michael and I worked like that. I’d give him ten pages or so, and he’d sketch out a couple pictures, see if I liked them, you know.” She crossed her legs.

“Okay. However you want to do it.” He couldn’t help but stare at her thighs, creamy and smooth.



She yanked the hem of her dress lower. "Where are you from?"

Most women commented on his accent, said they found it sexy or exotic. Most women seemed a lot friendlier than this one, though. Had he lost his touch? "You noticed my accent, huh? You like it? I'm from Trinidad."

She merely shrugged. "I figured something like that." Standing, she stretched her arms in front of her. "Can I get you a drink or something?"

"Later, perhaps." He opened his portfolio and took out his sketch pad and a box of pencils. "Mind if I make a couple practice drawings of your rabbit?"

"Bunny." She walked to a computer desk in the corner and riffled through a leather box of papers. "I have the first section of the book here. We can discuss my vision for the illustrations."

Keno couldn't tear his gaze from her sexy curves. His jaw clenched as he forced himself to concentrate on drawing. Did she dislike him? Perhaps she had someone in her life, a romantic interest who dominated all her sensual energy. Why did that notion disturb him? He'd just met her. And he *didn't* want her. Absolutely not!

Jeff's words swirled in his head. *I know you're a love-'em-and-leave-'em kind of guy. Wouldn't be smart to play this one that way.*

Best that she didn't succumb to his God-given charm. Yet the notion prickled his skin. He worked on the rabbit's nose, pressed the pencil too hard, and broke the point.

Barbie stood over him. "Something wrong?"

He gripped the pencil tightly and glanced up at her. "Not a thing."

Pointing to his tablet, she shook her head. "Honey Bunny's ears are longer. And his eyes should be wider, more childlike."

He took in her scent and held his breath. His pulse quickened. Setting his pad on the table, he stood. "I'll take that drink now."

She gave him a curt nod and dropped a folder onto the coffee table. "Sure. Come on into the kitchen."

He trailed behind her, close enough to feel her heat yet still sense the barbed-wire perimeter she'd erected around herself.

She led him to the kitchen, then opened the fridge and swept her arm through the air. “What would you like?”

His mouth fell open when he looked into her refrigerator. Cartons of low-fat yogurt lined the door. Half a dozen clear plastic containers of assorted fruits and vegetables were stacked on one shelf. He saw a bottle of diet soda and another of sugar-free sport drink. The remaining items sat in size order on another shelf. He'd never seen anything so neurotically organized.

“Just water, please.”

When she opened the freezer for ice, he glimpsed at least a dozen identical frozen meal boxes. Big red lettering proclaimed them low calorie and fat-free.

“Anything wrong?” She filled a glass from a jug on the counter.

He shook his head, but a pang of empathy jabbed at his insides. “You're quite...neat.” And diet obsessed.

That elicited a smile. “I find order comforting.”

This level of organization made his skin itch. But why couldn't he stop the erotic thoughts and visions that invaded his head? Visions of her naked and hungry. Squirming because her pussy was so wet. For him.

“Your water.”

Forcing the picture from his mind, he took the glass she held out for him. “Thank you.”

He followed her back to the other room, his gaze never straying from her ass. She sat on the couch and picked up her folder from the table.

Inwardly grinning, he took a seat beside her, close enough that his thigh brushed against hers. “You going to read me a bedtime story?” He lifted an eyebrow.

She merely squinted at him and inched away. “You *have* done this sort of work before, Mr. Jensen, haven't you?”

He sipped his water, then set it on a coaster. She might ask for another illustrator if she knew the truth. And he'd be out of a job. He squared his shoulders. “Of course. And call me Keno.” He straightened in the seat and listened to her read her story to him.

Barbie finished the last page she'd been writing, then glanced at Keno. He no longer frightened her, but a different kind of fear settled in her belly. The attraction she wished would go away lingered.

Yet nothing about him ought to attract her. She needed a man suitable to marry, one her grandfather would approve of, not a bohemian artist with long hair and a pierced nose. But Keno's exotic accent and handsome face drew her dangerously toward him. And his scent—like fresh-cut grass and coconut, exotic as a tropical breeze. His honey-colored eyes held a warm glint like the ocean on a sunny afternoon.

He picked up his sketch pad and tapped a pencil on it. “How do you feel about making Honey Bunny a little more lifelike, less cartoonish?”

She crinkled her nose. “Cartoonish? I'd hardly characterize Michael's drawings that way.” Who did he think he was, marching in here and insulting Michael's artwork? She folded her arms over her chest, wishing his insensitive suggestion had doused the simmering heat between her legs. Only it hadn't.

“Look.” He flipped a page and started drawing. In seconds he'd created a new face for Honey Bunny. But the eyes now sparkled with life, and he'd elongated the other features, giving the character a more realistic look.

Shaking her head, she huffed. “My books are for children. The animals have to appear harmless and fun. Realism doesn't figure in.”

He shrugged and tore out the page. “Your decision. Although I don't agree. Kids want to be able to relate to characters as heroes. They need heroes when their home life sucks.” His forehead creased. “Never mind.”

Had he suffered a bad childhood? Her heart squeezed. But she had a job to do. “Look, Keno. I know a lot about kids. When I started writing, I worked as a kindergarten teacher.”

His chuckle brought out dimples. “Forgive me. I noticed your dollhouse in the living room. I suppose one who plays with dolls knows much about being a child.”

She narrowed her gaze, trying to discern if he'd meant that condescendingly. His eyes sparkled like cinnamon sugar. And they held a confidence she found alarming. But she detected no malice in his expression.

“Tell me, why does your character go to church on Sundays? He's a forest creature, yes?”

She drew her legs up and sat akimbo. “Well, he's a forest creature who lives in a world like the children who read about him. Get it?”

“I thought you said realism didn't figure in.” A grin played on his lips. He had one of those mouths made for kissing. Straight white teeth and soft-looking lips. And she thought she'd seen a metallic glint on his tongue. What would it feel like to have a man with a pierced tongue lick her...

*Stop it!*

“Who's to say rabbits and skunks and chipmunks are Christians?” he went on. “Maybe they're Buddhists or Druids or Satanists.”

“Satanists!” She tried to concentrate on the conversation. He'd twisted her words, yet she found their banter more challenging than irritating. “*I say. And I created them.*”

“Ah. That makes you their god. So they must be Barbians. Or perhaps Barbarians.” He threw her a playful wink.

She laughed, but the heat blooming inside her gave her pause. How could she be attracted to a man like him? A man who possessed none of the top ten qualities on her list of must-haves. Yet she couldn't deny the chemistry. Her pulse quickened with arousal, and her nipples hardened to needy pebbles.

Their eyes met and held. Keno's pencil slipped out of his hand and rolled toward her on the couch. She reached for it the instant he did, and their fingers touched, entwined. She tried to scare up a sense of propriety. They ought to be working, not flirting. But all her thoughts about collaboration had nothing to do with creating a book. More like creating a raging fire of passion.

She'd never experienced such an instant infatuation for any man. Particularly not for someone so not her type. Her libido seemed to have a mind of its own. She parted her lips and drew a steady breath. Desire quickened her blood.

*Think about something else. Anything else!*

She yanked her hand away from his. “Work,” she said aloud. “We should concentrate on working.”

“Isn't that what we're doing?” His brow knitted.

Had she misread his signals? Projected her own wanton thoughts onto him? Heat crawled up her face. “Of course it is.” Her chuckle sounded forced even to her own ears.

He smirked. “We were discussing your rabbit's religious affiliation.”

No, she hadn't imagined the chemistry between them, but now he was playing her. Waiting for her to make a move.

*I am not attracted to him!*

She fisted her hands and leveled an angry stare at him. “Honey Bunny has no particular religious affiliation. He's just...you know, normal.”

He rested his head on his chin. “Would that be normal like me? Or normal like you?”

She bristled. “You know what I mean. Like an average American.” Why was he giving her so much shit about this?

“I am American. For your information, my father is a native Floridian. I came to live with him as a teenager. My mother is from Trinidad.”

She noticed that wince again at the mention of his mother, the slightest crack in his arrogant facade.

“My father is an average American. A white man. Who goes to church. And has a son like me. So, normal or average is not always as it appears.” He started drawing.

Her head spun from their conversation. She pinched the bridge of her nose, warding off a headache.

Keno held a sketch toward her. He'd drawn Honey Bunny with a ring through his nose and long braids.

“Very funny.” She tried not to laugh, but when she saw the amusement on his face, she gave in to it.

His eyes sparkled with warmth. He set a hand casually on her knee, igniting a new flare of desire. She inhaled his enticing scent again and leaned toward him, powerless to resist. Her gaze settled on those lips, and she had to taste them.

His hand slid higher up her leg, and a quiver of excitement danced up her spine. He circled his other hand around her head and pulled her even closer. She drew in the breath he released.

Her heart beat with a pounding intensity. Nothing existed but the two of them and their impending kiss.

The shrill ring of the phone shattered the moment. Alarm bucked through her. She reared back and shot off the couch.

*What did I almost do?*

Thank God for the interruption. Must have been divine intervention. She raced toward the desk, then cleared her throat before picking up. "Hello?"

"Hello, angel."

She spun around so Keno wouldn't see her face. "Hi, Grandpa."

Definitely divine intervention. She couldn't possibly get involved with someone like Keno when what she needed was a husband. "Is everything okay?"

"Fine, fine. Except..."

All the moisture disappeared from her mouth, and her chest tightened. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing to worry about. My dermatologist wants to cut out a little growth on my ear. I think she's only doing it because she has the hots for me."

Her stomach fluttered. "Maybe I ought to fly out there."

"Nonsense. You'll do no such thing. I shouldn't even have told you, except I had to change my plans."

She crossed her fingers. Postponing his trip meant she'd have more time to find Mr. Right. "Oh?"

"Yes. I'll be coming a week earlier. Darned doctor can't get me in until the twenty-eighth. Same day I was supposed to be on a plane headed to Miami."

Her throat closed. She gasped for air. "A week earlier?" she choked out.

"Hope that's okay. I'll be there a week from Thursday."

She glanced at the desk calendar beside the phone. That only gave her twelve days to find a fiancé.

*Oh God.*

"You're not too busy then, are you?"

“Actually—”

“Good, good. Because I've already changed my ticket. Shysters charged me fifty bucks to do it. And this ticket is nonrefundable.”

Her head pounded furiously. She glanced at Keno as he sketched. “That's fine, Grandpa. I'll talk to you in a few days.” She hung up and sucked in a steadying breath. She had to squash this attraction immediately. Time was running out. Facing Keno, she pasted a smile on her face. “Would you mind if we called it quits for today? I have a killer headache.” She rubbed her forehead, hoping he'd make a quick exit. She didn't trust herself to be near him another minute.

He hesitated a moment, then shrugged. “Anything you say, dear lady.”

She'd be stronger tomorrow. After a cool shower and some time on an Internet dating site, she'd surely be able to resist Keno's charms.

If not, she was in deep, deep trouble.

## Chapter Three

Keno woke from a dead sleep at the blaring alarm. He immediately punched the snooze button and lay back down. No use. He had a real job now. His days of painting until five in the morning then sleeping until noon were gone.

Propping up on his elbows, he stared down at the erection tenting his sheet. A few more minutes in bed wouldn't kill him. He'd managed to get through nearly a week working with Barbie—an agonizing week of being so near her, breathing in her intoxicating scent, and coming so close to touching her. Only he couldn't. Wouldn't. But how long would his resistance hold? She drew him in like no other woman ever had.

He shut his eyes and pictured her face, her ripe breasts, and the perfect orbs of her ass. Slipping his hand beneath the sheet, he grasped his engorged cock.

*Piece by piece, he watched her strip away her clothes. First a white ruffled shirt that she lifted over her head. Shaking her curvy hips seductively, she shimmied out of a skirt, let it pool around her ankles before she kicked it aside.*

*Yeah. Now she stood before him in a black bra and panties. She filled out every lacy inch. She reached her hands behind her back, then unhooked the bra and peeled it away, revealing luscious full breasts, high and round with nipples pink as porcelain rosebuds. Next, she rolled her panties down her legs.*

He rubbed his cock a little faster and let the pleasure carry him further into his fantasy.

*He took in the vision of her naked white flesh, the fine tuft of golden hair shielding her pussy. She reminded him of Venus at the Mirror. With long, flowing blonde hair and generous curves, Barbie could have modeled for the famous Rubens painting.*

*He took her hand and pulled her beside him onto the bed. She fluttered her lashes demurely, but he knew better. Beneath her innocent facade lurked a sexy vixen. He cupped her*



*cheek, and she leaned into his touch. Urging her gently, he lifted the covers so she could slide next to him. The instant her skin made contact with his, an electric zing took him by surprise.*

*She'd felt it too. Her eyes widened, and a tremble racked her delicious body. His cock pulsed with pent-up need. Lust burned inside him. He pulled in a breath of her scent, lilac mixed with an earthy, musky aroma he knew originated in her pussy.*

*Her pink lips parted slightly, enough to assure him she yearned to taste his mouth as much as he did hers. Settling a hand on her waist, he brushed his lips over hers, tasted their sweetness, like sugar on a plump strawberry. A soft purr rumbled in her throat, and she squirmed beneath his touch, subtly, but enough to let him know his kiss affected her.*

*Her taste reminded him of his grandmother's Trinidadian black cake. He couldn't get enough. Gliding his tongue over her teeth, swirling it around hers, his temperature shot higher. He yearned to touch, taste, and smell every inch of her.*

*He caught the full swell of her breast in his hand, then squeezed and kneaded her velvety flesh. She was softer than other women, and the lush sensation made him want her all the more. He'd sampled all the flavors Miami had to offer—black, Latino, Asian, white—but Barbie was somehow different, somehow more. From her soft blonde curls to her pink toenails, she drew him in like a siren coaxing a weary sailor.*

*Need quickened his blood. He pressed his hard-on against her thigh, earning a soft moan from her. He dotted her skin with kisses and sucked an alabaster earlobe into his mouth.*

*A hungry moan escaped her lips. She shifted on the mattress to turn more toward him. He slid lower and investigated the breast he'd neglected, licked the supple skin. Massaging the other, he grinned at the rising tempo of her whimpers. Her nipple tightened between his fingers.*

*His balls constricted with a ravenous craving. Barbie took his hand and moved it lower to her juicy pussy. "Please, Keno. I need you to fuck me."*

*He trailed kisses between her breasts, down her stomach to the thatch of blonde shielding her sex. She lifted her hips, begging for satisfaction, but he refused to rush. He'd savor the delicacy she offered up and tease her until she was drenched in her cream. He rubbed her pubic mound, then parted her thighs, revealing the treasure she offered.*

*Gasping at the beauty of her pale pink entrance, he bent to taste it and gave it a hungry swipe with his tongue. She bucked and pleaded.*

*"Fuck me, Keno. I can't wait another second."*

*He gripped her hips and circled her engorged nub with his tongue. Dipping into her cream, he tasted her heady desire. He lapped at her juices, enjoying the way she squirmed and sighed. Using his thumb, he rubbed her cleft, gradually increasing his rhythm until he heard her breath hitch.*

*She held perfectly still for a moment, then wriggled, moaned, and cried out. "You're...the...best."*

*Enough women had shared his bed that he knew how to make them scream in ecstasy, how to embolden them with his touch so they'd never forget that one night of passion.*

*He continued driving his tongue into her pussy, enjoying the full breadth of her orgasm. When she finally stilled, breathless and sweaty, he retreated to let her recover. Lying on his back, he brushed a braid out of his face.*

*Barbie's flushed face appeared above him, smiling like a cat that had just caught the fattest mouse. She sneaked her hand lower to his erect cock. A playful grin lifted her mouth. Taking hold of his shaft, she closed her long fingers around it. "Is that all for me?" Her voice—a siren's song—lifted his libido even higher. "It's awfully big." She got on her hands and knees and hovered over his granite-hard cock.*

*"I know you can handle it." His breath hitched as she skated her tongue along his length, then over his balls.*

*She pulled the crown into her mouth and sucked it, swirled her tongue around the tip. Molten pleasure flowed through his entire body. She took his cock farther in, until it tapped the back of her throat. Grasping the base, she slid his erection in and out of her mouth, creating a delectable sensation.*

*He held her head between his hands, guiding her movement and speed. God, he loved women who understood that nothing in this world could compare to a great blowjob. She cupped his balls and scraped her fingernails lightly over his flesh, tearing a low growl from his throat.*

*So close, he held back, knowing she had other things in store for him. She released his cock, then sat back on her thighs. "I like pearls," she whispered as she lay across the bed.*

*Yeah. Exactly what he wanted to give her. That beautiful, bountiful bosom deserved a pearl necklace. He straddled her hips, and she set a bottle of his favorite massage oil in his hand. His*

*gaze tracked down her ripe body. Bending to kiss her, he picked up her scent again, and it intoxicated him.*

*She quivered when his braids slid over her naked flesh. Her obvious pleasure chipped away at his control. He squeezed a generous amount of oil over her skin, then drizzled it down her peaked points and over his erection. Angling his cock toward her chest, he caught a breast in each hand. He burrowed between them, sliding his shaft through the tight confines until the tip appeared under her chin.*

*Tunneling between her oil-slicked orbs sent his mind into a dizzying frenzy. A strangled moan broke from his lips. She was all he saw, all he smelled, all he tasted. She'd hijacked his senses, and he didn't care. His balls constricted, ready to explode. He couldn't hold back another instant. His orgasm hit with a blinding intensity that shook him to the core.*

*The pearls she'd asked for spurted onto her skin and formed a translucent choker necklace. Panting and dripping with sweat, he stared down at her and watched her swipe a drop of his seed with her fingertip and spread it onto her tongue.*

He opened his eyes, then glanced around his apartment. Portraits of nude and nearly naked women covered the walls. He'd painted them all, had sex with each one before, during, or after he'd done their portrait. Yet none appealed to him like the woman he'd known for less than a week.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

Barbie obviously had no interest in him. She'd practically kicked him out of her house that first morning, then remained as cold as a polar bear the next three days. Which shouldn't bother him since any relationship with her wouldn't be wise. Jeff had warned him. And God knew he couldn't afford to lose the job. But he'd never been so into a woman who didn't even care to give him the time of day.

A long, hot shower would clear his head, get her off his mind. Only it didn't. Maybe drawing would help. Over a cup of strong black coffee, he started sketching on the morning's newspaper. A woman. Blonde and buxom and sexy.

*It's not her.*

Of course it was her. He tore the paper into shreds, then sent it all off the table with a sweep of his arm. Pushing out of his chair, he drew a deep breath.

*I don't want her. I don't want her.*

He merely had to keep reminding himself of all the women he *could* have. Like the brunette he'd met in the gym's parking lot. He dug in his wallet, found her card, and glanced at the name. Anne Marie. Yes, she'd take his mind off Barbie.

On his way to Barbie's house a little while later, he phoned Anne Marie. They spoke only a few minutes before he confirmed her interest and asked her out for that night.

"I make a mean piña colada," she told him.

He turned onto Barbie's street. "And I happen to have a blender and all the ingredients." Or he would by the time she arrived.

"Aren't you going to offer to buy me dinner or something first? Wouldn't be safe for a girl to go to a strange man's home when she hardly knows him."

God, he hated games. And he couldn't afford to buy dinner for two until he got paid.

When he didn't respond, she said, "Perhaps we could meet for a drink, see where the evening takes us."

Yes! "Just say when and where, beautiful lady."

"How about Calico Bay Club? I'll be there at eight."

"I'll be counting the minutes." Grinning, he parked his car. All he had to do was get through the day, then Anne Marie would take care of his carnal needs. He hadn't been with a woman for over a week. That must be his problem. No other reason for him to fantasize about someone like Barbie, a woman so unlike anyone he'd ever desired before.

She answered the door wearing denim capri pants and a loose-fitting T-shirt. Her blonde curls were pulled into a loose ponytail on the side of her head. Had she purposely tried to mask her sex appeal? Didn't work. The swell of her full breasts enticed him, although he wondered why her brow wrinkled when she looked at him.

He gritted his teeth against his rising erection and pasted on a smile. "Good morning."

"Morning." She stepped aside and stiffly gestured for him to come inside. Did she find him that distasteful?

Barbie unclenched her fists as she walked Keno to the study. She had no choice but to work with him. Her editor had made it perfectly clear on the phone yesterday. The publisher had been lucky to find Keno on such short notice. No way could they replace him and keep her on deadline for her next book.

She'd have to learn to ignore her body's response to the man. Focus her energies on meeting someone her grandfather would find suitable. Like an accountant or a lawyer or a dentist.

*Hmm. Maybe I ought to have my teeth cleaned. Again.*

She thought about her dentist with his unconvincing comb-over and his slightly creepy smile. No. She couldn't do it. And her accountant had a wife and enough kids to star in a reality TV show.

Keno sat on the couch, and his exotic scent wafted to her, intoxicating her. Being so near him made her nipples harden. Against her will.

*Damn it!*

She crossed the room to the chair farthest from him and took a seat, folding her hands on her lap. "Did you finalize any drawings for the first section?"

He nodded once and opened his sketch pad. Glancing down at it, he frowned. "I'm still working on Bashful Beaver. He's a little tricky."

He held the drawing toward her, but from across the room, she could barely make it out. "Sorry. Unless you're Wonder Woman, I bet you can't see this." He stood and closed the distance between them.

The instant he approached, his scent surrounded her, mesmerized her. She'd somehow managed to keep a lid on her attraction to him for the past few days, but her resolve was wearing thin. Her pulse quickened, and a pleasant ache settled low in her belly. She tried to concentrate on his sketch, but with him so close, she could only think about him touching her, kissing her, making love to her.

Her nipples pressed against the lace of her bra. She focused on the sketch. He'd drawn the beaver even better than Michael had, more in line with her vision. But his depiction of Honey Bunny made her gasp. Since when did the bunny resemble her so much? For heaven's sake. It even had breasts. Big ones.

“What the—”

Keno glanced from her to his picture. He immediately clutched the pad to his chest. “Sorry. Wrong one.” Sweat beaded on his forehead. He frantically flipped through pages. “Um, here it is.” He turned the tablet to face her.

She stared at the drawing, identical to the other, except Honey Bunny no longer had huge breasts, and the face didn't mirror Barbie's. Had Keno shown her the first sketch on purpose? She didn't think so. If he'd been obsessing over her in the same way she'd been about him, she was in deep, deep trouble.

*No.* She had to meet someone else, someone who'd distract her from her inappropriate fantasies. She'd found a blurb in the newspaper about a singles mixer tonight sponsored by a nearby synagogue. Hell, she could be Jewish if it meant finding the right man. She'd always liked bagels, after all. And circumcised penises. Her gaze wandered down to the respectably sized bulge in Keno's pants, and curiosity nudged her.

“What do you think?” His voice startled her.

She met his stare. Had he caught her checking him out? She swallowed hard. “Um, that's great.” She made a show of concentrating on his drawing. “Yes. I really like what you've done with Bashful Beaver.”

“I've always been a fan.” He waggled his brow.

“Of what?” Then she got his off-color joke. Heat crawled up her neck and cheeks. She cleared her throat. “Um, we should get to work.”

Keno returned to the couch and took a box of pencils out of the pocket of his portfolio. Barbie grabbed her manuscript pages and joined him. She'd have to deal with being close to him. The sooner they finished the book, the sooner she could have him out of her life and out of her fantasies.

They fine-tuned the first drawing with her direction and his artistic talent. She watched the way his fingers caressed the pencil, stroking it lovingly over the paper to create a picture full of life and movement. It was almost...graceful. She peered over his shoulder at his pad and saw a cottage take shape in the foreground. He had so much more talent than Michael. The way he used light and shadow to create depth and expression—brilliant. She yearned to know more about him.

“How old were you when you started drawing?”

A cloud passed over his face, gone in an instant. “Very young. I'd hide in my closet when my parents fought and use my crayons to make happy family scenes on the walls. After my father left her and went back to the States, my mother discovered my murals and beat the tar out of me with a switch.”

A thick clog formed in her throat. “That's awful.”

He merely shrugged, and Barbie easily pictured the frightened little boy retreating into his self-created world.

He fell silent, absorbed in his sketching.

“Your mother was abusive?”

He gave his head the slightest nod, never looking at her.

Could that be where the scars on his upper arms came from? She'd known every flavor of poverty in her youth, but never had to worry about physical punishment. Her mother certainly hadn't been the most responsible parent, yet she'd never once laid a hand on Barbie. “I'm sorry.”

He shrugged again. “Don't be. It happened a long time ago. I'm all healed up now.”

On the outside maybe. “Is that why you came here to live with your father?”

Another nod. He rubbed his finger over the outline of a tree he'd just drawn, smudging the edge and making it appear more distant. “What was that like?”

The pencil stopped. He looked at her, eyes hooded and glassy and beautiful. “Living with my dad?”

“Mm hmm.”

A muscle ticked in his taut jaw. “He lived a bachelor's life. Then this kid he hadn't seen for ten years is forced upon him.” Another shrug. “He did the best he could.”

“You're lucky you had him.” She had no idea what it must be like to have a father, since she'd never known one. Only her mother's occasional boyfriends who'd made it plain they didn't want a kid around. She suspected her father wouldn't have been much of a role model. He'd had long hair and spent all his time riding a motorcycle. A free spirit, according to her mother. Probably a lot like Keno.

He didn't agree or disagree. Apparently his childhood hadn't been much better than hers. Had he yearned for a normal family as she had? *Still did?* But Keno obviously didn't want to discuss his upbringing.

Over the next few hours they settled into a comfortable working groove. Keno sketched and Barbie wrote, stopping every so often to answer his questions and admire his illustrations. She glanced at the clock and realized they'd worked right through lunch. "Do you want to take a break? Grab something to eat?"

His brow furrowed as he stared down at his tablet. "I'm nearly finished with this one. I don't want to stop."

She sat beside him to see what had him so engrossed. But being this close turned her brain to mush. Desire heated her blood. Somehow, just being near him turned her into a puddle of a woman, pure liquid hormones. Every muscle tensed with awareness.

Keno stopped drawing and swiveled to face her. His gaze fell to her lips, and she swallowed back the sheer panic.

*I shouldn't be thinking these erotic thoughts.*

A bohemian artist would hardly make a suitable husband. Suitable or not, though, she couldn't resist his pull. Sensual energy filled the air. Passion flared inside her, hot and demanding. She tried to keep her expression neutral, to not allow him a glimpse of the insidious carnal forces at work.

She wouldn't think about his muscled arms and shoulders, or how his amber eyes were flecked with green and gray. Or his mouth. Oh Lord, his mouth. She couldn't be positive she'd seen a gold stud on his tongue, but she suspected. And hoped.

What harm would a fling cause? Not like she couldn't still search for someone more the marrying kind. She wanted to kiss him so badly that her whole body trembled. When his lips parted, she eased closer, closer, until she inhaled his breath. Then his fingers plowed into her hair, and he brushed his lips over hers.

Her eyes slipped lazily shut as she luxuriated in his sensual kiss. Everything else disappeared but the two of them and this moment. She explored his sexy mouth with hungry swipes of her tongue, tasted his cinnamon essence, and yes, felt the cool, hard contours of a metal stud.



Moisture quickly pooled on her panties at the thought of that tongue slipping into her pussy, stroking her erect nipples. She dived in, exploring the contours of his mouth, wriggling in her seat to disperse the heat between her legs.

Suddenly he broke the kiss, grasped her shoulders, and pushed her away. “No.”

## Chapter Four

Keno shoved off the couch and scrubbed a hand over his face. He didn't have to see Barbie's eyes on him to feel the burn of her stare. "I'm sorry. You have no idea how much I want..."

*To kiss you and make love to you.*

"You're right. This is a mistake."

The anguish in her sigh cut straight through him. He turned toward her and winced at the hurt written all over her face. Yet his eyes automatically zeroed in on her lips, then dropped to her breasts. "I really need this job. That's what I ought to be concentrating on."

She nodded, yanking on the hem of her T-shirt. "And I ought to..." Her cheeks reddened, and she looked away.

"What?"

"Nothing." She fixed him with those big green eyes, and his knees weakened. His stomach ached down low, but a good ache. An impish grin curled her lips.

He couldn't ignore her erotic pull. To hell with the job; to hell with everything. Closing the distance between them, he got on his knees in front of the couch and caught her shoulders in his hands. "I don't want to stop." He closed his mouth over hers, tasting her, tangling his tongue around hers. Sinking in a deluge of pure lust, he lowered a hand to her breast and reveled in its firm fullness.

She let out a plaintive mewl, shifting to give him freer access. Everything about this woman excited him. A little more voluptuous than most of his usual fare, she carried herself with more grace and confidence than thinner women. He normally went for wilder, more liberal women. But Barbie was the most buttoned-up girl he'd ever met.

He pictured her from behind, imagined what it would be like to fuck her that way, hard and fast as she pleaded for more. His cock strained against his pants. First he'd stand over her, watch

her take his erection all the way into her mouth, close her lips over it as she did in his fantasy. A bead of sweat trickled along the side of his face.

*Stop thinking.*

His cock was quickly taking control of every part of his body, including his mind. He grabbed at her ponytail. "Let your hair down."

She bristled a moment, then nodded and removed the coated rubber band. Her hair fell in golden ringlets about her shoulders. That simple change stoked his desire hotter. She met his stare with a heated one of her own, reached out, and touched his upper arm. His skin burned beneath her fingers.

His breath came in short rasps. He grasped at her breast, then worked his way to the point and tweaked a hardened nipple through the fabric. He luxuriated in her automatic moan. Need coursed through his body, at once incredibly painful and undeniably erotic. Pulling in a breath infused with her enticing scent, he bent to capture her mouth again and reveled in its irresistible taste.

Her chest heaved under his touch. He longed to rip away her clothes, gaze upon her naked flesh. Grabbing for the bottom of her shirt, he lifted it one-handed over her shoulder, then released her breast and completed the task. Her alabaster skin glowed with freshness and a light sheen of perspiration. Staring at her nearly nude torso, he knew he wouldn't be satisfied until he looked upon all of her, touched all of her, tasted, smelled, and fucked every last inch of her. "I need to see you. Naked." A command more than a request, yet she instantly complied.

She lifted herself off the sofa and unbuckled her pants slowly, teasingly. Keno bit his lip as she shimmied her hips and lowered the jeans along her creamy skin. Rooted to the spot, he merely stared, awed by the beauty of her ripe form. His body hummed with need. Every nerve ending tingled with raw anticipation as she peeled her capri pants down her legs. Underneath she wore white lace panties that matched her bra, an angelic beauty ready to turn devilish.

She kicked away her clothes and took a step toward him. Her fingernails lightly scratched down his arms, and he shut his eyes, imagining what those nails would feel like running the length of his cock. A shudder skittered over his skin. He breathed in and caught a whiff of a muskier scent than before. Her arousal.

Molten desire coursed through him, nearly knocking him off balance. What the hell was wrong with him? Control had never been so difficult to keep hold of—until now. Her fingers slipped beneath his shirt and lifted it off him. Then her mouth—soft, wet, and demanding—latched on to his nipples. He bit back a delirious gasp as her teeth abraded his skin. Her tongue toyed with his nipple ring, and she let out a half giggle, half purr.

Then her hands fiddled with his fly. He opened his eyes and stared down at her, overwhelmed by her brazen assertiveness. He was incredibly turned on. The instant she lowered his zipper, his hard-on sprang forth, heavy with need, ready and desperate to sink all the way inside her.

He plundered her golden curls as she dropped to her knees in front of him. This was better than any daydream. Cupping his ass, she drew him closer and whispered a soft breath across his cock. A low growl rumbled deep inside his chest—a primitive, animallike sound. His brain uttered a weak warning, but his libido immediately overruled it.

Just as he'd hoped, she dragged those lovely fingernails enticingly over his shaft—just barely, but enough to make him wild with longing. Staring down into the depths of her fetching cleavage, he knew one time with her would never be enough.

*Danger! Danger!*

He knew he should back away, somehow rein in his passion. This woman reeked of hemlock to his sworn way of life. No entanglements, no loose threads, no emotion. Her power had already proved too strong for him to resist, and they'd barely begun to play. He'd rather die than ask her to stop.

Her fingers circled his erection, her touch still light and teasing. His balls tightened with rising pleasure. She slid her hand to the base, then eased it up and over the crown, sending the most delicious feelings coursing through him. Her languorous pace captivated him, focused his entire world on the here and now and the blissful sensations. Cradling his balls in her hand, she applied the perfect amount of pressure. Then she lowered her mouth to his shaft and gave the tip a quick swipe of her tongue. Gazing up at him, she fixed him with a wicked stare, and he knew he was in for one of the best blowjobs of his life. Barbie licked the head again, this time longer and slower. “Mmm.”

Yeah. She enjoyed giving head.

Grasping the root, she slid her tongue along the entire length, purring her delight. She alternated long passes and fast flicks of her tongue. His mind swam in a sea of ecstasy. She took his cock into her mouth, only a little, then a little more. With each stroke, she took him deeper into the wet, velvety confines of her talented mouth. Heavenly vibrations overtook him. He swayed, grasped the edge of a chair to keep steady on his feet. She sucked him, pulled and licked and nipped. And she enjoyed it. He could tell by her smile and by the soft purrs escaping her throat. He couldn't think of a bigger turn-on than a woman who loved going down on her man.

His balls tensed, drawing him closer to his release, but he refused to surrender control. Not yet. "I must taste your sweetness."

She gave his cock a final pass with that amazing tongue, then stared up at him with doe eyes, so innocent. Only he now knew better. He helped her stand, wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her against him. His hands found her rounded ass, an ass he couldn't wait to kiss, to rub and lick. Catching the elastic along the top edge of her panties, he slowly peeled the garment down and settled his hands on her perfect orbs.

He yearned to bury his cock inside her, take her from behind, from on top, any way and every way. But he also craved pleasuring her as she'd never been pleased before.

Barbie's pussy tingled as Keno rubbed her bottom. And his immense shaft pressed hard against her belly. This was so decadent, so dangerous, but she felt powerless to stop. A momentary pang of guilt stabbed at her heart, but her libido promptly crushed it.

He rolled her panties down below her hips. Then his hands were on her breasts. Brushing his lips over hers, he began a soft, teasing kiss. His exotic taste was like ambrosia, enticing her to explore further, never stop. The metal stud in his tongue shifted her imagination into overdrive. The notion of that hard, cold metal on her breasts and inside her pussy made her squirm with unbridled anticipation. She swirled her tongue around his, drinking in his essence.

He massaged her breasts through the lace cups of her bra, then tweaked her nipples to hard pebbles. She ached to be free of the clothing still between them. The need to be naked, skin to skin with him, persisted. She slid her bra straps off her shoulders and let him push the rest of the fabric aside. The instant her breasts were uncovered, Keno broke their kiss and bent his head to

attend to her other needs. He caressed her nape and nipped at a painfully taut point. She couldn't hold back a plaintive moan as his tongue ring tickled her aroused nipple.

His tongue circled her areola, then wandered to the valley between her breasts. Deep inside her, juices started flowing, melting at her core. His hot breath sent shivers dancing across her skin. His freshly shaven cheek felt like silk as it glided over her flesh. He sucked her earlobe into his mouth, then tapped his tongue stud on her damp skin.

She pressed her hips toward him, her mind already anticipating the feel of his oversize erection inside her pussy. As if reading her mind, he gently guided her onto the sofa, climbed on top of her, and lowered his mouth to her nipple. He abraded her skin with his teeth, then followed with his tongue. Like sandpaper then a whisper of velvet. She arched her back toward him and drank in the power of his muscled arms and shoulders. His brown skin rippled with quivering strength.

Her hips started rocking of their own will, begging for relief for the fire inside her core. She didn't wait long. Keno slipped a hand between her legs and squeezed the flesh of her thigh. Normally this would have made her self-conscious of her weight, but she got the impression Keno was enjoying her body more than any man had before. Almost as if he worshipped her plus-size figure.

Renewed confidence heightened her drive. She gave herself wholly to her satisfaction—their satisfaction. He bit harder on her nipple, and to her surprise, she liked it. *Really* liked it.

She watched him suck long and hard, concentrating—and enjoying immensely. His touch beguiled her. She craved more and more. His hand started moving along her entrance, then slid over her moist folds. He released possession of her nipple, leaving it glossy and red from the attention. Claiming her mouth again, he flicked his tongue along hers, purposely enticing her with that metal stud. He sank his teeth into her bottom lip and sucked on it before releasing it. “You're killing me, Barbie. I've never met a sexier woman.”

His words stoked her growing fever. She smoothed a hand along the corded muscle on his back, then shifted to give him fuller access to her pussy, now drenched in her cream. She ran her fingers along the wavy lengths of his braids, stopping momentarily at several smooth beads. Nothing about this man bore any resemblance to other men she'd been with. Everything about him was new, unique, and incredibly erotic.

She spread her legs wider and squirmed to diffuse the heat in her core, but nothing would quench that flame Keno inspired, nothing but the man himself. He licked a trail down her neck, between her breasts, along her stomach. Hungry shock waves made her entire body quiver with longing.

Finally he kissed the skin on her thighs, then smoothed his hand along the crease where leg met torso. He shoved her panties down farther, then rolled them off her legs and tossed them over the couch. Moving closer to her entrance, he let out an exaggerated sigh. "Mmm. I love the scent of a woman ready for love."

She swallowed back a sigh. How did he know exactly what she yearned to hear, how she needed to be touched? His moist breath on her sensitive flesh sent a shiver of lustful electricity through her. He spread her wider and smoothed away the blonde thatch covering her most private area. Biting his lower lip, he grinned. "Beautiful." He skimmed his tongue along her furls, but only for a moment. "And delicious."

She floated on a wave of excitement. Using his index finger, he grazed over her slick folds, teasing and tantalizing her nub, fanning the fire already burning white-hot there. Her hips bucked of their own accord. He slipped a finger inside her, then two. In and out he drilled, deeper and deeper, rhythmically stoking her desire, leading her closer and closer to the edge. She was nearly there when he withdrew his touch and sucked his fingers into his mouth. "Mmm. As tasty as I suspected."

She arched toward him. "You can't stop now." She fixed him with a pleading gaze. "Keno, please."

His wicked chuckle took the game higher. "But I enjoy playing with you, Barbie." He scooted down on the couch, and his face disappeared between her legs. Suddenly his tongue stroked her pussy, lapping at her entrance. Her body shook with delight as she moved nearer her release. He licked her furls, used a finger to rub her cleft, and she tumbled over the edge, free-falling into an endless chasm of bliss. He continued his tongue-lashing, and the hard, cool metal of his stud repeatedly hit her clit, sending her crashing full force to the next level. Her body shook and writhed as wave after joyful wave rolled over her, fierce and blinding. She threaded her fingers through his hair and yanked at his braids as if they were lines to a life preserver.

Seemingly oblivious to any pain she might be inflicting, he kept stroking her pussy with his tongue and rubbing her with his fingers. Her ecstatic journey began to slowly ebb. She gasped a shuddered breath, then relaxed through the echoes of her pleasure.

Keno planted a sweet kiss on her thigh. "You're even more beautiful when you come. How is that possible?"

That earned him a big smile. Weak from her devastating orgasm, she managed to slide out from under him. "That was...amazing." She gave her head a heavy shake. "Totally amazing."

He sat back on his knees. "Don't think I'm through with you, princess. The best is yet to come. So to speak."

She climbed off the sofa in search of her panties and the rest of her clothes. She'd managed to keep her bra on, although it was now a tangled white band around her midriff. She reached around herself, found the hooks, and unfastened the garment. Striding through the room stark naked, she realized she wasn't even a bit self-conscious. When had that happened?

For heaven's sake. She'd just met Keno days ago.

Warning bells chimed loudly in her head. She ought to end this right this instant. Only she couldn't. How unfair would it be to take her own pleasure and deny him the rest of his?

*That's not it, and I know it.*

She couldn't stop now if her life depended on it. She had to have a taste of what lay in store. All the erotic experiences she'd always dreamed of suddenly dangled right before her, easily within her grasp. Sure, she'd had lovers—good lovers—but she'd never found such an immediate click with anyone before. There had to be a reason, and that reason piqued her curiosity so much, there was no way she could fight the urge.

She bent to retrieve her underwear and caught Keno staring at her, a naughty leer curling his sexy lips. "What?" She dangled her panties from her pinky as she straightened.

He closed the distance between them and gathered her in his arms. "I can't wait to get you into the bedroom." Gesturing toward the door, he shrugged. "That is where we're heading, right?"

Instead of answering, she merely planted a quick kiss on his mouth. She wriggled out of his embrace, then started from the room, never giving a backward glance. She knew he couldn't



resist any more than she. Her head swam with visions of sensual delights. This would be a morning to remember.

## Chapter Five

Keno crossed the threshold into Barbie's bedroom and found himself in a cotton candy pink explosion. He squinted against the aesthetic assault and instead turned his attention to the buxom beauty mounting the high four-poster bed. She leaned back on her elbows, exposing her nude, perfectly ripe body to him. He drank in the vision from head to toe. Tousled blonde curls, gently curved shoulders, and smooth arms. Her breasts sat full and high with pinkish-coral areolae and nipples like precious gemstones. His gaze continued down to her rounded hips and plump thighs. He licked his lips as he focused on the triangle of blonde hair shielding her sex.

She crooked a finger at him, and he immediately strode to the bed and climbed onto it. Lifting her leg, he sniffed her calf and breathed in her lilac scent. He couldn't resist kissing her milky skin, feasting on her succulent taste. Cradling her heel in his hand, he grinned at the carefully painted pink nails before sucking her big toe into his mouth.

She let out a quiet giggle and squirmed for a moment, then lay back on the silky comforter. "So you're a foot man, hmm?"

He ran his tongue along her instep, then met her smoky stare. "I'm a lover of beauty. And your feet are nearly as bewitching as the rest of you." Skimming leisurely kisses along her ankles, he caressed the pearly white skin of her calves, luxuriating in the velvet texture. Her delectable moans fed his soul like water on a thirsty earth. As he continued his slow, teasing march toward her sex, he felt her shudder and knew she was as turned on as he was. He licked behind her knee, glided his fingers gently over her shins, up her thighs. Spreading her legs wider, he took in the vision of her exposed pussy. Her intimate lips reminded him of a winter flower nearly ready to blossom. The nub glistened with her dew.

He lowered his head nearer her entrance, eager to watch her pleasure unfold up close. Giving her clit the lightest of touches with the tip of his finger, he delighted in her instant gasp. She lifted her hips toward him, silently urging him to give her more.

He had to taste her again, couldn't wait another second. Easing her labia wider, he stroked his tongue through her cream.

“Oh my God.” Her strained words betrayed how close she was to another orgasm. Exactly where he wanted to keep her.

He dipped a finger inside her channel—only an inch—then withdrew it. Her plaintive cry confirmed he'd set out on the right course. He lapped along her folds, purposely skirting her bud. Tunneling deeper into her slit, he reveled in each little tremble that racked her body, knowing she teetered on the edge of bliss.

When she curled her fingers into the bedclothes, an idea came to him. He reached for her wrist, took her hand, and set it just above her mound. He hoped she had the confidence to pleasure herself in front of him.

She didn't disappoint. After only a moment of hesitation, she started rubbing her cleft. He followed her pace, flicking her bud with his tongue, sure to touch his gold stud to her quivering flesh.

A primal scream tore from her lips, and her whole body convulsed in powerful quakes. He drank in her juices and tried to hold on for the wild ride. She bucked and writhed and shouted. Nothing excited him more than watching a woman at the pinnacle of her ecstasy.

And when she finally settled, he looked up toward her face and saw more perfect satisfaction there than he'd ever glimpsed on anyone before. An angel bathed in divine happiness.

He smoothed a hand along her hip. “How shall I fuck you, my princess?”

She let out a delicious purr. “Suggest something.”

He couldn't hide his wicked grin. Without waiting for her to change her mind, he grabbed her by her waist and rolled her onto her stomach. Then he climbed on top of her and slid his rigid cock along the crease of her ass.

She made a halfhearted attempt to complain, but quit when he shifted and gave her backside a firm slap. Damn, but he loved the sound of that. She drew a sharp breath, but made no attempt to escape. Rather, she lifted her buttocks higher, nearly imperceptibly, but enough that he sensed she craved more.

When the second spank came, Barbie's pussy throbbed with heavenly expectation. She'd never dared ask any lovers to play this way, yet she'd always yearned to try it.

Keno placed a warm, wet kiss on her back, so soft and gentle it sent shivers over her skin. He followed with another spank that made her sex tingle even more. The contrast of soft and hard, pleasure and pain, was more erotic than she'd ever imagined. She gestured toward her night table. "Condoms. Top drawer."

He immediately shifted so he could reach them, then sheathed himself. Her mouth watered at the notion of that big brown cock inside her.

*I shouldn't be doing this. I ought to be saving my pleasures for someone more right for me, for my grandfather's sake.*

Gritting her teeth, she banished her protests. All thoughts of stopping abated when Keno traced a long finger along her moist entrance. Her pussy vibrated with fierce craving. She lifted her hips toward him and glanced back at him. His braids fell over his shoulders, nearly to his firm pectorals. The way he looked down at her—as if she were a work of art—squeezed at her heart.

He bent to kiss her back, sending a hot shiver dancing along her spine.

"My beautiful princess." He grasped her hips and touched just the tip of his cock to her sex. With teasing strokes, he steered his shaft into her, slowly, methodically.

She tried to push back against him, but he refused to relinquish control. His hands, large yet incredibly gentle, guided her along his length. To the left, to the right, in small circles, gradually deeper. Torturously taking his time with skillful, deliberate thrusts, he slid into her, like a painter creating a masterpiece. As he deepened the penetration, Barbie braced for his impressive size. An instant of stretching pain gave way to delight. As he stroked inside her, he moved his hand between her legs and strummed a finger over her clit. Delicious joy spread through her.

She tightened her intimate muscles around his cock and was rewarded with a deep, vibrating growl. Keno penetrated all her defenses, took her higher and higher until she teetered on the brink of heaven. She tensed a second before the sweet, burning flood of pleasure rolled through her. The combustion of ecstasy set her ablaze, primal and all-encompassing. Rivulets of bliss spiraled in every direction.

Behind her, Keno dug his fingers into her hips and pounded against her. "Sweet Jesus, yes." He drove into her throbbing pussy again and again. After one final thrust, he collapsed over her, panting.

His heart hammered against her back, which made her smile. He moved off her, then took her with him when he curled onto his side. Cradled along his body, she breathed in the musky scent of their union. Perfectly and totally satisfied. They fit together like an expensive lipstick and its matching case. It almost felt...meant to be.

*No!*

This couldn't happen again. Absolutely not. As amazing as the sex had been, she had to find a husband. She'd have to be satisfied with memories of one amazing experience with him. Shutting her eyes, she forced back all the emotions bubbling up inside her. She could have everything she'd ever dreamed of if she could just put this behind her and find a good, solid man her grandfather would approve of.

\* \* \*

Barbie sank deeper into the service chair a few hours later at Hairgasm and drew a little comfort in the heavy scent of hairspray. "What the hell am I going to do, Reggie?" She stared at him in the mirror.

The hairdresser swatted her with his comb. "Well, first you're going to sit up like a big girl."

She smiled at his playful wink and shifted her rear end back. "Sorry. How am I going to find a fiancé by the time my grandfather arrives?"

Reggie stole a quick glance at the blue-haired lady having her hair teased at the station to his left. He took a step closer to Barbie and squinted at her reflection. "My last client is single, the one you saw leaving as you came in. And he's got a soft spot for blondes. Did you notice him?"

She tried to recall, but with her head in such a fog since her tryst with Keno earlier, she probably wouldn't have noticed if Brad Pitt had walked past her. "Sorry. What does he look like?"

Reggie combed a section of hair and held it between his fingers. *Snip*. A wet curl dropped onto her lap. “He’s hot. Midthirties, black hair, blue eyes, about six-three, lanky. And single.” He waved to a passing customer. “See you soon, Angie.”

“What does he do?”

“Lawyer. Works for the county.” He moved behind her and unclipped the back section of her hair.

“You’re sure he’s not gay?”

He let out an exasperated gasp. “Are you implying my gaydar is flawed? Why would I try to pass him off to you if there was a snowball’s chance in Miami Beach he’d go out with me?”

Reggie had been doing her hair for years. He knew what she liked, what she didn’t. She silently watched him work his magic. “He’s not one of those commitment-phobic men, is he?”

He set his hands on her shoulders. “He wants a family. Says so all the time. I don’t know why I didn’t think to fix you two up months ago. Of course, you never had quite so much pressure to hook up with someone before now. Wouldn’t it be adorable if it worked out? I could be your maid of honor.”

She flashed on a vision of her dollhouse, complete with a husband and two adorable kids. Keno’s face hijacked her daydream. That idyllic scene didn’t include a carefree Caribbean artist type like him. Her traitorous body heated as she recalled their lovemaking earlier. She started to fold her arms over her chest to hide her erect nipples, then remembered the dark vinyl cape that covered her. How could she get through the next few weeks working with Keno without touching him again? Unless...maybe just once more they could...

*No!* Keno was fun to play with. Way beyond fun. But she needed more. She had to find Mr. Right. And she had to find him in a hurry. “Okay, Reggie. What’s your customer’s name?”

“Allen Vandyke.” He combed a lock of hair into place. “Can’t you just see it now? Barbie Vandyke. Or Barbie Turner Vandyke.”

Yeah. She could totally see it. Hopefully he’d agree to go out with her tonight. The sooner she could strike Keno from her mind, the better. “Give me his number.”

\* \* \*

Keno entered the Calico Bay Club a few minutes after eight. The decor reminded him of the beachside fishing shacks in his native Trinidad. Fishnets hung from the dark wood ceiling, adorned with plastic starfish, crabs, and lobsters. Weatherworn driftwood flanked the long rattan bar, and a calypso beat filled the air.

He scanned the room for his date, trying to remember what she looked like. Dark, straight, shoulder-length hair, incredible body. A hand on his shoulder had him turning to find Anne Marie. "There you are." In tight-fitting black jeans and a sheer leopard-print blouse with a black lace bra underneath, she looked way beyond smoking hot.

"Here I am." She stood on her tiptoes and planted a wet kiss on his lips.

*She doesn't taste as good as Barbie.*

No. He couldn't think that way. All afternoon he'd been unable to push thoughts of Barbie from his mind. What had that woman done to him? Felt like some sort of spell. Maybe voodoo.

Forcing his mind to the present, he slid his gaze slowly over his date from top to bottom. "You look good enough to eat, my lady."

She gave her eyes a playful roll. "Maybe later." Smoothing her hand over his back, she made a clucking noise. "I love your Hawaiian shirt. You fit right in here."

"And your outfit fits *our* theme."

Her eyebrows knotted in question. "Oh? How do you figure?"

Grinning, he pointed to her blouse. "You wear the colors of a predatory animal, and I get the impression I am your prey."

Giggling, she grabbed a fistful of his shirt and urged him closer. Her spicy perfume smelled expensive, but she'd apparently bathed in it. His eyes watered.

"I'm a very successful huntress." She hooked her hands around his neck and was about to kiss him.

He took her wrists and relocated them to her sides. "Slow down, tiger."

*What? What's come over me?*

He normally loved fast and assertive. Anne Marie typified his type of woman. Why wasn't his body reacting as it always did? He stared down into her cleavage, but still, nothing. All he could think about was Barbie. Her ripe curves, her luscious mouth, her delicious rosebud nipples.

"I'm really not very thirsty," Anne Marie said. "Want to get out of here? I live only a few blocks away."

The woman didn't seem to get the hint. She reminded him of the Hindu deity Shiva, with its many arms. And it felt as if all those arms reached for him, which shouldn't be a problem. Only it was.

Familiar, musical laughter drifted to his ears. Tuning out Anne Marie, he swept his gaze through the bar. Past the suspended lobster trap and the treasure chest he saw a blonde with her back to him. Could it be? Seated opposite her was a skinny suit with glasses. Probably an accountant or a lawyer.

When the man touched the blonde's hand, the hair on the back of Keno's neck stood on end, and his jaw automatically tightened. She turned her head to the side enough that he could see her profile. Barbie's profile. His head started buzzing. His stomach churned uncomfortably.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

Anne Marie droned on about her job, but he could only focus on the couple across the bar. An ache started in his neck and radiated around his head to his temples. He'd never experienced anything like this. He'd run into women he'd slept with before, even when they were with another guy, yet this felt totally different.

Every time Barbie's date touched her, he wanted to rip the guy's face off. Primitive possessive forces swirled inside him, making his heart thunder and his mouth go dry. He stared at them and didn't care if anyone noticed.

"Keno?"

Grasping to get his bearings, he glanced at Anne Marie. "Hmm?"

"Did you even hear a word I said?"

No. "Yes. Of course." He gestured over her shoulder. "Thought I saw someone I know."

She stepped closer. "You know *me*." Touching her hand to his face, she shook her head. "Where did you go just then? I've never had to work so hard to hold a man's attention."

He shifted from foot to foot. "You know, I'm not feeling quite right. Maybe I'm coming down with something." He patted his forehead, and sure enough, it did feel clammy.



Her eyebrows snapped together, and her head jerked back. “Yeah? Well, I think you're full of shit. I think you spotted something you want more than you want me, so now I get kicked to the curb.”

His stomach sank. Hurting Anne Marie's feelings was the last thing he wanted to do. He wished Barbie didn't affect him the way she did, but he couldn't help it, couldn't fight it. “I'm so sorry, fair lady.”

“Don't you 'fair lady' me, you jackass. I bet those braids are a weave.” She yanked hard on his hair.

“Ouch!” He gave her a gentle shove to stop her from hurting him.

She reared back, then landed her fist in the center of his gut. He stumbled backward into a high table and knocked over a bar stool. “Have a nice fucking life.” With that, she marched away and out the door.

Gathering his courage, he ventured a glance in Barbie's direction.

*Shit!* She stared at him wide-eyed. And so did her date. Like he was some piece-of-trash drunk causing a ruckus in the place. His face heated, but he managed an idiotic wave at her.

She rolled her eyes, then started toward him. What the hell would he tell her? Certainly not that he was jealous. Ha! He'd never had a jealous bone in his body.

*Until today.*

He glanced past Barbie at the skinny dude at her table. Skinny and pasty. And ugly.

“What a coincidence.” She lifted a blonde eyebrow.

“Yes. Quite a coincidence.” He gestured toward the man. “You here on a date, me here on a date.”

A grin played on her lips. “Was that your date who just stormed out of here? After punching you?”

He squared his shoulders. “Wasn't like that at all. You see, we attend the same gym. She's taking a self-defense class and wanted to...uh...show me how much she's learned.”

“Oh, I see.” Her nod didn't convince him any more than his explanation had convinced her.

He glanced toward her table. “Where'd you find Ichabod Crane over there?”

“Sleepy Hollow, of course.” If she didn't know better, she'd think Keno's eyes had grown a bit greener. But now that he mentioned it, Allen did bear a resemblance to the literary character. Which wouldn't necessarily be a problem. Her real issue with Allen was her total lack of attraction to him. Every time she'd tried to imagine kissing him, her mind would twist the vision until she was kissing Keno. And making love with Keno. How had he snaked his way inside her head?

“Is he your boyfriend?” Keno's nostrils flared on the last syllable.

“Of course not.” Did he think she'd sleep with him if she had a boyfriend waiting in the wings? But in truth, thinking didn't have much to do with their earlier tryst. Not like they'd discussed it ahead of time like civilized people. No. They'd merely hopped into the sack like a couple of animals.

Animals. Hot, sweaty, lustful animals taking their pleasure because they could. Heat crawled under her collar and made her nipples peak. She fanned her face, then realized she'd given her thoughts away.

Keno leered at her.

*No! I will not succumb.*

Keno was all wrong for her. For her grandfather too. She ought to give Allen another chance. Maybe if she got to know him better, the attraction would eventually come.

“Everything all right here?”

She spun around to find Allen standing behind her with a dopey smile on his face. “Yes, fine.” She gestured toward Keno. “Keno Jensen, Allen Vandyke.”

The men shook hands.

“Keno is illustrating my next book.” She glanced from one to the other, waiting for someone to offer an excuse to part ways.

“So you're an artist,” Allen said. “I dabble in watercolors myself. I'm not a pro, of course.” To Barbie's horror, Allen sat on a bar stool and motioned for Keno to join him.

What the hell? The men started talking acrylics versus oils, the benefits of pastels. The more she watched and listened, the more convinced she became that Reggie's gaydar was

definitely broken. If Allen wasn't gay, he was at least bisexual. And he seemed way too interested in Keno. Which put her right back at square one.

Her grandfather would arrive in Miami in less than a week, and she had no fiancé to show him. A sob caught in her throat. He would be heartbroken that she'd lied. And he'd probably never speak to her again.

All her dreams were about to come crashing down.

## Chapter Six

Barbie paced her living room floor, rubbing her stiff neck muscles. There must be a way to find a man in a hurry. Her grandfather would arrive in only three days, and several church mixers and online dating searches hadn't yielded a fiancé. She grabbed her water bottle and stopped for a sip to quench her dry throat.

To make matters worse, her preoccupation with Keno had seriously slowed down progress on her book. Now she'd have to spend part of her grandfather's visit working. Of course, he'd probably head right back home as soon as he'd learn she'd lied about being engaged. The scrambled eggs she'd eaten for breakfast sat like a stone in her stomach.

She sank onto the rattan rocking chair and studied her incomplete dollhouse family. It *would* be complete—someday. Eventually she'd marry and start a family. But with her grandfather's poor health, he wouldn't live long enough to see that happen. If only she could show him she'd started down that path to happiness, she knew he'd be at peace. His only son—her father—had run out on her mother when he'd learned of her pregnancy. He'd perished in a motorcycle accident a few years later.

Barbie didn't know the dynamics that had existed in her father's family or why he'd disappeared from their lives. But her grandfather had made it clear how strongly he felt about Barbie marrying, how important that was to him. So important that he hinged her inheritance on it.

Perhaps she should just phone him and say her fiancé dumped her. Or that she'd caught him cheating.

*Way to break an old man's heart.*

She really wanted to make him proud, particularly since his son had disappointed him so profoundly. Maybe she could convince him she did have a fiancé. He could be away on a business trip.

No. He wouldn't buy that. Her head buzzed with worry. If she didn't calm down, she wouldn't be able to get any work done. With a deadline looming for this book and another to find a husband, her brain felt like it was going to come crashing out of her skull at any moment. She had to find a way to relax.

When Keno arrived a few minutes later, smelling like sunshine and exotic spices, she didn't even fret. Would it be so terrible if she gave in to temptation? Sure, they needed to work on the book. Wasn't like she couldn't control herself until their workday ended. No reason not to indulge after hours. One more tryst with him would relax her enough so she could accomplish all the monumental tasks she needed to in the next few days. Giving him a big smile, she gestured toward the study.

She couldn't help admiring the view as she followed him through the house. His snug T-shirt hugged his muscular shoulders and broad torso. In her mind, she stripped away his clothes and recalled his lean backside and long, powerful legs.

A ribbon of desire uncoiled inside her, shooting delicious heat to her abdomen. Maybe they'd work after they played.

*Try to get your work finished first.*

She sat beside him and waited as he flipped open his sketch pad.

"I enjoyed chatting with your...um...date last night." A smug grin lifted one corner of his mouth.

Recalling the evening's humiliation, she blanched. Although he ought to be more embarrassed than she. "Sorry I didn't get to meet yours. Since she left in such a hurry." She lifted an eyebrow in challenge. Did he really want to discuss that fiasco?

He instantly averted his gaze. "Ready to move on to the next drawing?"

After several hours of work, Keno stood up and stretched. He glanced at Barbie, tapping away on her laptop, oblivious to his presence. He allowed his gaze to linger on her luscious breasts and the smooth, milky texture of her skin. Sunlight streaming in the window behind her bathed her in a golden glow. The need to capture her beauty overwhelmed him.

Quietly he picked up his sketch pad and sat on the arm of the couch. He worked quickly, effortlessly. His pencil seemed to move itself as his picture started to take form. The gentle curve

of her jawline, the soft, loose curls, long, sweeping eyelashes, and full, succulent lips. The more he drew, the more a strange new sensation took root in his belly. Could he be coming down with something?

He'd sketched models before—dozens of times. Why did this feel so different? So personal. He desperately wanted to paint her. Nude. She'd surely never agree to that, being as buttoned-up as she was. Of course, he knew the other side of her. The wild, erotic side.

She stopped typing and glanced at him. Her brow furrowed. “What are you doing?”

He closed his sketch pad and set it on the coffee table. “Nothing.”

She lifted a skeptical eyebrow. “Nothing?”

His face warmed. What had come over him? The woman was stirring new emotions in him, uncomfortable emotions. He shouldn't paint her. That would only worsen this new dilemma. Except the desire refused to go away. “I was thinking.” He sat on the couch.

She stepped around the desk and leaned against it with her arms folded across her chest. “Okay.”

“I'd like you to pose for me.” There. He'd said it. She'd refuse. He knew she would.

“You mean like for a picture?”

“Mm hmm. A painting.” He waited for her to balk at the request. “Nude.”

She squinted at him. A pink flush spread across her cheeks. What happened next made him drop his jaw.

Barbie took a step toward him, then lifted her shirt over her head. She tossed it across the room and toed off her sandals. His pulse quickened as she unbuttoned her pants, lowered them, and kicked them away. Staring at her lovely body clad in only a pink, lacy bra and panties made his mouth water. Desire boiled inside him. He didn't want to break his own rule and continue their affair, but how could he resist her?

His cock strained against his pants as she reached her arms behind her and unhooked her bra. She peeled it away, then took off the panties. Her taut nipples called to him, begged him to suckle them. And her scent—oh Lord. A heady mix of lilac and musk drew him like a siren's song.

“Where do you want me?” Her voice—barely above a whisper—caressed his soul.

Words caught in his throat. He'd never yearned for a woman as he did for her.

*Danger! Danger!*

She sauntered past him to the love seat and draped herself across the cushions. "Like this, maybe?"

He shook his head, his mind swirling with a hundred lustful ideas. He couldn't help himself. "Closer."

She stood and moved toward him.

"Closer."

Another few steps, and she stood over him.

"Not close enough." He set his hands on her waist and pulled her onto his lap, straddling him. His erection pressed against her. All thoughts of stopping flew out the window.

A naughty grin curled her lips. "How can you paint me when your fingers are otherwise occupied?" Taking his hands, she moved them to her breasts.

Kneading her luscious orbs, he stared at her mouth, willed her to kiss him. She swiped her tongue over his lips. He craved her sweet taste, needed it to survive as much as air and water. She rocked her pelvis against his stone-hard cock. Sighing, he suckled her tongue, then devoured her mouth.

A deluge of desire tore through him. He couldn't get enough of this heavenly creature. She broke their kiss, then practically tore off his shirt. Fumbling with his fly, he managed to open it, and his erection sprang free. Immediately Barbie's fingers closed around his cock. He shut his eyes, reveling in her touch.

She squeezed his shaft, then cupped his balls. Pleasure spiraled through him. Her fingernails teased and tantalized his hard flesh. He opened his eyes when he felt her move off his lap. She sank to her knees on the floor in front of him.

"What a sight," he murmured. He caught the waistband of his pants and eased them down farther.

"Mmm." She gave his cock a long, slow swipe with her tongue. Her hair splayed over his lap as she licked his balls and sucked them into the warm, wet confines of her mouth.

He lifted toward her. She slid her closed hand along his hard-on. His head swam in bliss. Gliding her tongue around his cock, she advanced toward the crown. A pearl of his seed escaped the slit. Greedily she lapped at it, then slid the tip into her mouth. He leaned his head back and enjoyed the erotic sensations.

She took him deeper, in and out, sucking more and more of his length each time. Gripping the root of his shaft, she circled her talented tongue around his flesh, flicking and nipping and swirling in a mind-blowing frenzy. From the sound of her excited moans, he could tell she was enjoying this almost as much as he was, if that were possible. He combed his fingers through her hair, fighting to maintain control. His balls constricted, so close to release. He had to let go or he'd die. "I'm about to come."

Her smile confirmed she wanted him to go for it.

A strangled cry tore from his throat as he shot his seed into her. She sucked and squeezed, milking every drop of ecstasy from him. He shuddered from the fierceness of his rapture. She licked him clean as if lapping up the sweetest honey. He'd never had a woman give him more pleasure, or appear to enjoy it as much.

"You're going to kill me, my beautiful princess."

She looked up at him, smiling. "You make me feel so sexy when you call me that."

He stroked her hair back from her face. "You are by far the sexiest woman I've ever known."

Her mouth formed an O. She shook her head. "You're spoiling me."

He pulled her up and sat her on his lap. "I've not yet begun to spoil you, my queen."

She threw her head back, laughing. "I've been promoted to queen."

"Absolutely. Queen of delight."

She wriggled off him and stood up. "Well, the queen is famished. Let's get something to eat." She retrieved her underwear from the floor and put it on.

He pushed his pants the rest of the way off. "May I eat naked?"

She wagged an eyebrow. "Most definitely."

He followed her into the kitchen.

She pulled open the fridge and gestured toward the contents. "What do you want?"



“Aside from you?” He pinched her backside and laughed when she giggled. Returning his attention to the food, he frowned. “Everything in here is low-fat, fat-free, sugar-free, and no doubt taste-free. Why don't you eat real food? A meal should be like a work of art. It should give pleasure.”

“I'm trying to lose weight.”

He gave the refrigerator door a shove and took her hand. “You are beautiful exactly as God made you. So, he didn't make you skinny. Big deal. Don't deprive yourself of one of life's pleasures.”

She shook her head and dropped her gaze to the floor. The sadness he found on her face cut deep into his heart. He longed to free her from her self-imposed chains.

She squared her shoulders. “There's nothing wrong with wanting to improve myself.”

“That's true. But whoever said you needed to be improved didn't look deep enough.” He closed her hand in his. “Hollywood and Madison Avenue shouldn't dictate how we live our lives.”

Shaking her head, she sighed. “Has nothing to do with movies or magazines.”

He waited, but she didn't elaborate. “Why then?”

She pulled her hand free, then wrapped her arms around her middle. “My mother was a little overweight, like me. She always thought that might have been part of the reason my father wouldn't marry her. I don't really think that was the reason, though.”

He rubbed her arm gently, sensing she wanted to talk about this more. “Why then?”

She looked away and shrugged. “I think he was a free spirit. Didn't need anything or anyone tying him down. He lived...and died on his Harley. That's what my grandfather says. He was devastated when my father left. Very disappointed. I'd rather die than let him down.”

“I'm sure your grandfather doesn't care what size you wear. Nor do I.”

Her halfhearted smile convinced him he'd have to try harder to get through to her. An idea hatched in his mind. “Go get dressed. I'm taking you to my place.” This was crazy. Convincing her to live her life to its fullest was suddenly incredibly important. He felt himself tumbling deeper and deeper into his forbidden zone, the place where he kept so many of his emotions hidden. He ought not to care so much about her, but he couldn't help himself.

Back in her study, he watched her dress as he put his clothes on and wondered if he'd completely lost his mind.

\* \* \*

Barbie gasped when she set foot inside Keno's apartment. Massive canvases lined one long wall of the converted warehouse. Had to be a dozen of them. The most beautiful, vivid colors, stunning landscapes, and captivating portraits. "These are incredible."

He set his keys on the long counter and glanced toward the paintings. "If only you were a collector or a gallery owner."

She scanned the open space. The living area sat next to the industrial-style kitchen and in front of the bedroom section. Could his living space be any more different from her cozy bungalow? Come to think of it, they were such opposites in every way. So why did she find herself so drawn to him?

*The sex, dummy.*

Sure. That was it. Plain and simple. Yet looking at his art touched something deep inside her, something powerful. Her stomach growled loudly, filling the silence. She set a hand on her belly and felt her face warm.

Keno let out a hearty laugh. "I promised to feed you, didn't I?"

"Mm hmm." She strode toward the paintings, then stopped to study each one.

"I'm going to start a batch of curry chicken, my grandmother's recipe. But don't worry. I won't force you to wait while it cooks. I have an appetizer you'll love."

What did that mean? Pots and pans clanged behind her, but she ignored all his preparations. His paintings fascinated her way more than his cooking. The love he put into every canvas was evident in the sensual curves, the bold colors, and the dramatic composition. She didn't know much about art, but she could see he had a huge amount of talent. And his passion shone through in every painting.

Standing in front of a tropical beach scene, she jumped when he touched her shoulder. She spun around and grinned when she realized he'd stripped naked again. Feasting her eyes on his muscular form, her insides instantly heated.

“I've laid out a little snack for you. Until dinner is ready.” He led her to his bed, and she noticed he'd moved a low table next to it, covered with several small bowls.

Curiosity niggled at her. Keno took her face in his hands and kissed her, slow and soft. A quiver of excitement shimmied up her spine. He worked his hands under her blouse and eased it off her shoulders.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he trailed hot kisses along her throat, in the hollow of her neck, down to her cleavage. He lowered one bra strap and cupped her breast. Using his thumb, he strummed the nipple, sending the most delicious sensations through her. Her breath grew ragged. He moved the other strap off her shoulder and licked the taut point.

Suddenly he stopped and backed away, and she noticed the playful glint in his eyes. “I promised you a snack, didn't I?”

“I'm not hungry anymore.” Food was the last thing on her mind now.

He wagged his finger back and forth. “No, my queen. I must feed you the nectar of the gods.”

She lifted an eyebrow, wondering what he had in store. He took her hand and guided her to his bed, gestured for her to sit. Getting on his knees in front of her, he pulled the table a little closer. Then he dipped a finger into one of the bowls.

“Open your mouth for me. I want to share a sweetness with you.”

His words alone stirred her passion. Her juices moistened her panties. Shutting her eyes, she waited. Keno slipped a finger into her mouth. The decadent taste and smell of honey filled her senses. Had she ever truly savored it like this before? She didn't think so.

“No saccharin or aspartame or anything else fake and empty here. Just pure bee nectar.” His voice, sugary as the confection, warmed her soul.

She suckled his finger, licked it and swirled her tongue around it as she had his cock earlier.

“Isn't that better than all your no-calorie, fat-free junk?”

“Mm hmm.” She released his finger and licked her lips. “Nearly as satisfying as the taste of your lust.”

He let out a wicked laugh. “You are a naughty, naughty girl, my queen.” He caught her shoulders in his hands and eased her back onto the bed. “Let's get you undressed, naughty girl.” Working the button on her pants, he managed to get it open, then lowered the zipper. She wriggled the pants off, then let him roll her panties down.

Keno picked up another bowl and dipped his hand inside. She tried to sniff out the contents, but couldn't smell anything but the musky scent of her rising libido. His fingers glistened as he removed them from the bowl. He rubbed his hands together, then reached for her breasts.

Something slick and warm glided over her skin as he massaged her flesh. Then he turned toward the table and reached for another bowl. He sprinkled something brown and sparkly onto her breasts. The spicy tang of cinnamon reached her nose.

He straddled her and bent to lick her erect nipples. Then he brushed his tongue along her lips.

Butter, sweet and rich, prodded her taste buds. The cinnamon mixed with sugar and the erotic blending of food and sex raised her pleasure quotient. Her pussy throbbed with anticipation.

Next he dipped his finger into the last bowl. When he lifted it out, it was covered in something dark and thick.

Chocolate.

“Where are you putting that?” Her pulse pounded with need.

A slow, leering grin curled his lips. “Here.” He touched his finger to her nipple. She bucked as a ripple of longing snaked through her body. “And here.” He dotted the syrup along her middle, then reached for the bowl and held it above her.

She sucked her lips into her mouth and bit back a lustful sigh. He drew a line down her belly, then dipped into the bowl for more. Her breath came in short gasps as he painted her skin with chocolate. He set the bowl down, then started licking up his creation.

She squirmed, ready to explode with pent-up need. He lifted her arms over her head and held her wrists with one hand. He lowered his lips to hers to capture her mouth, then swirled her tongue with his chocolate flavor. With his free hand he caught her breast and tugged at the nipple, still sticky from the sweets he'd painted there.

Breaking the kiss, he stared down at her. "We're both a mess, you know."

She nodded. "I don't care."

He leveled a serious gaze at her. "I do." He climbed off the bed, then stood and offered her a hand up. "In fact, I believe the queen needs a bath. And I am just the man for the job."

A jolt of excitement flooded her veins. "Yeah?"

"Yes, my queen." His wicked grin told her this would be no ordinary bath. This would be a fantasy come true.

He took her hand and led her to the bathroom. One of his portraits hung on the wall—a nude black woman with small breasts. She wondered if he'd slept with the model and asked to paint her too. None of her business, really. In a few days this affair would be over, and Barbie would continue her search for a husband.

But when she looked at Keno leaning over the tub, running their bath, she realized she didn't want it to end soon. She hated the idea of never seeing him again, or at least not sleeping with him anymore. Forcing the notion from her mind, she glanced around the room. It had the same sleek, industrial look as the kitchen. White, angular appointments and no-nonsense chrome fixtures.

"Ready, my queen?" Keno gestured toward the bathtub, which he'd filled with frothy bubble bath.

Climbing inside, she let the steamy water soothe her skin. She breathed in the humid air scented with a familiar sweet aroma she couldn't quite place. Then she spotted the pink bottle on the windowsill. "Mr. Bubble?"

Keno gave a firm nod. "Only the best for you."

Chuckling, she slid down in the water, luxuriating in the silky feel of the bubbles. Keno stepped in at the opposite end, holding a fluffy white washcloth. Her insides heated as she imagined him washing her.

Fantasy became reality as he rubbed a bar of soap on the cloth, then lifted her foot and started to scrub gently. He held her ankle and worked the lather all the way up her thigh, then repeated the process with her other leg. Delicious longing hummed through her. He dragged the washcloth so close to her entrance, then moved it along.

She whimpered her disappointment, but Keno only smiled. "Patience, my queen." He sluiced lather along her stomach, between her breasts, then over her shoulder and down her arm. After he'd tended to each finger, he sucked her thumb into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it.

The sensuality of the gesture only heightened her desire. She couldn't take much more of this. He lathered her other arm, carefully rinsed it, then moved his soapy hands to her breasts. His fingers slid over her slippery skin. She nearly cried out when he bent his head to suckle and flick his tongue stud over her aroused nipples. Pleasure flared in every direction. Her pussy vibrated with need.

His fingers marched lower, then lower, until they sneaked inside her folds and played there. Delirious with desire, she wriggled and squirmed, moaned and panted. He found her nub and strummed it. She climbed closer and closer to the edge of bliss. He drove his fingers inside her, thrusting in rhythm with her bucking hips.

All the hot, wet sensations melted together, conspiring to bring her nearer to release. She teetered on the precipice of an earth-shattering orgasm.

*Oh Lord.*

She wanted it to go on forever. She tumbled into nirvana. Wave after euphoric wave catapulted her to ecstasy. The rapturous sensations went on and on and on. She shook and whimpered, reveled in her fierce tremors.

Keno stroked her softly, whispered soothing words. Somehow he'd taken her to a level of pleasure she'd never known before. He let the water out of the tub. When she stood, he wrapped her in a fluffy white towel and drew her against him. He held her for several minutes, neither of them speaking a word. Yet the silence was filled with emotions she'd never expected to feel, emotions that frightened the hell out of her.

Rather than inspire her to go find Mr. Right, her day with Keno had made her yearn for more of him. Now she wanted to spend the rest of the night in his arms. Wasn't like she could leave when he'd made her a sumptuous dinner. The spicy aroma of curry stirred her other appetites, and all thoughts of leaving vanished like steam from a hot bath.

One night couldn't hurt.

## Chapter Seven

Keno closed his hand around Barbie's and led her to the couch, stopping along the way to retrieve a condom from his dresser drawer. Removing the towel from his waist, he winked at her. Since when did a woman make his heart beat so fast? He spread the towel over the couch and dropped the foil packet on the end table. Then he sat down and pulled her closer.

Her scent stirred something in him—something savage and hungry. She climbed onto his lap and let go of the fabric separating them. He gave his head a heavy shake. “You're quite the beauty.”

She crinkled her brow and huffed. “You can quit buttering me up.”

“I buttered you before, remember?”

Her eyes rolled toward the heavens. “Mm hmm. I remember.”

He cupped her generous ass and pulled her closer. “Seriously, you are a very pretty lady. And you turn me on like...”

*Like no one ever has before.*

“You ought to believe in yourself. You're an author and a teacher and one incredibly hot woman.” He brushed his lips over hers. His cock hardened at her delighted purr. So sexy. She slid her sex over his erection. He'd die if he didn't bury himself inside her soon.

“Thank you for saying so. I wish I had talent like you.” She swept her arm toward his paintings. “You're really good.”

He tightened his grip on her backside. “I'm good and hungry. For you.” He captured her mouth, tasting the cinnamon he'd shared with her before. His head swam with desire for her alone. She wrapped her arms around his neck as she rocked against him, her juices lubricating her way.

He moved from her mouth to her neck and shoulder, skimming and nipping her silky skin. She lifted slightly, and he took the opportunity to slide his hand between her thighs and dip a finger inside her, testing her readiness.

Lord, she was so tight. And soaking wet, which had nothing to do with the bath. She whimpered softly, then leaned to the side and grabbed the condom packet from the table. Tearing it open, she grinned at him. "If you don't fuck me now, I'll positively die."

"My sentiments exactly. I'd hate to keep Your Highness waiting."

He let her sheathe his erection. She pushed up on her knees, and he guided her descent onto his stone-hard cock. Inch by inch, he slipped deeper. Seeing her wince, he lifted her slightly. "I'm sorry. Too deep?"

The pain on her face gave way to a satisfied smile. "You're awfully big, you know. Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

He didn't want to ever hurt her. The notion that he'd caused her a moment of distress cut through him. "Tell me if it's too much, please."

She gave him a soft, sweet kiss. "It's perfect now. Just that instant of adjustment. Well worth the payoff." Pivoting her hips, she ground against him, taking him deeper. Her fingers curled into his shoulders. Everything she did felt tight and wet and wonderful.

He lifted her, withdrawing by inches, then thrust deeper. He yearned to quicken his rhythm, to give her everything, but he held back to make it last. She rolled her head back, moaning and wriggling. Her pussy squeezed around him, sending delightful flares of pleasure shooting through him.

He felt her orgasm quake inside her. She let out a scream as she dug her nails into his shoulders. The pain didn't bother him. Quite the contrary. Now that she was climaxing, he allowed his own control to slip away.

He quickened his tempo, driving into her hard and fast and deep. His thrusts melted into her warm wetness. A blinding ecstasy rocked him to his core. She milked him of every drop of his essence. Heaven on earth. He never wanted it to end.

Sweat poured off his skin. He held her against him and kissed her deeply, tasting her bliss on her tongue.

She broke away and collapsed on his shoulder, panting. "Oh...my...God."



“Woman, you're going to break my cock.”

She threw her head back, laughing. “But what a way to go.”

He kissed her neck, not yet ready for their contact to end. Skimming his hands along her sweat-slick back, he thought about tomorrow. No way could he keep this up. He had to end it lest he risk developing feelings for her.

*As if you don't have them now.*

He refused to make himself vulnerable to the inevitable anguish. Never again. He'd loved three women, and two of them had hurt him deeply—his mother with her fists and his ex-fiancée with her cheating ways. The familiar pain in his gut accompanied the thoughts. He swept the unpleasant memories right out of his mind.

*Think about the here and now.*

Over the sweet scent of their lovemaking, he detected the pungent aroma of curry in the air. The chicken would be perfect by now. Mind-blowing sex followed by culinary nirvana. But he ought to not get too used to this.

He was so far into the danger zone with Barbie, but he had no idea how to jump off the train. He didn't want to fall for her, and he already wanted her more than he should. This could only lead to disaster.

\* \* \*

Barbie picked up Keno's limp arm and moved it off her hip. Thankfully he didn't even stir. So full from the amazing meal he'd made her, she couldn't sleep. Spending the entire night felt too much like a relationship anyway.

She slipped on her clothes and made it out the door in less than ten minutes. Then it dawned on her that Keno had driven her here. She thought about phoning a cab, but realized she had no idea where the hell she was.

*Brilliant.*

She returned to the apartment door and tried the knob. Miraculously it opened. Keno stood in the doorway wearing a frown and nothing else. “Where did you think you were going? It's after midnight.” His accent sounded stronger.

She swallowed hard. Words got lost in her throat.

He took her hand and pulled her inside. "I'll take you home. If that's what you want." He turned away and strode toward the bed.

"I'm not in a position to get...involved, Keno."

He stopped, but didn't face her.

"I'm... There's someone else." She tamped down her guilt over the lie.

Finally he glanced over his shoulder at her. "Oh?"

She dropped her gaze to the floor.

"Not that gentleman I met the other night, hmm?"

She shook her head. "I'd appreciate it if you'd drive me home. Or call me a taxi." Her gut clenched, but she couldn't look at him; she refused to face the hurt she knew she'd find. "I didn't mean to—"

"Don't. I had no plans to continue this...this thing, anyway. Let me throw on some clothes, and I'll take you home."

She backed against the door, averting her eyes as he dressed. It had to be this way. She couldn't give up all her dreams. Her grandfather would never accept someone like Keno. He wanted to see her with a man who mirrored his own values. Didn't matter that she'd already developed feelings for him. She'd have to move on. Without him. She'd known him less than two weeks, for heaven's sake. Why should it be difficult?

He didn't speak a word to her as he let her into his car and started the motor. She ventured a glance at him, but his stony expression gave away nothing. Biting on her lip, she stared straight through the windshield at the deserted streets. Made no sense that his silent treatment bothered her so much. How could he mean anything to her already? Only, he did.

Much as she yearned to continue this fling, see where it took them, she just couldn't. She had obligations, after all. Her grandfather was the only family she had left. How could she cast aside his wishes?

She had to think of something. With his visit only two days away, finding a fiancé would be impossible. Unless...

The car jerked to a stop. Keno got out without uttering a word and came around to her door. He yanked it open and stepped aside.

She wanted to say whatever it would take to make this okay, but she couldn't find the words. Her heart pounded as she stood and brushed past him. Turning toward him, she swallowed back the lump in her throat. "I had a wonderful time."

*So beyond lame.*

He refused to meet her gaze. "Yeah. Me too."

"I think it would be best to put work on hold until next week. I have company coming from out of town on Thursday, which will keep me busy through the weekend." She clasped her purse tightly to keep her hands from shaking.

"Fine."

Her gut clenched as she watched him get into his car. After a quick glance, he drove off—fast, squealing his brakes at the end of the street. He took a left and faded into the moonless night.

Barbie unlocked her door and slipped inside. She already missed him. His spicy scent, his comforting presence. His reassuring touch.

*Stop thinking about him.*

She had big problems to deal with. Like how she'd let her grandfather down by admitting she had no fiancé. And that she'd lied to him. Suddenly she remembered the idea that had begun to spark in the car.

If she could find someone to *pretend* to be her fiancé, she'd avoid breaking her grandfather's heart. She'd explain later that the relationship had ended. But by that time, she'd surely have found someone suitable. And when she took Mr. Right to meet her grandfather, all would be well.

\* \* \*

Barbie woke with a start. Another dream about Keno. That made the second in as many days. Ridiculous. Rather than dwelling on something that could never be, she ought to be concentrating on finding a fill-in fiancé for her grandfather's arrival tomorrow. So far, her accountant and her optometrist had turned her down. Flat refused to go along with her subterfuge even for a few days.

She padded into the bathroom and caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror over the sink. Her hair reminded her of a blonde bird's nest. Maybe she should run by Hairgasm and have Reggie fix her up.

An epiphany hit her like a bowling ball. Reggie acted in community theater. He'd love the opportunity to play the role of her doting fiancé for a few days. She raced from the bathroom to the kitchen. As she started a pot of coffee, she phoned Reggie on his cell and asked if he'd meet her for breakfast in forty-five minutes.

"Where's the fire, girlfriend?" His effeminate tone gave her pause.

But she'd seen him in a local rendition of *Julius Caesar*. The guy had played an impressive—and quite manly—Cassius. Then again, she'd also watched him in a low-budget production where he'd done a killer Mae West. He'd just have to channel his Cassius again.

"I need a huge favor." She turned on the coffeemaker and went to grab a mug.

"Another one? I just fixed you up, sweetie. How'd that go, by the way?"

She gritted her teeth, remembering the date debacle. "Let's just say Allen is more your type than mine."

"No way!"

"Way. But not to worry. You can make it up to me. How about that diner on Flagler Street near Ninety-Five? I'll buy."

"Those are the magic words. See you at nine."

\* \* \*

Keno dragged his paintbrush along the canvas, creating an angry black slash over a pink flower. Pink! Since when were all his details that sickening, weak hue? He clenched his teeth against the answer he refused to give voice to.

Not only had Barbie invaded his color palette, but every time he created a new face, it resembled hers. Each figure took on the ripe, curvy proportions of her sexy body.

It shouldn't bother him that she hadn't even phoned him in two days. She'd said she was having company. That would keep her busy. But still, didn't she regret sneaking out of his apartment? Wouldn't she want to call to apologize?

*She doesn't care. Women don't care.*

Exactly why he'd sworn off relationships long ago. Wisely so.

*Just look at me with my bruised ego.*

He gave his head a heavy shake. Only he knew this went way beyond his ego. Somehow she'd managed to break through his defenses and get into his head.

*My heart.*

"God damned woman." He drew a big *X* on the canvas. He needed to get laid. By someone other than *her*. Wiping his brush on a rag, he let out a harsh breath. He crossed the room to the phone, then scrolled through the list of recently received calls. Two numbers belonged to women he'd gone out with—once. He tried to recall what each looked like, but kept picturing Barbie's face. Knowing instinctively neither woman would tempt him now, he slammed the phone down on the table.

He crossed to the large window and glanced toward the blazing sun high in the sky. What was she doing right now? He recalled she'd said her company would arrive today. A man, perhaps? A lover?

His chest tightened at the thought. Envisioning her making love with someone else made his gut swirl with dread. Better not to know.

*Keep your mind on other things.*

Painting hadn't worked, so he grabbed a water bottle and headed to the gym. As usual, he noticed several young hotties. But he didn't have it in him to chat them up. When one made obvious eye contact, he merely looked away and continued climbing the stairs machine. Sweat poured off his body and ran down his forehead and into his eyes, clouding his vision.

For an instant, he thought he saw Barbie. He wiped his face and refocused. Not her.

*Lord, I'm down with the sickness.*

He had to get her off his mind. Continuing the relationship would only hurt, as they always did. He flashed on his mother's twisted face as she cut a switch from the banyan tree in the yard. A switch meant for him.

An involuntary shudder rolled through him. He shifted his thoughts to his ex, Delia. He'd searched their place for a note, for something to explain why she'd left—and taken anything of value she could get her hands on.

It had taken him months to locate her—with her new husband. She'd been apologetic, explaining that she hadn't meant to fall for her new man, but had taken up with him months before she'd left. He'd thought his pain couldn't worsen until he felt that knife twist.

“Slow down.” The hot redhead on the elliptical trainer next to his smiled at him. “You're making the rest of us look like slackers.”

He gave her a polite nod, all he could manage.

“You wouldn't want to share your secrets, would you?” Her wink held the promise of a good time, something he'd have taken advantage of only a week ago.

“Pardon?”

Her gaze slid over his shoulders and arms and down his legs. “Whatever it is you do to build those muscles, I'd love to know your secret. I'm totally lost in the weights room. I'd love to have you show me what to do.”

He looked her over. Nice, perky tits, long legs, pretty face. “Sorry. I'm only doing cardio today.” He only wanted quiet, but he feared she wouldn't take the hint.

“How about tomorrow? Or Saturday?” She tossed her hair over her shoulder and licked her lips. Sexy as hell. So why didn't he care that she was practically throwing herself at him?

He hated to hurt her feelings. No denying her hotness, but he couldn't muster any enthusiasm. Barbie had completely ruined him. But it wouldn't last. It couldn't. He had to be back to his old self soon. Slowing his pace, he wiped his towel over his face and neck. “Sorry. I'm...busy.” Without waiting for her reply, he stopped the machine and went to get a wipe to clean it. When he returned, she'd put on earphones and pretended to ignore him. Just as well.

On the drive back to his place, he considered taking a detour and passing Barbie's cottage.

*No, damn it!*

He was no lovesick teenager, and he refused to let a woman rule his heart. Never again. He went straight home and opted for a cold shower. The frigid water did nothing to quell the growing desire to go to her house and beg her not to end things between them.

*Beg her?*

He'd never stooped to such a thing in his entire life. But as he shaved, his resolve to see her only increased. He stormed from the bathroom and threw on his clothes. She'd hear him out. To

hell with her out-of-town company. He didn't care who was at her place. He'd make her listen to him.

If only he had any idea what he'd say.

It would come to him. He slid into his car and headed out the parking lot. Come hell or high water, he wanted her. All he had to do was convince her she wanted him too.

## Chapter Eight

Barbie steered her car into her driveway, then shut off the engine. “Here we are.” She turned toward her grandfather and smiled, but her heart clenched with worry. His complexion had grown more pale since she'd seen him last. If memory served, he'd also lost weight and now looked too thin.

He craned his neck toward her house and gave it an appraising once-over. “Very nice.”

Her spirits lifted a little. She wanted so much to please him. Not only was he all she had left, but she was also *his* sole remaining relative. Her father had bitterly disappointed him. She didn't want to let him down too.

She thought about the sham she'd concocted, and her stomach swirled with worry. Would Reggie play a convincing fiancé? Why did she keep hoping she could introduce Keno to her grandfather? But Keno would remind him of his own son, who'd also sported long hair and was a free spirit.

*No!*

She didn't trust herself to be around him now. Just being in the same room with him would be way too tempting. And ripping his clothes off in front of her grandfather wouldn't be prudent. Especially for a woman engaged to someone else.

She climbed out of her car, then opened the trunk to retrieve her grandfather's lone suitcase.

He met her in back of the car and tried to get the bag away from her. “I'm not helpless, you know.”

She relented and let him carry the suitcase inside. The smell of pine cleaning solution hit her the moment she stepped past the threshold. She'd spent the last two days scrubbing and rescrubbing every corner of her house.



He set his bag down in the living room and his gaze circled the area. "I like it. Very tropical and very...clean."

Yeah. He'd noticed. "I want everything perfect for you. Whatever you'd like to do while you're here, we'll do it."

"So you've arranged for a couple of hot young showgirls to keep me company?" His blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Grandpa!" She playfully swatted his arm.

"What? I'm old, not dead."

"Are you tired from your flight? I totally understand if you need to rest a while. Your room is right down the hallway."

He nodded. "Maybe for a few minutes. When do I get to meet your fiancé? What's his name?"

Her pulse raced, and her abdomen tightened. She dropped his gaze. "It's Reggie. And he's dying to meet you. He should be here within the hour. After he gets out of court."

"So he's a lawyer?" A big smile settled on his weatherworn face.

"Yes. He is." Thank heavens she'd gone over this with Reggie so they'd have their stories straight. She picked up his suitcase and gestured for him to follow. "Let's get you settled in the guest room."

After his obligatory compliments about the decor, he shooed her from his room so he could nap. Barbie drew a relieved breath that at least so far, things were going as planned. The doorbell rang and she hurried back to the living room. Reggie had arrived right on time, a good omen.

Only when she opened her door, Keno stood there, an angry scowl on his handsome face.

*Not now.*

Her heart fluttered at the sight of him, with sweat glistening on his muscular shoulders and a rosy glow on his cheeks. She'd stopped herself from calling him so many times in the last few days. Not only did she miss his touch and his presence, but she knew she'd treated him poorly that last night. If the tables had been turned, she'd be incredibly hurt. But Reggie would be here any moment, and her ruse would begin. "It's not a good time. Can I call you later?"

"No." He shoved past her into the house. "We talk now!"

Head suddenly pounding, she glanced toward the hallway. Thankfully her grandfather must still be in his room. Squaring her shoulders, she faced Keno. "I told you I had company coming from out of town. You can't just come here unannounced."

He bent over, laughing. "That's rich, princess." He stood and closed the distance between them, spoke inches from her ear. "I can't come to your house without phoning first, hmm? Yet I can lick your most intimate parts, slip my fingers inside your pussy until you cry out like a she-devil."

A shiver of awareness rolled over her skin, and her nipples tightened to hard pebbles that pushed painfully against her bra. Desire spooled inside her.

He circled behind her, and she felt his breath on the back of her neck, but she refused to look at him. "I covered your beautiful breasts in butter and cinnamon, and you sucked honey from my fingers, but you don't want me to show up here without warning." His voice, quiet as a lover's secret, flooded through her, exciting every nerve ending.

"But, as you said, there's someone else in your life. And does that someone touch you the way I do?" Standing behind her, he slipped his hand under her shirt and reached for her breast.

She could only gasp as he pinched her erect nipple. Powerless to move, she shut her eyes, knowing she shouldn't. With his other hand, he reached inside the waistband of her pants and sneaked his long fingers inside her panties. Moisture pooled between her legs. He'd know how much she wanted him any second, when he felt the dampness at her entrance.

A door opened nearby, and she instantly wriggled away from Keno. Heart pounding like a bass drum, she cleared her throat and waited for her grandfather to appear.

"Is he here?" Emmett's shaky voice filtered to her ears before she saw him. Then he entered the room, and his eyes fixed on Keno. His smile faded, and a deep furrow formed between his eyebrows.

Uncomfortable silence filled the space.

Finally Keno took a few steps toward her grandfather and offered his hand. "Keno Jensen. Nice to meet you, sir."

Barbie moved her lips to speak, but nothing came out. Panic set in.

"Emmett Hargrove," her grandfather said as he pumped Keno's hand. "Barbie's grandfather." He slid his gaze to Barbie, but his expression gave away nothing.

She stepped between them the moment they dropped their hands. “Keno has been working with me, illustrating my next book, Grandpa.”

Emmett narrowed his gaze at Keno. “That right?”

Tiny muscles around Keno's jaw quivered a few seconds. Then he gave his head a sharp nod. “Yes, sir.”

The doorbell rang again. This time, Barbie's stomach knotted with apprehension. Why wasn't Keno making any move to leave?

Her grandfather sat on the couch and folded his arms over his chest, a small smile playing on his lips. “Aren't you going to answer that?”

Her throat tightened, and her mouth grew dry. “I... Yes.” Her hand shook as she reached for the knob. Reggie stood there, dressed in a business suit with a purple handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket—a dead giveaway. She instantly plucked it away and crumpled it in her fist.

“Hello, darling. Sorry I'm late. Court ran over.” Reggie gave her a quick peck on the cheek, then glanced past her into the living room. He blinked rapidly, and his Adam's apple jumped. “What's going on?” he asked under his breath.

She widened her eyes, a silent warning to behave. “I hope you won your case, sweetheart.”

“So this must be your intended.” Her grandfather's pride and happiness were evident in his tone even though she couldn't see his face. She wished to God Keno had left before Reggie got there. This could be way beyond awkward. Keno's presence had the potential to undo all her planning.

*Her intended?* Keno couldn't believe his ears. She didn't seem the type to cheat on her fiancé. Had another woman played him for a fool?

*Just like Delia did me.*

Anger simmered. Had Barbie made him an unwitting conspirator in her cheating ways? Still, he couldn't imagine she'd be that cold and calculating. And damn his traitorous libido, he still wanted her.

His shoulders tightened with tension as he watched her charm flow. She obviously wanted her grandfather to like this...Reggie character. Asshole looked gay. The guy set his hand low on Barbie's back and let it slide down to just above her ass.

Keno clenched his fists at his sides. He had no right to his jealousy, yet there it was, stirring inside him. As laid-back as he usually was, the urge to hit something—or someone—felt foreign to him. Yes, he wanted to hit Reggie. His jaw clenched. His temples throbbed.

Barbie turned to look at him, and her face paled. “May I speak to you? In private?”

He shook his head. Why should he make this easy for her? “Say your peace here.”

She gave her grandfather a quick glance, then hurried over. “Please, Keno, just leave. I promise I'll explain all this later.” Her voice was merely a whisper, yet her fear came through loud and clear.

Reggie approached them, slipped his arms around Barbie's waist, and pulled her against him. “Everything okay here?”

Keno squared his shoulders. “It's fine, thank you. And private.”

“Anything that concerns my little buttercup concerns me.” He kissed the top of Barbie's head. “Besides, we have plans tonight with her grandfather. I don't mean to be rude, but I think I heard the lady ask you to leave.”

Who the hell did this suit think he was? Muscles in Keno's neck ached, and uncomfortable heat flooded his system.

Barbie rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Please, Keno.”

“You heard the lady, friend. There's the door.” Reggie motioned toward it.

Reason and rage warred inside Keno's head. But in the end, anger proved more powerful. He gave Reggie's shoulder a strong shove.

The man's eyebrows lifted in surprise, then drew together. “What the hell's wrong with—”

Keno drew his fist back and let a powerful punch fly. He heard Barbie scream and the old man gasp. Reggie hit the floor with a thud.

*Shit!*

He'd only hit another human being once or twice, and only defensively. He objected to violence on principle, especially since he'd been victim to it at a tender age. Disgust swirled in his belly.

Reggie groaned on the floor. Barbie knelt beside him and clutched his arm.

"What's wrong with you, son?" Emmett asked.

Keno scrubbed a hand over his face. "I'm so sorry, sir. I didn't mean to lose my temper. Your granddaughter has me turned inside out." He glanced at her consoling her fiancé. "She didn't tell me about her engagement."

"What?" Emmett looked from him to Barbie and back again. "You mean you're dating her?"

He dropped his shoulders. "We're...involved. At least we were."

The old man's face twisted into a scowl. Without another word, he disappeared down the hall.

"You've ruined everything!" Barbie's enraged tone cut straight through him.

"I lost my temper. I'm sorry." He offered Reggie a hand up.

Barbie swatted his arm away. "Don't you touch him! You've already done enough."

Emmett reentered the room, suitcase in hand. "I've called a cab, Barbie. I'll phone you when I've checked into a hotel."

She stood and hurried to him. "No, Grandpa. Please, let me explain. I—"

He stopped her with a stiff hand in the air. "Not another word. I need time to cool down and think this through."

She shifted her gaze to Keno. Angry sparks shot from her eyes. "Go away."

Her words hit him like a kick to the gut. Yeah, he'd done enough damage here. No use trying to apologize now. Maybe later she'd listen. Swallowing back his pride, he headed for the door and left. He prayed he hadn't screwed things up for good.

\* \* \*

"Please, Grandpa. Don't go." Barbie fought back tears. She didn't even care that her nosy neighbor had stopped watering her roses to gawk at them.

He opened the back door of the taxi and drew a deep sigh. Facing her, he set a hand on her shoulder. "I'll call you and let you know where I end up. Seems to me you have a few issues to deal with here in the meanwhile."

She couldn't let him leave like this. "But—"

"Tell me something before I go."

Panic drummed in her ears. She knew what he'd ask.

"Is it true? Are you having a relationship with that black man?"

She nodded mutely.

His furrowed brow and flattened lips revealed nothing. "I see."

Her insides twisted. "I'd like to explain."

"Sweetheart, I'll buy you breakfast in the morning. I promise. We both need some time to think." With that, he sat inside the car and pulled the door shut.

A thick clog caught in her throat as the cab drove away. Head hung, she dragged inside.

Reggie lay on the sofa, holding an ice pack over his cheek. "Sorry, honey. Things don't always go like you plan."

She sank onto the love seat. "That's an understatement. But it's me who should be apologizing to you. I had no idea Keno would go off like that." Yet a little piece of her celebrated Keno's over-the-top reaction.

*Crazy!*

She should be furious with him, but in truth, the blame lay squarely on her shoulders. Her grandfather wasn't the only person she'd deceived. If Keno had perpetrated something akin to what she'd done, she'd have been devastated. But why? They had no commitment, had only known each other a little more than a week. Their connection felt like more, though. Like they'd been lovers for a while; like when he was with her, she was home.

She forced that unsettling notion from her head.

*I must concentrate on mending my relationship with Grandpa.*

What could she tell him? He probably thought her a two-timing slut. Oh God.

"What are you going to do now? Will your grandfather disinherit you?" Reggie sat up and set his ice pack on the coffee table.

A purple-red bruise covered the left side of his face beneath his eye. Her stomach roiled. She'd caused all this. "I don't know. But he has every right. I just hope he'll understand why I deceived him. Or at least forgive me. I can't bear the thought of never seeing him again."

He cupped her cheek and gave her a warm smile. "He has to take some of the blame. Giving you an ultimatum like he did wasn't fair."

She nodded. "That's true. But I should have discussed that with him, rather than set up this elaborate hoax."

She had to fix this. Fear clawed at her throat at the idea of admitting her duplicity. She prayed she hadn't completely destroyed things with her grandfather. Or with Keno.

\* \* \*

Keno sat at his kitchen table, riffling through his phone book. Why had he ever gotten involved with Barbie? Huge mistake. But nothing a few more glasses of vodka wouldn't fix. He refilled his glass and gulped it down in one swallow, then set the glass down hard. The burning in his stomach didn't bother him nearly as much as the gnawing emptiness inside him.

*I should have known this would come to no good.*

He thumbed to a page marked with two red stars. Reading his entry, he grinned. Suda Narong and her roommate, Sunee, both from Thailand. The pair did everything together. *Everything*. He flashed on the night the three of them had shared. Suddenly he felt a lot better. He punched the number into his phone and rocked his chair back.

Two hours later he opened the door to Suda and Sunee. He slapped his chest and feigned shock. "You ladies are more lovely than the last time I saw you. Please, come in." He stepped aside for them to enter.

One of them shook her finger at him. "You said you'd call us. That was weeks ago." She brushed past him.

"Yeah," the other said. "More like a month. We thought you had a good time with us."

"Sorry. I've been working a lot." Not a lie, really. Although making love to them a second time broke his rule, he could justify it since they insisted they were a package deal.

"Suda, you bring that weed?" Sunee pointed to her friend's purse.

Suda nodded and rifled in her purse, then produced a skinny joint. She set it between her lips, and Sunee held up a lighter and flicked it. "You mind, Keno?"

He shrugged. "Whatever you like."

Suda sucked in a toke, held her breath, then passed the joint to Sunee.

"You want some?" Suda asked Keno.

He shook his head. "I keep it real, you know?"

As soon as the women had finished smoking, they started to strip. He loved that about them. No mindless small talk, no pretense of interest in his artwork or anything else. They merely wanted to get busy.

Suda had her clothes off in seconds. Her long black hair hung nearly to her waist. He drank in her smooth, olive skin, small but firm breasts, and tiny waist. Seconds later, her roommate lowered her dress and kicked it aside.

Sunee stepped behind the other girl and wrapped her hands around Suda, then cupped her breasts. "You want to watch first, Keno?"

This was exactly the sort of erotic play he'd always loved. His libido should be kicking into overdrive now. So why didn't he even have an erection?

Sunee twisted her friend's nipples between her fingers, and Suda sighed.

"Take your clothes off," one of the girls urged him.

Maybe that would help. He stripped off his shirt and shorts while he watched the girls play with each other. Their performance was worthy of a porn flick, as hands explored and mouths kissed and sucked.

Still his cock stubbornly refused to fully invest in the scene. He took matters in hand as he stared at them.

"Come here," one of them urged.

Only he didn't want to.

*Christ, she's really ruined me.*

He stared down at his flaccid flesh. The girls didn't appear to mind much, though. They moved to his bed and pleased each other in every manner imaginable. He sat on the edge of the bed, hoping for the erotic views to stimulate him.



At one point, Suda took a dildo out of her enormous purse and proceeded to fuck Sunee with it. Then they switched. The women gave each other one orgasm after another. It was so hot the room should have incinerated.

Yet nearly an hour after they'd arrived, he was still waiting for wood. When the ladies fell asleep, Keno put his clothes back on and stretched out on the couch. The instant his eyes slid shut, he saw Barbie's face. At least she'd be with him in his dreams.

## Chapter Nine

Barbie pressed the “7” button in the elevator at the South Beach Towers Hotel. Unfortunately her stomach decided to stay on the ground floor. When the doors opened, she stepped out and followed the signs to her grandfather's room. Hands shaking, she knocked on the door and drew a deep breath.

“Who's there?”

His frail-sounding voice tugged at her heart. Her mouth had grown nearly too dry to speak. “It's me, Grandpa.”

When he let her inside, she swore he looked older than he had only yesterday.

He gestured toward a chair by the window. “Have a seat. I called for room service a few minutes ago. I hope waffles and fruit meet with your approval.”

No way could she eat a thing now. “That's fine.” She sat stiffly.

He sat on the edge of the bed and folded his arms. “So. Is the wedding off?”

Icy fear snaked through her. She dropped his gaze. “It was never on. Reggie and I are only friends.”

“Oh?”

She spotted a water pitcher on the table and a plastic-wrapped glass. “May I?”

“Go ahead.”

She poured herself a drink, then quickly gulped it down. “The truth is, I'm not engaged. Never was. I asked Reggie to pretend to be my fiancé. He's actually my hairdresser.” She gingerly glanced at him.

His gray eyebrows drew together. “I see. So this was all some big game to you.”

“No, not a game, Grandpa. I took it very seriously. I've tried for months to find someone. I only resorted to this pretense when I ran out of time.”

He gave his head a heavy shake. "I never doubted you for a minute."

She clenched her jaw to keep from crying. "I know."

"What about that other fellow? The black man with the right hook?"

Her first instinct was to tell him Keno meant nothing to her. But she couldn't continue to lie. "I'm not sure. All I know is...I care about him."

"Do you plan to marry him?"

She stiffened at the question. "No. I mean, I've just recently met him. I have no idea where the relationship will go." She pictured Keno's face, remembered the feel of his muscles beneath his skin. "But I want to find out. If he's even speaking to me anymore."

A knock at the door jarred her out of her introspection. She hurried to answer it and ushered in a white-uniformed man with a rolling cart. He wheeled it to the table and set out two covered plates, coffee, and orange juice.

After she showed the man out, Barbie joined her grandfather at the table. The dishes were piled high with thick waffles topped with plump strawberries and a generous dollop of whipped cream. But her stomach turned at the thought of taking a single bite. She pretended to nibble on a piece, then pushed some around on her plate as her grandfather devoured his.

Finally he shoved back from the table and set his napkin down. "Sounds like you ought to go see this Keno character and iron things out, hmm?"

She dropped her jaw. Could he really be okay with her dating someone like Keno? "But—"

"I'll be fine here. I know you have all sorts of excursions planned, and we can discuss all that later. But for now, you should go see your young man."

Relief and excitement swirled inside her. She jumped out of her seat and hugged him tightly. "I love you, Grandpa."

He patted her arm, then gave her a stern stare. "Don't think you're completely off the hook, young lady. We still have things to discuss."

"Yes, sir." Even the prospect of losing the inheritance couldn't keep the smile from her face.

“You call me tonight. Maybe I'll let you take me to dinner.” He stood. “I saw a couple of hot silver-haired babes by the pool. Think I'll dig out my swim trunks.”

His wink made her giggle. After kissing him good-bye, she raced over to Keno's place. She knocked on his door and waited.

Nothing.

She tried again, but to no avail. Tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to give up so easily. Once more, she banged with all her might. Her hope lifted when she heard footsteps from inside.

Keno opened the door, looking haggard in rumpled shorts and a white undershirt. He rubbed his eyes and frowned. “What are you doing here, Miss Almost Married?”

She shoved past him and went inside. “I'm not engaged. Never was.”

Keno couldn't believe his ears. He allowed a glimmer of hope in. “Then who the hell did I punch?”

Her face flushed a rosy hue. “Reggie is my hairdresser.”

He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he wondered if this was a dream. “Figures. I'm sorry I hit him.”

“He'll be okay. I spoke to him this morning and promised to make it up to him.”

He nodded, although the whole thing didn't make much sense. “Care to tell me why you were pretending to be engaged to him?”

She dropped his gaze. “It had to do with my grandfather. An early inheritance he offered me. But I had to be married by my thirtieth birthday.”

“Why?”

Her shoulders drooped. “Because my father was an asshole who refused to marry my mother. My grandfather had to make sure I didn't make that same mistake.” She met his stare. “He only wants me to be happy. I don't think he meant for me to feel the awful pressure I did.”

Sounded pretty controlling to him, but the old man probably had her happiness in mind. He thought back to his mother's brand of control—the kind she used her fists to enforce. Barbie's grandfather's method sounded way kinder.

He nodded his understanding. "Your grandfather must despise me."

She shook her head. "I explained everything to him over breakfast."

He sat on the couch. "I wish you had explained it to me before I hit that poor guy."

"Looking back, I should have told you. I never imagined you'd react that way."

He folded his arms over his chest, fixed her with what he hoped was an admonishing frown. "For future reference, I do not take well to another man pawing my woman."

She lifted an eyebrow. "*Your* woman?"

He could hardly believe the words had come out of his mouth. "You heard me."

She closed the distance between them and straddled his lap. "Can you ever forgive me?"

As if he could stay angry with her. He slipped his hands around her backside as she rocked her hips. His cock started to come to life. Thank the Lord. She kissed his neck and wriggled against him. Something inside him raised a weak protest, but he quickly squelched it.

*To hell with my rules.*

He could no more stop himself than fly to the moon. "You know, you've ruined me for other women. You completely screwed up my mojo."

"Did I? Good." She lifted his undershirt over his head. Meeting his gaze, she gave him a wicked grin. She tugged at the hairs around his nipples, and a rush of desire spiked through him.

"I woke you, huh?" She licked her lips. "Maybe I ought to put you back to bed."

Grinning, he helped her up, then led her to his bed. As she stripped off her clothes, he plucked a condom from the drawer and set it on the night table. He dropped his shorts and studied her naked body, in awe of its beauty. "I'll never tire of seeing you nude, my queen."

She stepped closer, and he savored her enticing floral scent. Wrapping his arms around her, he settled his lips over hers. He slipped his tongue into her mouth and drank in her minty taste. Lustful thoughts filled his head. He wanted to make love to her all day, all night.

He pulled her onto the bed, then lay beside her, kissing her, feeling the silky smoothness of her skin. Pent-up need set every cell in his body on fire. And he knew no one else could quench the flame.

His cock throbbed painfully. He'd die if he didn't get inside her. And soon. But more than his own lust, he yearned to satisfy her. He moved his hand to her breast and plucked a taut nipple. She squirmed and moaned.

When her fingers closed around his erection, he gritted his teeth. Raw, savage craving captivated him. A low growl he barely recognized as his own rumbled in his chest. He kissed her throat and the valley between her succulent breasts.

She whimpered and tightened her grip on his hard-on, but he took her wrist and urged her to release him.

He moved lower on the bed, then spread her legs apart. The view stopped him for a moment as he took time to admire her pussy, shrouded in golden curls. "Beautiful." Sliding his finger along the edges of her sex, he grinned at her plaintive cries.

"Please, Keno. Fuck me."

He dipped into her drenched folds and teased aside her intimate lips. "First I want to taste you." He flicked his tongue over her nub, sure to touch it with his stud.

"Oh God, yes." She lifted her hips higher, but he wasn't through teasing her yet.

Licking her cream, he ran his tongue through her folds. Her body quivered with tremors, and her moans grew louder. He pushed his tongue inside her entrance. She grabbed his head and urged him deeper. But he yearned to watch her bring on an orgasm.

Backing away, he took her wrists and guided her hands to her pussy. She rubbed at her cleft, shut her eyes, and sighed. He reached for the condom, tore open the packet, and slid it over his length.

When she came, she bucked and twisted and moaned. He gave her no time to rest before he thrust into her, only a little at first. Inch by inch, he slipped inside her. Deeper with each stroke. She clenched around him, squeezing his cock with mind-blowing pleasure.

He withdrew and got on his knees. Lifting her legs, he grasped her ankles and continued fucking her. He held her legs together, then shifted them to the right. The position tightened her pussy even more. He tunneled harder, faster, struggling to keep from bursting.

"Yes, yes, yes." She lifted her hips and convulsed in another orgasm.

Stars floated before his eyes. His balls tightened, and his control shredded. White-hot bliss flooded through his body as he detonated in a powerful explosion. Engulfed in ecstasy, he jerked inside her before stilling. His heart raced; sweat dripped from his skin.

He set Barbie's legs down and settled over her.

She sighed contentedly. "Seems like your mojo is still intact."

He laughed. "Yes, but only for you."

"And that's exactly the way it should be."

He pulled her into his arms and cuddled her against him. He didn't give a damn about his stupid rules anymore. Being with Barbie trumped everything. They were together now, and nothing else mattered.

\* \* \*

After four days of showing her grandfather all Miami had to offer, Barbie drove him to the airport.

"I've had a wonderful time, sweetheart." He took an envelope out of his suit pocket and checked his ticket.

Barbie pulled into a spot in the parking garage, then shut off the engine. "What was your favorite part?"

He scratched his head. "Either Coral Castle or the airboat ride through the Everglades."

"I'd like to come see you over the summer." She opened her door and met him around the back of the car. As she opened the trunk and lifted his suitcase out, her throat tightened. "I'm going to miss you, Grandpa."

He took his bag from her and set it down. "Me too. But I've made a decision."

Her heart pounded. "Oh?"

His lips flattened. "You know why I put the stipulations I did on your inheritance. I didn't want to see you squander the love in your life as your father did. He threw away the best thing that ever happened to him."

She merely nodded, afraid she'd cry if she said a word.

“But I see now you're smarter than that. You're going to be happy, whether you marry this Keno fellow or someone else.” He drew her into a hug. “I'm going to give you the money, sweetheart.”

Her heart felt as though it might burst. Removing the stipulations on the inheritance meant that he loved her unconditionally. She had no idea how important that was to her until this very moment.

Her tears fell on his shoulder. “Thank you. I love you.”

He backed away and grasped her shoulders. “Pay off the mortgage on that house. Put the rest away. You hear?”

“Yes, sir. I can't even begin to tell you how much this means to me.”

He shook his head. “It's the least I can do after all you and your mother went through thanks to my son.”

“No, Grandpa. Please don't blame yourself for my father's mistakes. It's not your fault. My mother thought the world of you, and so do I.”

Twenty minutes later she kissed him good-bye at the security checkpoint. Then she headed straight to Keno's place.

He answered the door in a paint-stained T-shirt and shorts. “I'm just about ready for you.” He drew her into his arms and kissed her tenderly. Then he led her to the couch, which he'd covered in a pink cloth.

“Perfect.” She started taking off her clothes.

Keno set a large canvas on an easel and winked at her. “This is going to be my most beautiful painting ever.”

She couldn't hide her smile as she removed her underwear. Gathering all her clothes, she tried to calm the excitement swirling inside her. She piled her things on a nearby chair, then returned to the couch and set her hands on her hips. “All right, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up.”

 THE END 



## Wynter Daniels

Wynter Daniels began writing naughty stories after her alter ego, Dara Edmondson, ventured out of the tame romances she'd written for several years. She lives with her husband, two nearly grown children and two spoiled cats in Central Florida. Heating up readers with her erotic stories is what she loves most. Second to that, she enjoys hearing from her readers.

Find Wynter on the Web at <http://www.wynterdaniels.com/>, or check out her blog at [NaughtyAuthorChicks.Blogspot.com](http://NaughtyAuthorChicks.Blogspot.com).