



SAMANTHA
SOMMERSBY

SHELTER
FROM
THE STORM

SAMHAIN publishing, Ltd.

Not everyone has to go looking for love...for a lucky few, love finds them.

In any other circumstance, Jennifer Jones's first meeting with Maclain Moore would have been called serendipity, a happy coincidence. She's looking for a new roommate; he's looking for a place to live. It doesn't hurt that he's sexy as hell, either.

But the man who crosses her threshold isn't there to sign on the dotted line—he's the bearer of news bad enough to shake the very foundation of her life. A life built around a fierce sense of independence, born of a violent incident from her past.

Mac is no stranger to heartache. His career in social work immerses him in it, plus he has his own share of skeletons rattling around in his closet. His attempts to comfort Jennifer bring the two of them closer together. With each touch, she becomes harder to resist. Mac's body's response would try the patience of a saint. And a saint he's not.

Baring her soul isn't high on her list, but she finds herself opening up to Mac in ways that make it hard to hold him at arm's length. And as her life spins out of control, their growing passion becomes the only tangible thing she can cling to...

This book has been previously published and has been revised and expanded from its original release.

Warning: This book may spoil you for real relationships. It contains a beautiful woman with a dark and dangerous past, sensational sailboat sex and a leather-wearing, motorcycle-riding man who loves kids, knows how to cook and actually listens.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Shelter from the Storm
Copyright © 2010 by Samantha Sommersby
ISBN: 978-1-60504-893-2
Edited by Tera Kleinfelter
Cover by Scott Carpenter

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: May 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

Shelter from the Storm

Samantha Sommersby

Dedication

To all of the real social workers of San Diego County's Residential Services Unit. You have impossible jobs, but thankfully even impossibly bigger hearts—Barry, Mary, Theresa, Jay, Ruben, Suzanne, Sandy, Lisa and my husband, Bill. I hear your inspiring stories every day. None of you are Mac, Mike or Antonio. And yet, you all are.

Prologue

12/30/03 Los Angeles, CA

Officers Clark and Hernandez stepped into the elevator of the Drake Apartment building and pressed the button for the third floor. As the elevator began to move, Hernandez turned to his partner and for the second time asked, “What did dispatch report the woman said again?”

The older officer’s expression was deadpan, his tone bored. “She’s dead and I can’t get her to leave the apartment. Oh, my lord.”

“You’d think we were coming up on Halloween instead of New Year’s, huh?” Hernandez nervously adjusted his utility belt. “Probably some loon thinking she’s seen a ghost.”

The doors to the elevator opened and Clark stepped out. “Man, you never know. You’re new here. I’m telling you, a few more years working the streets of Los Angeles and you’ll have all kinds of stories.”

The two walked side by side down the long corridor, checking the numbers on the doors. The building was old. The paint in the hallways was cracked and peeling. As they rounded the corner an impossibly thin woman ran up to them, her eyes almost comically wide.

“Officers, I’m so glad you’re here!”

“Dementia?” whispered Hernandez.

The woman was over eighty if she was a day. Her wrinkled lips were painted with bright red lipstick, now gruesomely smeared. Her short hair was jet black, save for the half-inch wide strip of white apparent at the part.

“It’s awful, simply awful! I can’t get her to come out and she won’t say anything! Although she doesn’t normally.”

The woman was dressed to the nines in a red dress and matching pumps, but the flecks of vomit spattered on her shoes and skirt spoiled the effect.

“Your tenant doesn’t normally leave her apartment?” Clark asked.

“I’m talking about the girl. Poor thing, you’ve got to get her out of there!”

Hernandez held up his hands. “Whoa! Slow down, Mrs.—”

“Roberts. I must look a sight.” She pulled a tissue from the pocket of her dress and dabbed her forehead and her upper lip.

“Why don’t you tell us what’s going on?” Clark asked.

Officer Hernandez lifted his nose into the air and sniffed. “God! Something smells.”

Mrs. Roberts nodded vigorously. "It's her. Mrs. Jones. The neighbors were complaining. The smell was coming from her apartment. I knocked, but there was no answer. I thought it might be a plumbing problem so I went in and..." Mrs. Roberts started to cry.

Clark gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "Can you show us the apartment?"

"No!" She took two steps back. "I'm not going back in there. I can't! Please, don't make me."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Roberts. You don't have to go back inside," said Hernandez. "Just point us in the right direction."

"Down there. They're in 3B." Mrs. Roberts glanced over her shoulder. "If you'll excuse me, I have to get out of these clothes."

"Of course." Clark stepped aside and allowed the woman to pass.

"I'm in 1A if you need anything else. God, how on earth am I ever going to get that stink out?"

The front door to apartment 3B was standing wide open. The horrible, acrid stench spilling into the hall was even more pungent inside. It was the unmistakable odor of decomposition, of death.

"Christ!" Officer Hernandez pulled out his handkerchief and covered his nose before stepping inside. "It reeks to high heaven in here."

"Careful."

Hernandez brushed against the stack of mail on the entry table and knocked it over. When he bent down to retrieve the scattered envelopes, he managed to bump into the door, which, in turn, collided with a stack of empty bottles.

"You're making a mess," Clark scolded.

"Somehow I don't think the owner will notice," Hernandez said through his handkerchief.

Clark walked ahead, cautiously stepping farther into the apartment. As soon as the full landscape of the living room came into view, he held one hand out behind him.

Hernandez took in the pained expression on his partner's face and froze.

"Call the coroner, and call Child Protection," Clark said.

"Sure thing." Hernandez plucked his radio off of his belt before stepping into the room and surveying the scene.

The space was sparsely decorated, like the rest of the apartment, like dozens of other furnished apartments in Los Angeles. But this one would stand out forever in the young officer's mind. It wasn't so much the image of the dead woman, laying in repose on the sofa; he had seen dead bodies before. It was the sight of the small, frail-looking child who sat next to the body, heedless of anyone's presence, as she rocked back and forth, staring into space and clutching the dead woman's hand fast to her heart.

Chapter One

12/31/03 San Diego, CA

"Stop!" Antonio laughed. "You're killing me!"

"Let me guess, you're sharing my story."

"I couldn't help myself," Mike said.

Mac nodded. "Let's all have a great big laugh at Mac's expense."

Antonio quickly sobered. "You mean it's true?"

He threw his hands up in the air. "Is there anyone here who hasn't heard about my humiliating experience?"

Ava stepped into the office. "Sorry, Mac. I think we've pretty much all heard. I just came from the deli across the street and they're even talking about it in there."

Mac rounded on his office mate. "Mike, I swear you're like an old woman! Can't you keep anything to yourself?"

Before Mike could answer, the nervous administrative assistant stepped between them. "I hate to break this up. But the boss just got a call about a new case and Mike's next on the roster." She pushed the glasses that were forever sliding down the bridge of her nose back up.

Mike took a step backward. "Sorry, guys. Duty calls."

"Don't worry," Ava quietly assured Mac. "I won't tell anyone you're moving in with a prostitute."

"I am not—" He rounded on Mike. "We'll finish this when you get back."

"Will there be spanking? If so, can I watch?" Antonio asked with a great big smile on his face.

Mike scowled. "If there is to be any retaliation, it will involve manly punching or crude practical jokes. I'm telling you, Antonio, you keep joking like that? Someone's going to think you're gay."

As soon as they were alone, Antonio shut the office door. "Your half of the office looks like it's occupied by a monk."

Mac pulled out his chair, sat down and propped his feet up comfortably on top of his desk.

"I'm still getting a feel for the space."

Decorating his office was the last thing on Mac's mind. He had transferred to San Diego from Los Angeles County a few short weeks ago and was far more concerned with completing the training for his new job.

"I could loan you my New York firefighter's wall calendar. That would cheer the place up."

"I'll think about it." Mac absently picked up a Rubik's cube and began to fiddle with it.

"A family photo would be nice. Or, maybe one of those little miniature Zen gardens like Zoe has."

"Why doesn't Mike know you're gay?"

"He's a bit homophobic." Antonio perched on top of Mike's desk. "It would make him nervous, so he stays comfortably in the land of denial."

"But the other night, when we were at your apartment playing poker, you introduced Mark as your partner."

Antonio shrugged. "People see what they want to see."

"But, you and Mark live together."

"True."

"In a one-bedroom apartment."

"Uh-huh."

"What kind of partners does he think the two of you are? Business partners?"

"Who knows?"

"Like, by day you're a mild-mannered social worker and Mark is a third-grade teacher, but during off hours you band together to... What?"

"Oh, this is fun. Maybe we fight crime like Batman and Robin, those two were obviously gay. Besides, I've always wanted a big, latex codpiece."

"Batman and Robin?" Mac mulled it over for a moment. "I think you might be right. No self-respecting straight guy would walk around wearing tights or trying to resist the temptation of Cat Woman."

Mike walked back into the office. "Cat Woman? We're talking about comic books now? So what's your pleasure, Michelle Pfeiffer or Eartha Kitt?"

Antonio moved so Mike could sit back down. "Actually, I was just about to hear Mac's version of yesterday's events."

"Bloody hell!" Mac brought his feet back down to the floor and leaned forward in his chair. "All right! Here's the long and short of it."

Antonio eagerly rubbed his hands together. "I'm all ears."

"I get off a bit early yesterday and head back to my Uncle Henry's place where I've been staying. I get in the elevator and there's this bird—"

"Translation," Mike interjected, "hot chick."

"Oi! Who is telling the story?"

"Sorry, Mac."

"The elevator door opens and we both get out on the same floor. Apparently she lives across the hall from my uncle. Just as we get close to our respective doors the bottom falls out of her grocery sack and stuff goes everywhere. Course, being the helpful bloke I am, I start to help her gather her belongings—"

“And here’s where the story really begins. I swear this is like one of those movies with Doris Day and what’s his name?” Mike asked.

“Rock Hudson?” Antonio suggested.

“Yes!”

“Go on, sweetie,” Antonio encouraged.

“She says something about my being her four o’clock. She unlocks the door and invites me into the apartment. My arms are full of the chit’s groceries.”

“So he follows her inside,” Mike added.

“Right. I start to lay the stuff out on her counter. Next thing I know, she’s pointing out the way to the bedroom and saying something about hoping the queen-size bed will be sufficient. She tells me to go on in and she’ll join me in a minute.”

“So you think she’s offering...”

“Nookie!” Mike leaned back in his chair. “I swear this never gets old. Tell him what you said!”

“I think it was something profound, like, ‘huh’?” Mac admitted. “Then she says, ‘I assumed you’d want to, you know, see stuff before filling out the application. I mean, there’s no need to fill out an application if you’re not interested.’”

“And here’s the best part. Our Romeo says, ‘Oh, I can’t imagine there’s a bloke alive who wouldn’t be interested in this offer, blondie.’”

“And, that’s when she gave me the application to rent the room in her apartment,” Mac finished.

Antonio shook his head. “You left out the part about the ball gag and leather pants.”

“What?”

Mike grinned. “I might have embellished a bit.”

The Rubik’s cube sailed through the air, narrowly missing Mike’s head.

“Does the young lady have any idea you thought she was a hooker?” asked Antonio.

“No! And she’ll never know!” Mac pointed back and forth between the two of them. “Got it?”

“Right! It’ll stay between you and me and the rest of the Department of Social Services.” Antonio rolled his eyes. “Our little secret.”

“Man, you’re lucky you were actually looking for an apartment.” Mike retrieved the toy that had rolled under his desk. “Where is this place?”

Mac started to turn his attention back to his e-mails. “Over on Goldfinch, in Mission Hills. It’s a great old building, lots of character. My uncle’s been there for years and apartments don’t open up often.”

“Goldfinch?” Mike looked down at the paper he held in his hand.

“Yeah, 4435 Goldfinch.” Mac selected the newest item in his inbox. It contained a long list of names, cases he would be assuming responsibility for as of January second. “Looks like they’re not wasting any

time assigning stuff to me.” He pulled a pad of paper and a pen out of his top drawer. “I’ll have to hit the ground running after the holiday. No more slacking off for me.”

“We’re too short-staffed to let you just sit around looking pretty.” Antonio pulled his ringing cell from his pocket. “Hi, honey, I’m almost ready to call it a night.”

“Mac? What did you say your new roommate’s name is?” Mike asked.

“Jennifer Jones, like the actress.” He finished scribbling down the list of case numbers. “Only this one’s a blonde. Why?”

“I’ll be damned.”

Mac turned around. “Do you know her?”

Mike held up the sheet of paper. “My new assignment. Seems she’s the only living relative of a court dependent from L.A.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. They want someone to go down there in person and talk to her about taking the kid.”

“Tonight?”

Mike nodded. “Otherwise they’ve got to find long-term placement on New Year’s Eve. You know that’s going to be damn near impossible.”

“Why wouldn’t they call her? That’s what they normally do.” Mac stood and walked over to Mike.

“There are extenuating circumstances. This is strictly a courtesy request. Seems like the girl’s mother passed away. They found the kid in the apartment, locked up with the deceased. She’d been there a few days.”

“Christ!”

“The coroner notified the next of kin, it was the deceased’s estranged husband. He’s the one who gave CPS the name of your Jennifer as the girl’s sister,” Mike explained.

“I take it he’s not the girl’s father?”

“No, it says father unknown. The worker from L.A. thought it would be best to deliver the news to Jennifer in person.”

Mac reached for the report and frowned as he reviewed the details. After a moment he looked at his new friend. “Why don’t you run along home to that pretty wife of yours? I’ll have a chat with Ms. Jones and call L.A. back.”

“You’re sure?” Mike started to put on his coat. “It’s my case and—”

“You have plans. I don’t. Go.”

Mike slapped Mac heartily on the back before heading for the door. “Thanks, buddy. I owe you.”

“It’s still your case. I’m just doing this one thing, got it?” Mac shouted out, only Mike was long gone.

Antonio hung up the phone. “Sweetie, tell me I didn’t hear what I thought I heard.”

“You were talking on the phone the entire time. How could you have possibly tracked our conversation?”

“I can multitask. It comes in very handy when trying to eavesdrop.”

Mac stood and slipped on his leather coat. “Well, there’s no good time for news like this. Might as well get it over with. Seems I’ll be searching for an apartment again.”

“Happy New Year!” Antonio called after him as he took off down the hall.

Thirty-year-old Maclain Moore paced in front of the door to what he had been starting to think of as his future apartment. “Good evening, Miss Jones.” He shook his head and stopped. “Good, if you want her to think your three hundred years old and from Transylvania. Jennifer, I have some news for you.” He reached up and ran his hand through his shoulder-length blond hair. “Too casual. Miss Jones, I’m afraid something rather upsetting... Too British. Bloody hell.”

Mac leaned against the wall of the hallway and nervously tapped the heel of one of his boots against the toe of the other. He reached in the pocket of his leather jacket and pulled out a crumpled pack of Marlboros. Inside, there was one cigarette.

Two years ago he had lost his mother to breast cancer. Before she died, she begged him to promise her it would be the last cigarette he ever smoked, and he had yet to smoke it. Every time he looked at it he remembered her pain and the incredible void he experienced with her death.

He put the pack back into the pocket of his jacket, tucked his motorcycle helmet under one arm and began to search his pants pocket for some gum. As he pulled the pack free, his helmet slipped, falling onto the hardwood floor with a loud clunk. Predictably, it rolled down the hall and knocked against the front door of Jennifer’s place. He bent down to pick it up, freezing momentarily at the unmistakable sound of the latch opening.

“You’re early for a change! Come on in.”

Mac stood and peered into the apartment. It was bigger than the one he’d been staying in, although the layout was basically the same. Jennifer was nowhere in sight. Where she had disappeared to so quickly, he couldn’t begin to guess. He crossed the threshold, then quietly closed the door.

“I’m almost ready,” she called out from the direction of the bathroom.

It was as if he’d inadvertently stepped into a naughty shampoo commercial. Jennifer emerged, shaking out the loose curls of her long mane of honey blonde hair. She was wearing a stunning red dress. It was cut on the bias. Dipping low in the front, it hugged her curves. This girl had them and in all the right places.

“What do you think? Should I go with the sexy, strappy sandal or the more conservative pump?”

“Wow.”

In her hand she held a mismatched pair of shoes. He'd obviously surprised her. "I'm sorry, I was expecting my friend, Rachel."

Mac lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck. "Ah! I thought you were talking to me when you shouted out the invitation."

She smiled brightly. "That's okay. You can give me your opinion. Sandal or pump?"

"Care to model them? It's hard to imagine which would look best."

"Sure." Jennifer leaned down and easily slipped the pump on first, and then the sandal.

Mac stepped back. "Maybe if you walked a bit?"

She dutifully turned around and took a few steps away from him. Mac let his eyes roam up the length of her body, drinking her in from head to toe, appreciating the way she moved, the way the skirt of her dress swished with each and every sway of her hips. For a moment he became lost in thought. Before he knew it, she had spun around and was walking back toward him.

"Well?" she asked, expectantly.

"What kind of an impression are you trying to make, exactly?" He was stalling, plain and simple.

"Impression?" Jennifer pursed her lips together in thought. "Sexy but not slutty. Fun but not frivolous."

"This is a first date?"

"Date?"

"Not that it's any of my business."

She replaced the sandal with the second pump. "No, no date. I'm going with Rachel and Tom. But you never know when you're going to meet Mr. Right. What do you think of the pumps? I'm leaning toward these. They're more comfortable for dancing."

On impulse he reached out for her hand, pulled her to him and took her on a quick spin around the living room. "They're good," he declared before releasing her. "Go with the pumps."

"Right." She spun on her heels and headed for her bedroom. "Now you can help me choose earrings. Come on."

"You do realize I'm a guy, right?"

"I let you lead, didn't I?" She frowned. "Of course I know you're a guy, that's why I'm asking you what you think."

His forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Something is different."

"Well, my hair isn't pulled back in a ponytail, I'm wearing makeup and I'm not in jeans and a sweatshirt."

"No!" He waved his hand dismissively. "It's not you, you were just as stunning yesterday." His eyes were drawn to the large boxes stacked in the corner of the living room. "It's those."

Jennifer blushed slightly at his unwitting compliment before continuing back into the bedroom. “You don’t happen to have a screwdriver and read ancient Sumerian, do you?”

This time Mac followed her. “Sumerian?”

“I’m not very handy. The assembly instructions might as well be in some dead language for all the good they’re doing me.”

“I think I could lend a hand. I’ll have some time tomorrow. What are you trying to put together?”

Jennifer made a beeline for her dresser. She held up a pair of ornate black-jeweled earrings. “I bought a desk and shelving for the third bedroom. I’m planning on setting up an office in there. Rachel and I had used it as an office before, but the furniture was all hers.”

“Rachel is the friend you’re going out with tonight?” Mac leaned in to more closely inspect the earrings, then shook his head.

“Yeah. We run a business together, Seasons. We plan events and parties for people with no time and obscene amounts of money. We used to be roommates, too.” After discarding the first set, she held up a pair made of red crystal. “Rachel’s found true love. She and Tom are really committed to one another. They just bought a fixer-upper together over in Golden Hills. What do you think of these?”

“I’m not crazy about them.”

“Really?” She started to fish through the jewelry box again. “Anyway, Tom’s great. He’s a pastry chef. Wedding cakes, mostly. That’s how the two of them met. He moved here about a year and a half ago from New York, we were planning this big wedding—”

“And he did the cake?”

“Yup. He claims he took one look at Rachel and bam, love at first sight.”

“Don’t you believe in love at first sight?”

“Oh, I don’t know. What about these?” The third pair were plain gold hoops.

“Too run of the mill.”

“You’re right.” She tossed them back. “When Rachel told me they wanted to live together I couldn’t help but be happy for her. I have a feeling we’ll be planning her wedding soon.”

Mac looked over her shoulder and pointed to a pair of simple square-cut ruby earrings. “Those.”

Jennifer looked up, surprised. “My mother gave me these for Christmas the year I graduated from high school. They used to be hers.”

“They’re perfect.”

She slipped one into her ear, then went to work on the second. “Mom loved them. No matter how bad things got, she always held on to these. She would say they were the only thing of value she ever had.”

He had to tell her. Mac took a deep breath, then dove in. “Jennifer, there was a reason I came.”

“You’re not bailing on me, are you?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s business.”

“Business?”

“It’s about your mum and sister, actually.”

“My mom and sister?”

Mac pulled the paper from his pocket. “Best you sit down.”

“I don’t want to sit down.” Jennifer crossed her arms protectively in front of herself. “What do you know about my family?”

“I don’t know much of anything. This came across the fax at work today. One of the other social workers was assigned the call—”

“What call?” She was becoming angry now, increasingly agitated.

“I’m sorry, I’m not handling this right.” Mac once again ran his hand through his hair. He’d made calls like this, dozens of them, why was this so difficult? “Jennifer, your mother’s passed away.”

“What? When?”

“It happened a few days ago, but she was found only yesterday. Your little sis is alone. She needs a place to stay. L.A. CPS thinks the best place for her is here, with you.”

“Here?” Jennifer’s eyes filled with tears. “My mother’s dead?”

Mac led her over to her bed and she mechanically sat on it. “Yes, I’m sorry, your mum’s passed away—”

“I...I heard you, I guess I’m...”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to keep saying that. How?”

They were interrupted by a harsh buzzing sound. Both sets of eyes were automatically drawn to the living room.

“Rachel and Tom.” Jennifer pinched her nose and shook her head, trying to prevent the inevitable flow of tears.

“Shall I buzz them into the building?”

“No!” She looked almost panicked. Tears spilled over and rolled down her cheeks, streaking her makeup. “I don’t want... I’m not ready.”

“They’re your friends, right?”

Jennifer stood and swiftly walked out of her room. Mac wasn’t far behind.

“Rachel?” Her voice was surprisingly steady as she spoke into the intercom by the door.

“Hey, Jennifer. Buzz us in!”

“You know? I think I’ve caught some awful flu thing.” Jennifer flashed Mac a sideways glance.

“Oh, no!”

“I was about to call you on your cell. It’s ugly, really. I’m feeling awful.”

“Do you need anything?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I don’t want to let you up and expose you. You two go and have fun, all right?”

“I hate to leave you alone,” Rachel said hesitantly.

“It’s probably just a twenty-four-hour thing. I’ll be as right as rain by tomorrow, I’m sure of it. Have a glass of champagne for me tonight, will you?”

“Sure. But I’d much rather you were with us.”

“I’m going back to bed. Sleep is what I need. Happy New Year.” Jennifer leaned her head against the intercom and released the call button.

“All right. Happy New Year. Call if you need me?”

“Of course. Night.”

And then there was silence. Several minutes passed without Jennifer moving. Mac removed his jacket and laid it over one of the living room chairs. He glanced around the apartment and tried to look for clues. Who was this girl? What made her tick? He realized, for the first time, how sterile it all appeared, how impersonal. The furniture was of good quality and, although there weren’t many pieces, what she had was elegant, tasteful. But it looked like a showroom, devoid of pictures or any of those other touches that can make a space feel lived in, that makes a house a home.

“What do I need to do?” she asked.

Mac walked over to her and placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. “I’m sure this is quite a shock.”

“Don’t.” She shrugged off the gesture and stepped away.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t be tender. Don’t pretend like you care.”

“But I do care.”

“You couldn’t possibly. You don’t even know me. You don’t know anything about me.” Without another word she walked back to her bedroom and quietly shut her door.

Mac stood there for a few minutes looking at it.

“What the hell are you going to do now?” he mumbled to no one in particular. Then he listened and he heard them, heart-wrenching sobs coming from within.

She was in pain. He didn’t think twice. He turned the knob and quietly pushed open the door.

Jennifer was lying on her side on the bed, facing away from him. Her hair was splayed out across one pillow and she appeared to be clutching a second to her chest. She was weeping, bearing the burden of grief alone. Mac knew what that was like, he knew all too well.

With trepidation he stepped farther into the room. “Some of what you said in there is true. I don’t know you—”

She sat up. “What are you doing?” Her voice was full of accusation.

“Trying to comfort you?”

“But the door was closed. I closed it.”

“Yes,” he admitted, nodding.

“And I specifically left you out there, on the other side!”

“True, but the comforting thing doesn’t work as well that way. See, we social workers use this technique called empathic listening and in addition to occasional vocalizations like, ‘Tell me more’, ‘I understand’, and ‘Hmm’, it requires actual eye contact.”

Jennifer climbed off the bed and moved over to the dresser. “Did I ask for your comfort?” She angrily pulled a tissue out of the tissue box. “No!” With haste, she reached for a second and in doing so knocked over her jewelry box. “Damn it!”

Mac knelt down. “Let me—”

“I can do it!” Jennifer fell to her knees. Frantically, she began to gather up the dropped pieces of jewelry. “I can take care of myself! I don’t need... I don’t...”

He placed his hand on top of hers, stilling her movements. Jennifer’s eyes lifted and locked with his. The wall she kept trying to erect crumbled. Mac swept aside the remaining pieces of jewelry and she fell into his arms. He slid closer, but said nothing. He simply sat there, held her and let her weep.

Finally, her cries of anguish subsided.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked. “Maybe a glass of water?”

Jennifer pulled away. “I’m sorry you had to see me like this.”

Mac reached out, gently guided her head toward him and searched out her eyes. “I’m not.” He grabbed a tissue from the box and offered it to her. “Except for the snot part. I could have done without that. Blow.”

Jennifer smiled wryly. “Thanks.” She accepted the tissue and dabbed daintily at her eyes before turning away and blowing her nose.

Mac pulled the front of his now tear-stained T-shirt away from his body and looked down at it. “I’m going to go change. I’ll be right back. Then, we’ll talk.”

Jennifer climbed to her feet. “You don’t have to babysit me.”

Mac followed suit. “Look, you don’t have any plans now. I don’t have any plans, either. I was going to cook myself some dinner and watch a bit of television. It’s just as easy to cook for two. It’s not babysitting. It’s being a friend.”

“A friend.”

“Yeah. Now, why don’t you wash your face and put on something comfortable. In spite of my snarky snot comment earlier... Well, I want you to know I’d rather see the real you, warts and all, as they say.”

Jennifer wrinkled her nose. “I don’t have warts.”

Mac reached back to rub his neck. “Blondie, we all have warts of some kind.”

“Was it suicide?” The question was asked so softly, he almost missed it.

Mac nodded. “It looks that way. She overdosed. Booze and barbiturates.”

“My sister, she’s in detention someplace?”

“Over at Oliveview, for now. I’ve got the number if you want to call her.”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said. “Okay?”

“Okay.” She followed him back into the living room. When she opened the door, he noticed her hands were shaking.

Mac slipped out. “Lock the door behind me. I’ll knock, and you can let me back in.”

Jennifer shook her head. “That’s all right. I’ll wait and leave the door open.”

Mac shook his head. “Not safe.”

Jennifer snatched the extra set of keys off the counter. “Here. Let yourself in.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Chapter Two

Thirty minutes later Jennifer emerged from the shower and toweled off.

Before Mac had shown up she had bathed and painstakingly readied herself for the evening. As soon as he left she felt the need to shower again. She told herself the hot water would help relax her and the steam would help stave off the headache now forming behind her eyes. But really, it was nothing more than an irrational desire to remove the stench of her past.

Although she had pulled her hair back before stepping into the shower, some random loose strands had gotten wet. She pulled out the clip, brushed out her hair, then rearranged it into a neat ponytail at the base of her neck. She put on a thin layer of moisturizer, slipped on her red silk robe, and walked out of the bathroom and into her bedroom.

As she caught a glimpse of herself in the closet mirror, she turned toward the image, studying it for a moment. Jennifer leaned forward, sticking her tongue out at her own reflection. Then pointing at it she said, “You know what your problem is, Jennifer Jones? Wherever you go...there you are.”

Suddenly she became aware of music playing out in the living room. Not just music, opera. She followed the unfamiliar sounds that were at once beautiful and hauntingly moving. The kitchen, living room and dining room came into view. Mac had lit the gas logs in the fireplace and the candles on the coffee table, her expensive candles, the ones she used purely for decoration.

He was in front of the stove, standing over a skillet, singing along in Italian with the score while he stirred. He must have sensed her presence because suddenly he looked up at her. “Finally used up all the hot water?”

Jennifer buried her hands in the pockets of her robe. “I think there might be an ounce or two left.”

He reached for the remote and turned down the volume on the stereo. “Can I offer you a glass?” He nodded toward the bottle of wine on the counter. It wasn’t a brand she recognized, he had to have brought it with him, along with the opera and the scads of groceries that were now strewn across her previously neat and tidy countertops.

“Sure. You listen to opera?”

“Sometimes.” He shrugged, then poured her some of the red wine. “Seems fitting to listen to Italian opera when making a Bolognese, don’t you think?”

She hopped onto the barstool at the counter. “Smells yummy.” Jennifer peered into the pot.

“You can’t go wrong when a recipe starts with sautéing garlic and onions in olive oil.” Mac continued to stir. “Leastwise that’s what my mum used to say before she died.” He shook his head and with it the melancholy of the mood that seemed to be forming. “Listen, I’m sorry I barged into your bedroom. At the time it felt like the right thing to do. I just couldn’t *not* reach out to you when you were in such obvious pain. But I know a closed door, especially your bedroom door, is a boundary I shouldn’t cross.”

“Forget it.” Jennifer took a sip of her wine.

“Forget it?” Mac looked perplexed. “If we’re going to live together, we need to have respect for one another’s space and—”

“You mean you’d still consider living with me? Even after seeing psycho Jennifer? Even knowing I’m going to have a nine-year-old moving in here?”

“Unless you don’t want me to. Maybe you’d rather have the place to yourself now?”

“Rather, yes. But I can’t afford it, especially if I’m going to have another mouth to feed and clothe. You know what real estate prices are like here.”

“That I do.” Mac began browning the meat in a second skillet and turned the flame off under the onions. “It’s settled? You’re definitely going to take her?” He took out a clean kettle, dumped the onions into it, and then dropped the first skillet into the sink.

Jennifer quickly assessed the number of glasses, plates, skillets and pots he had pulled out. “Who do you think is going to do all these dishes?”

“I’ll do all of the cooking and cleaning this year, you take it over for next year. How’s that?”

“I’m not falling for it. There’s only a few hours left of this year.”

Mac refilled his wineglass. “Here’s the truth. I love to cook, don’t mind most house chores, but I hate having to do the dishes.”

“I can see why,” she teased, looking around the kitchen.

“If we could work out some sort of trade that would be great, but, not tonight. Tonight I’ll do the soddin’ dishes without complaint.” Mac looked back at the sink and frowned. “Or, I’ll come back in the morning and do them. How’s that?”

“We’ll work something out.”

Jennifer nodded toward the stack of boxes containing her newly purchased office equipment. “Guess I’ll be exchanging those for bedroom furniture the day after tomorrow.”

“I’ve got my own bedroom set in storage.” Mac added the browned meat to the pot. “Give your sister the room you were going to give to me. There’s already a bed in it. I can move my stuff into the smaller room.”

“You don’t need to give up your room. But, if you prefer your bedroom set... I mean, if it’s nicer...”

Mac opened a drawer and peeked inside. “Can opener?”

“The second one over there.” She pointed to the drawer next to the sink.

"I wouldn't say what I have is nicer. I picked the set up from a consignment shop when I was a starving graduate student. It's done me fine for years. Needs a new mattress though."

"Keep it in storage." She got up off of the barstool and moved over to the fireplace. "I'll get Sara new stuff. Maybe I'll buy myself a small desk. I can put it in the corner over here." She gestured to the right of the French doors that led onto the balcony. "I don't really need an entire office. We can keep most of the stuff for the business over at Rachel's." Jennifer unlocked the doors to the balcony and stepped outside.

Mac finished opening the cans of tomato paste and sauce. He poured them into the pot and added the herb mixture he had brought over with him. Then he stirred in a cup of Chianti and set the pot to simmer before grabbing his wine and joining her.

He paused for a moment at the threshold, noticing how beautiful she looked standing there in the moonlight. The night air was cold for Southern California, almost bracing. There was a breeze coming from the west tonight, off of the ocean, and it made her robe flutter around her legs. She stared out at the dark city below, almost as if she commanded it. He'd seen the crack in her exterior earlier. Now she was back in control, confident, seemingly unaffected, untouchable. He preferred the real girl behind the mask.

As he approached her from behind, she shivered. "Cold?"

Jennifer nodded. "How did your mother die?"

Mac stopped. Her back was to him. "Cancer." He placed his wineglass on the ledge of the banister surrounding the balcony.

"Was she a good mother? Did you...love her?"

The question might have surprised someone else, not Mac. He'd seen more than his share of bad parents and battered or neglected children. He placed his hands on her arms, running them up to her shoulders and back down again in an attempt to warm her. "I loved her very much."

Jennifer leaned back into him, her body pressing into his in a way that was comforting, intimate. "My mother was horrid."

He didn't say anything. He just enjoyed the moment and waited for her to continue. Eventually she did.

"She was a drunk. I hadn't spoken to her in years. I think I've spent most of my life hating her, trying to get away, trying to move on. I thought I had put it all behind me. But now, somehow... Now that she's gone..."

"It feels like a piece of you is missing."

"Why?" She sounded so lost.

"Because," Mac pushed down the impulse to wrap her in his arms and pull her even closer, "she was your mother."

He let a moment or two pass.

“Why don’t I go stir the sauce? Come in out of the cold. We’ve got at least an hour before dinner’s ready,” he said.

Jennifer followed him back inside and closed the door. “Is there anything you want me to do?”

“I’ve got it under control. It’s just pasta and bread.” He picked up the loaf from the counter and waved it triumphantly in the air.

“You bought bread from The Bread Company? You can definitely be in charge of cooking!”

Mac stirred the sauce. “Have you tried their cinnamon rolls?”

Jennifer sat on the sofa. “No, and I’m not going to. Rachel got addicted to them last year. The resulting five pounds and her disposition during the detox that followed wasn’t pretty. You’ve been warned.”

Mac joined her in front of the fire. “Tell me about Sara.” He bent down and unlaced his boots.

“My sister?”

“Yeah.” He pulled them off, tossed them aside, then propped his stocking feet up on her coffee table. When she failed to respond after a few seconds he turned to her. “Well?”

Jennifer pointedly looked at his feet on her table. “Make yourself at home.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Mac slouched down farther and wiggled his toes. “I promise I took my shoes off, Mum, and the socks are clean.”

Jennifer frowned.

“Tell me about Sara. I’m not hurting the bloody table.”

“I’ve never met Sara.”

“What?” Mac sat up and twisted to face her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve never met Sara.”

Mac continued to look at her.

“I was gone before Sara was born.”

“Gone?”

Jennifer sighed. “My mom was always a drinker, but after my dad left, it got worse. He was never around, but those child-support payments came every month, like clockwork. They kept her in booze.” Jennifer stood and began to pace in front of the fireplace. “My senior year in high school was hell. She knew on my eighteenth birthday the payments were going to stop. She was hospitalized twice that year. Overdoses. She applied for disability and was turned down. Then she started to get desperate, she—”

“What? Go on.”

“Why am I even telling you this? I never talk about my past, especially with strangers.”

“Your snot was on my shirt. We’re no longer strangers. Besides, social worker.” Mac pointed to his forehead. “I swear it’s embossed right here. You’d be amazed at the things people feel compelled to share with me. Take Mrs. Champieux, for instance.”

“The sweet old lady who lives down on the first floor?”

“In the apartment by the mailboxes.”

“What about her?”

“Did you know she used to be a man?”

Jennifer scoffed. “You’re making that up!”

“Swear to God.” Mac held up his hand. “Just don’t tell Mr. James. She asked me not to. Seems he’s taking a shine to her.”

“Mr. James?”

“They’ve been going to church together on Sundays for a year now and, well, she wants to take the relationship to the next level but she feels it’s only right she tell him first. She needed a sounding board.”

“Next level? You mean...sex?” She whispered the last word.

Max rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. “You have something against sex?”

“No! But Mr. James must be close to eighty.”

“Old people have sexual needs. I’m not sure the desire for intimacy...connecting ever dies. The fact is—he rings her bell! I think it’s kind of sweet. She’s going to tell him tonight. She’s making him dinner and has this whole seduction scene planned. She’s been saying the Rosary for a month, praying he doesn’t have a heart attack when she breaks the news.”

“You’re not making this up?” Jennifer narrowed her eyes and looked at him suspiciously.

“Nope, now finish your story.”

She sat back down. “Tell me something about you first.”

“Last night I had a really hot dream about Angelina Jolie,” he replied before taking a sip of his wine.

“Mac, even I’ve had hot dreams about Angelina Jolie.”

“Okay, how’s this? I was once in love with a woman. She had a drug habit. It got bad.”

“How bad?”

“Really bad. The drugs were all she saw, all she wanted, all she needed. I became invisible. She became someone else. I couldn’t reach her. It broke my heart.”

“What did you do?”

He stared down into his glass. “One night I gave her an ultimatum. She didn’t choose me. I understand what it’s like to live with an addict. Nothing is as important as the next high. Certainly not the feelings of a lover—”

“Or the needs of a daughter,” Jennifer interjected.

Mac nodded. “Or the needs of a daughter.”

“You’re good at this. You make it look easy.”

Mac smiled, leaned back and gave her his full attention. “I believe it’s your turn.”

“My mother started looking for someone, anyone to pay the bills and keep her in booze,” Jennifer began. “I was young and naïve, but even I could tell what she was doing. She’d bring them home. Sometimes they’d be there the next morning. Eventually, she got pregnant.”

“With Sara?”

“With Sara. She was thirty-seven and I was seventeen. She had no idea who the father was. She tried to pass it off on several of them with no success. And then she scored. The guys name was Cliff Corbin. He knew the child wasn’t his; I overheard him telling my mom he couldn’t have children. Apparently that’s why his last marriage had split up. He agreed to marry her, but stipulated he wouldn’t adopt me, or the baby. He moved in two days later. I left the next one. I never went back.”

Mac reached for her hand. “What happened? Why did you leave?”

Jennifer gave him a shaky smile. “Maybe someday I’ll tell you, but not tonight.”

“Fair enough.” He released her hand. “Cliff was the one who gave CPS your name.”

“I’m surprised they were still together.”

“They were still legally married, but they weren’t together. It seems he and your mum split a while back, don’t know the circumstances.”

“Sara will know,” Jennifer said, solemnly.

“She’s only nine, blondie. She might not—”

She leaned her head back and rested it on the top of the sofa. “Sara will know,” Jennifer repeated with certainty. After a minute she turned to Mac. “How is this going to work?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will they just let me have her?”

“The judge will want to make sure we’re placing her in a good home. L.A.’s probably already done some preliminary checking on you. Once they hear you’re interested, they’ll transfer the investigation down here and things will get serious.”

“What do they investigate?”

“They’ll do a complete criminal history check, make sure you’re not in the database as a perpetrator of abuse yourself. Then they’ll do a home visit and assess whether you meet the requirements to be licensed as a foster parent. They’ll check me out, too,” he explained.

“I don’t want to be a foster parent.”

“It’s just procedure. It doesn’t mean you have to accept any more children.”

“How long will it take?”

“Depends. Want me to call L.A. and give them the thumbs-up or do you want to sleep on it?”

Jennifer stood and made her way to the kitchen. “I was never going to have children.” She poured the last of the wine, then gave the sauce a stir. “When my father left us, I remember deciding then and there I

would never get married and have kids. I vowed I'd never be dependent on someone or allow someone to be dependent on me."

Mac slipped into the kitchen behind her. "How old were you when he left?" he asked, as he preheated the oven.

"Twelve." Jennifer moved back to the other side of the counter and resumed her earlier position on the barstool. "I was twelve."

"And now you're?"

"Twenty-seven." She rested her chin in her hand.

"Well, blondie, you're a woman now. You're entitled to change your mind. You've got to know your mum's life wasn't like it was because she got married or had kids." Mac filled up a large pot with water and lit a flame under it. "It's more complicated than that. The interdependency you're referring to that comes with relationships? It isn't always a burden."

"You sure about that?"

He added some salt to the pot. "Sometimes it's actually a blessing."

"But what if it's really awful? What if I'm really awful?"

Mac leaned across the counter and looked Jennifer directly in the eye. "You don't have to do this. It's all right to say no."

"I'm nothing like my mother."

Mac smiled. "You're Jennifer."

"What if being Jennifer isn't good enough?"

"Do you *want* to do this?"

"Yes."

"If it's awful, you'll just keep working on it, both of you will, until it's good. And then you'll work on it some more, until it gets even better. It's a process. There aren't any quick answers."

The lid on the pot began to rattle. Mac picked up a potholder, removed the lid, and poured in the penne pasta.

"Mac?"

"Hmm?"

"You should really think about doing this professionally." Jennifer took another sip of wine.

"Cooking?"

She set her glass on the counter. "Not cooking." She gestured between them. "This. I mean, you're a licensed therapist, right?"

"Yeah. This isn't therapy. This is just two people, talking."

"What I meant was, you could be earning big bucks in private practice."

“I don’t care how much you beg, I’m not taking you on as a client. It’d be a conflict of interest, what, with us living together, and all. Plus? You couldn’t afford me.” Mac put the bread in the oven. “Unless you’re willing to negotiate on the dishes?”

“I’m serious! Why are you working for CPS?”

“You mean aside from the hot chicks, light workload, fast company cars and large expense account?”

“Yeah, aside from all that.”

“To make a difference.”

“It’s as simple as that?”

“I guess when it comes down to it, I’m a simple guy.”

“Do you have time to call L.A. before the pasta’s ready?”

“You sure? This isn’t something you have to decide tonight. You can sleep on it.” He reached across the counter and tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. “You can take as long as you need.”

“I’m sure. I think maybe I can make a difference. I want to try. Besides, she’s my sister.”

Chapter Three

1/3/04 5:30 p.m., San Diego, CA

Jennifer walked into her apartment after a long day of work. She and Rachel had been at it all day, helping the daughter of one of the town's wealthiest plan her dream Valentine's Day wedding. They had already been working on the account for months. Jennifer was beginning to hate pink, *really* hate pink.

She dropped her purse on the counter and went over to the fridge to grab a bottle of water. The lights were off in both the kitchen and living room. The entire place was quiet. She was alone. She leaned back against the door to the refrigerator, flipped on the overhead light to the kitchen, closed her eyes and released a sigh.

"You're home late."

Jennifer jumped, dropping the water bottle on the floor.

Mac leapt back. "Good thing it wasn't open." He retrieved the bottle and handed it to her. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Sorry." She gave him a sheepish smile. "It was a tense day. I thought I was alone."

"I was in my room, reviewing my new case files. When I started, it was light out. I must have drifted off a bit ago. I woke up when you came in," he explained. "Why was today so awful? Couldn't the bride decide what color napkins she wants?"

Jennifer frowned. "It's an important decision. And you have no idea how many shades of pink there are."

"Some things are better off left to the imagination."

"A bride wants everything to be perfect on her wedding day."

"Talk about an unreasonable standard." Mac tilted his head, indicating he wanted her to move.

"What?" She stepped away from the fridge. "I suppose you'll just have those brown paper napkins made from recycled material at your wedding."

Mac grabbed a beer from the fridge, opened it, then headed back toward his room. "No, I would forego napkins altogether and have the guests all wipe their mouths on their shirtsleeves, like I do."

Jennifer rolled her eyes. "Of course."

He turned around, "Do they really make napkins with recycled content?"

"We're not buying them."

"Why not?" he shouted.

She followed him to his room, pausing at the entrance. "They're yucky looking and they cost more." She leaned against the doorframe.

He sat his beer on his nightstand before climbing back on the bed. "But they're better for the environment. Don't you care about your carbon footprint?" Mac opened a case file and began to read.

"Of course I do." She held up her water bottle. "I'm recycling, aren't I?"

"But still buying all those individual little water bottles. Baby steps."

Jennifer took a minute to look around. The room had been totally transformed in the last two days. Initially it had contained just the dark walnut antique four-poster bed and dresser surrounded by white walls. The first change had been those walls. When Jennifer came home from Rachel and Tom's on New Year's Day, she discovered Mac had painted them red. Red.

"You painted the walls red?" she'd asked.

"No. It's not red. The guy at the paint store said it's called 'Rendezvous'."

"Right, rendezvous!" She laughed and shook her head. "Did he give you a discount?"

"You don't like it?"

"It's a bit...red."

"I think it makes a statement."

"What kind of a statement?"

"Trust me, I've got a vision. It's going to be great," he replied, not deterred in the least.

And he was right. After he painted the walls the rich wine color, he had stenciled on the Chinese symbols for peace, love and faith. He'd also positioned a three-by-five jewel-toned oriental rug between the antique dresser and the footboard of the bed. The richness of the colors complemented the dark wooden shades of the hardwood flooring and walnut furnishings. There was even a large tray of sorts resting on top of the dresser that Mac had fashioned out of an old portrait frame and filled with pillar candles.

"You coming in?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. If it's all right."

"Of course, have a seat."

Jennifer walked around the bed en route to the chair. The bed itself took up most of the room. He'd adorned it with a black chenille duvet cover, trimmed in red Chinese silk not unlike the material her robe was made from. There was a new piece of furniture. He had placed it so it sat between his bedside and the black leather chair he had retrieved from storage and was using it as a combination nightstand and side table. In addition to a clock and his beer, the table held a lamp, about four or five books, and a pair of reading glasses.

"New table and lamp," she observed, sliding into the chair.

"Found the table this morning over on Adams in one of those little antique stores." He continued to flip through his case file, scanning the contents.

The overhead light in the room was turned off. The only light came from the candles and the bedside lamp. The room was filled with a warm glow, and interesting shadows danced across the dramatic walls as the flames of the candles flickered.

“Did you have the lamp already?”

“Yeah, I’ve had it for a while.”

“I should let you work.” She started to get up.

He tossed the file aside. “No. I need to stop.” He tilted his head toward the lamp. “I bought it in a store up in L.A., in Chinatown. I don’t remember why I was there, probably killing time. My mum was sick. I was practically living at the hospital. I bought it for her. Everything in that room was so cold, so sterile.”

“I bet she loved it.”

Mac nodded. “We’d sit there together and stare at it. I don’t know what it is. Maybe the way the light gets diffused as it passes through the flax paper but it seems—”

“Warm. Peaceful.”

“Yeah.” Mac sighed.

Jennifer leaned back in the chair, kicked off her shoes and propped her feet up on the edge of his bed. “The place looks great. It feels nice.”

“You look like you’re ready for a nap.”

“Maybe a hot bath.” She closed her eyes. “How do you feel about take-out Chinese for tonight?”

“Can’t join you tonight, blondie.” Mac got up, then drained the rest of the beer. “I’ve got a date,” he told her, setting the bottle back on his nightstand.

Jennifer’s eyes flew open. She quickly sized up his appearance. “You do not have a date.”

Mac pulled his leather coat out of the closet. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you’re not even dressed.”

Mac looked down at his obviously clothed body. “Of course I’m dressed. What are you talking about?” He picked his keys and billfold up off of the dresser.

“You’re not dressed *up*. You know, so you can make a good first impression.”

“It’s supposed to be casual, pizza and a movie. This is what I normally wear.” Mac stuffed his billfold into the pocket of his jeans.

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t make a little extra effort. You know, put your best foot forward.” Jennifer stood and stretched. “Did you even shower?”

“Course I did! I showered this morning when I came back from my run.”

“That was for work. I meant for your date.”

“Let me guess.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “You’re one of these girls who puts on airs, trying to impress so you can reel some unsuspecting bloke in. When, may I ask, are you supposed to start to show your date the real you?”

“You think your date is going to let you see the real her?”

“Don’t know. The truth is I have no control over what she’s going to do. What I *do* know is if I like what I see and she’s willing to go out with me again it’ll be because she saw something in me she liked. I won’t have to be guessing about whether what *she* liked about *me* was the façade.” Mac walked back over toward her and retrieved his empty beer bottle. “Recyclable.”

“You know what I think? I think you’re being a teensy bit disingenuous.”

“How so?”

She gestured toward him. “This is all part of an image.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The black boots, leather coat, rumpled T-shirt that screams ‘I’m a bad boy’ when—”

Mac wrapped the arm holding the beer bottle around her waist and in one fluid motion pulled her body flush against his before bending her backward in a low dip. “You don’t think I can be bad?”

Jennifer’s breath hitched.

“Little girl, you have no idea,” he whispered into the shell of her ear, his voice low and seductive. Then he nuzzled her at her neck, breathing her in. “We’re all just a little bit bad.”

“You mean, what you’ve shown me? This great, sensitive guy I’ve been getting to know isn’t the real you?” She was slightly breathless.

Mac lifted his head and looked searchingly into her eyes. He was so close. He smelled so good. He *felt* so good. Her entire body tightened in anticipation.

“We all have a dark side,” he murmured. “A part lurking within us, longing to live for the moment, to act on wild impulses, to give in to temptation.” Mac licked his lips. She could practically taste them. “Don’t you ever feel that?”

Jennifer’s heart was racing and her mouth was dry. It was as if time had suddenly stopped. As she gazed into his impossibly blue eyes, she realized this was one of those defining moments. One of those times when, with a single action, you could change the course of your life. If only you were willing to take the chance.

“Mac... I...”

“Yes?”

“You’re going to be late for your date.”

“Right.” He straightened, bringing her back to an upright position. “I hate to keep a beautiful girl waiting.”

“You should go. Have fun.”

“Right now, I’m sorry I agreed to it.” Mac reached up and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I’d much rather stay here and order Chinese with you.” Then he turned around and left her. Alone.

“Pick up! Pick up!” Jennifer chanted into the phone as she paced back and forth.

The buzzer to the intercom rang, announcing the arrival of her dinner. She buzzed the delivery boy into the building, then tossed the cordless phone on the couch. Jennifer pulled a twenty out of her wallet, opened the door and waited. When he stepped off the elevator her phone rang.

“Leave the food and keep the change!”

As soon as the man snatched the money out of her hand and passed her the brown paper bag, Jennifer was on her way to the telephone.

“Hello?”

“What is it? Are you sick? Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“No, I’m fine.” Jennifer set the bag of food on the counter.

“You’re fine? You’ve left me seven messages in the past hour saying there was an emergency!”

“Well, there is, but not a hospital kind of emergency.” She hurriedly removed the cartons of food from the bag. “It’s more of a kissing type of emergency. Well it wasn’t a kiss, actually. More like an almost kiss—”

“Jennifer, breathe. Sit.”

Jennifer took several deep breaths as she walked over to the sofa and sat down. “What am I going to do?”

“Tell me what happened. We’ll figure it out.”

“He was holding me in his arms and looking into my eyes. I could smell his aftershave and the faint scent of the beer he had just finished. It was as if time suddenly stood still and all I could see was him. He said something and I looked at his lips. I had this impulse to... What’s wrong with me?”

“You’re horny because you haven’t had sex in three years?”

“Two years,” Jennifer corrected.

“Who are we talking about here?”

“Mac.”

“Oh, shit! You’re new roommate made a pass at you?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. We were talking while he was not getting ready for his date. I was teasing him—”

“You were teasing him?”

“Not in a sexual way! I was teasing him about what he was wearing. I said something about him trying to project a certain type of image and then there were eyes and lips and almost kissing.”

“But there was no kiss.”

"No kiss," Jennifer confirmed. "But there were sparks."

"Definite sparks?"

"Yeah." Jennifer leaned back and rested her head on the sofa.

"For both of you?"

"I think so."

"Then what happened?"

"I got scared and pulled away. It was like we were wrapped in this spell and suddenly I made it all go poof. God, I'm such an idiot! What was I thinking? I was practically panting, Rachel. I'm so embarrassed."

"Maybe he didn't notice?"

"He noticed."

"So, you got scared. Everyone gets scared. When Mac returns from his date, just tell him."

"I can't get involved with him, you know I can't."

"Not can't," Rachel clarified. "Won't"

"It's the same thing."

"It's not, and you know it." Rachel quoted: "'Can (verb): to be able to. Will (verb): the capability of conscious choice and decision and intention'."

"Do you actually read the dictionary?"

"Hey! We're not talking about my quirks here, we're talking about your quirks. Tomorrow you can call me back and pick on me."

Jennifer sighed. "Fair enough. Maybe I'll pretend nothing happened."

"That's your plan? From what you've told me about this guy, my guess is he's not going to fall for it."

"Well, you're not helping. It's the best I can come up with right now!"

"I don't think creating an alternate universe is going to work this time, Jennifer."

"You're probably right. What if he brings it up? What am I going to say?"

"Say what's true. Tell him how you feel."

"What if I'm not sure what's true or how I feel?" Jennifer asked, feeling a sense of panic at the thought of revealing herself.

"Then that's what you say. You can do this, Jennifer," Rachel encouraged.

"Yeah, okay."

"Definite sparks?"

"Like I've never felt before."

"Call me tomorrow. Maybe we can get together for dinner? I want to meet this guy."

"All right. I'll call you tomorrow," Jennifer agreed before hanging up.

She picked up the remote control, switched on the television and began searching for something to watch. "*Dr. Zhivago. Out of Africa. Casablanca*," she muttered, quickly flipping through the channels. "Is

there anything on besides tragic romances? Ah-ha *Lawrence of Arabia*! That will work, a war story. No women. No romance.”

Jennifer dished up some of the Chinese food, poured herself a glass of wine and curled up on the sofa. Two hours later, she realized her strategy wasn’t working. She was still thinking about Mac. “Stupid Peter O’Toole and his stupid blonde hair, blue eyes and chiseled cheekbones.” She aimed the remote control at the television set and clicked it. The screen went black.

For the next few minutes she busied herself cleaning up her dishes, placing the leftover food in the fridge and turning off the lights. She went into her bedroom, undressed and put on her robe. Intent on taking a bath, she grabbed a fresh towel out of the linen closet before walking into the bathroom and turning on the taps to the water. After adding a generous amount of orange-ginger bubble bath, she had a few minutes to kill. She popped some mellow Spanish guitar music into the CD player, then refilled her wineglass and made a quick stop in Mac’s room to search through his stack of books.

Hastily, she scanned the various titles. “He’s got to have something I’ve never read before.” After Jennifer selected one she returned to the bathroom, pushed the door closed, shed her robe, turned off the taps and stepped into the tub.

The temperature of the water was sheer perfection. The aroma of the bath salts almost instantly soothing. Jennifer sat the glass down on the floor and leaned back, submerging herself. She leisurely sipped her wine and read for close to twenty minutes. Finally, the tension in her neck and shoulders started to subside. She set the book alongside her empty wineglass, drained some of the water, added more hot, then leaned back and exhaled, grateful that at last she was able to turn off her thoughts and relax.

“Jennifer?”

She sat up. “I’m taking a bath.”

“Yeah? Well, I’ve got to use the bathroom. If you’re the modest type you better close the shower curtain. I’ll try not to peek.” Mac opened the door.

Jennifer gasped. She grabbed the shower curtain and pulled it closed, shielding herself. “You peeked. I saw you.”

“I said I’d try not to peek. I did try. I found I couldn’t help myself.”

She heard him unzip his pants, lift the lid on the commode and relieve himself.

“If you feel you simply must even the score, you’re welcome to peek,” he offered.

“I think I’ll pass.”

He flushed the commode, then turned on the water at the sink. “Is that my book?”

“Hope you don’t mind, I—”

“Don’t mind at all. I’ve almost finished it. You’re welcome to it tonight, blondie. I’ve got plenty to read. Can I get you another glass of wine? It looks like you’re almost out.”

“Please. And would you mind hitting the play button on the CD again?”

“Anything else you can think of to make your bath more enjoyable, milady?” He called out from the kitchen.

“Brad Pitt? Oh!” Jennifer gasped as the curtain suddenly opened a few inches. When she turned toward the gap, her eyes met his. He was crouched down, holding out the glass to her.

“I promise, I’m just looking at your eyes. No peeking. Two outta three ain’t bad.” Mac said.

“No Brad?”

Mac’s reply was interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone. “Hello?”

“I miss you already,” the voice on the other end of the phone said.

Mac’s forehead wrinkled as he moved into a sitting position, his back against the wall. “How did you get this number?” he asked, setting the beer he’d been holding onto the floor.

“Mike gave it to me. I told him I left something in your car.”

“Did you leave something in my car?” Mac picked the beer back up, tilted it to his lips and took several swallows.

“No. But tonight didn’t go exactly like I had hoped. I was thinking, maybe, if you wanted to, we could try a different ending.”

“Mel—”

“Let’s not play games. I’m waiting for you. I want you. You know where I live. No. Strings. Attached,” she said, slowly, before hanging up.

Mac pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it for a few seconds.

Jennifer had heard every word. He looked over at her and she quickly looked away, avoiding his gaze. Her cheeks tinged pink from embarrassment.

“You heard. You’re embarrassed.” Mac sat the cell phone down on the bathroom floor and then took another sip of his beer. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s been a long day.” Jennifer stared down into her wineglass. “I’m kind of tired.”

“This will only take a minute, I have something for you. I meant to give it to you earlier, but we got...distracted.”

Jennifer looked up, surprised. “Aren’t you going out?”

“To see Melody? That would be a no.” He climbed to his feet and headed for the door. “Be right back.”

“But, she was offering sex!” Jennifer blurted out.

Mac froze, his back to her. “Yes.”

“Don’t you like sex?”

Mac turned around, walked back into the bathroom, crouched down in front of her. “Oh, I like sex, Jennifer. I didn’t like her.”

“But you kissed her.”

Mac tilted his head to the side. "Why would you say that?"

She reached out and dragged the pad of her thumb across his earlobe. "Lipstick." She showed it to him. "You also have some on your neck."

"She kissed me. When I dropped her off."

"So there was kissing." Jennifer took another sip of wine. "But, you don't like her."

"We just didn't...spark, you know? Why would I want to waste my time?"

"Because you could have gotten laid?"

Mac rolled his eyes. "You don't need to remind me."

"Sorry."

"I'll leave your present on your bed. I'll see you in the morning, blondie."

"You're going to sleep?"

"Not likely. Not now. Not with these images I've got rolling about in my head, thanks to you."

"You sure you don't want your book?"

"Nah, I think I'm going to have myself a nice long wank." Mac stood and again headed out the door.

"Mac!"

Before closing it, he peered back around and winked. "Pay no attention to the man moaning in the next room...even if he calls out your name."

Jennifer sat alone on her bed. The apartment was dark and quiet, except for the soft sounds of jazz emanating from Mac's room. It took her quite some time to gather up the courage to open the card. She looked down at it and after wiping a tear from her eye she read it again:

Jennifer,

I know you're nervous about Sara, wanting everything to be perfect. It won't be. It's going to be awkward, sometimes painfully so. You're going to have doubts. You're going to make mistakes along the way. I suspect soon after Monday's home visit you're going to get the green light. I wanted to get you something to mark the occasion, but I wasn't sure what. Then I realized sometimes it's the subtlest of things that create the greatest changes in our lives, in us. Maybe finding the right path doesn't have to be complicated. Maybe direction can come from something as simple as stopping in the hallway to help some girl pick up her spilt groceries. Or, maybe it's not even the actions we take that are important. Maybe it's more about being open, about thinking, feeling, believing...about believing in ourselves...about believing in one another. I believe in you. I think you can.

Mac

Jennifer tore open the wrapped package. It was the 60th Anniversary Edition of *The Little Engine That Could*, by Watty Piper. Jennifer opened the book to the first page and began to read. “Chug, chug, chug. Puff, puff, puff. Ding-dong, ding-dong. The little train rumbled over the tracks...”

Chapter Four

Mac sat at the dining table, reading the Sunday edition of the *San Diego Union* and eating some oatmeal. It was close to ten thirty. He had found sleep elusive and had spent most of the night tossing and turning, thinking about her. The phone rang.

“Hello?”

“So? How did it go?” Mike asked.

“How did what go?”

“Melody! It seemed like she really liked you. I mean, she did ask you to drive her home. What happened?”

“Yeah, she liked me all right.” Mac realized he sounded bored.

“But you didn’t like her?”

“Not really.”

“Maybe you didn’t give her enough of a chance. She’s a beautiful girl, man. And she’s obviously attracted to you.”

“We didn’t click.” Mac took another sip of coffee. “The chemistry wasn’t there. It was all right, good even, but not great, not what I want, not what I need.”

“So, you and Melody?”

“We kissed, that’s all. She was offering, but...”

“But what?”

“It didn’t feel right.”

“Mac?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m officially taking away your Guy Card.”

Mac smiled.

“I’m telling you, if I were there, I would hit you upside the head. Did you *not* notice her tits?” Mike asked.

“They were kind of hard not to notice.” Mac leaned back in the chair and allowed himself the brief memory of how her breast had felt, cupped in the palm of his hand. As Melody moved in and kissed him goodnight, she had boldly led his hand under her sweater, placed it over her right breast and encouraged him, guided him...

Someone beeped in.

“Hold on. Hello?”

“It’s me,” said Jennifer. “I’m glad I caught you.”

Mac lowered his voice. “I missed you this morning.”

Jennifer swallowed. “You did?”

“Yeah, well, I slept late. When I woke up you were already gone. Where are you?”

“The mall. I had to do some clothes shopping. I’m going over to Ikea in a little while to order the bedroom stuff for Sara’s room.”

The sales clerk who had been helping her knocked on the dressing room door. “Jennifer? We don’t have your cup size in the beige, just black, red and ivory.”

“Try on the red,” Mac said.

Her heart rate picked up. “The red?”

“It’s my favorite color.”

“Hold on.” Jennifer sat the phone down, opened the dressing room door and accepted the handful of lingerie. She picked the phone back up. “What were you saying?”

“You’re trying on lingerie?”

“Yes.”

“Describe it. The more detail the better.”

“What? No!”

“Come on. Is it satin? Lace? Does the set come with a matching garter?”

“Mac, are you wearing pants?”

“Yeah, but they’re becoming uncomfortable. I should take them off. I will if you ask me.”

Jennifer blushed. “I’m not having phone sex with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” Even as she said it, she removed her panties.

“Tell me I’m imagining this. Tell me you don’t feel it, the attraction between us. It’s off the charts. I can’t stop thinking about you.” His voice was low, and oh-so-sexy.

Jennifer leaned back against the door to the dressing room and closed her eyes. Her hand slid across the full mounds of her breasts, then down the length of her stomach. As her fingers reached her center they slid easily between her folds, dipping into the hot wetness. “I feel it,” she admitted, slightly breathless. “But we *can’t*...we shouldn’t...”

“Tell me what you’re doing. The sound of your breathing, it’s—”

Jennifer looked at herself in the mirror and quickly removed her hand. “Wrong.” She turned around and rested her head against the door.

“It’s not wrong when two people—”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m attracted to you. I can’t act on that. I won’t. My sister’s moving into the apartment in just a few days. She’s going to need my attention, my focus. She’s going to need stability. No.”

“No, as in eventually?”

A tear rolled down Jennifer’s cheek. “Maybe you should go out with Melody again. She seemed to really like you.”

“I don’t *want* Melody. What I want...”

She sniffed reflexively.

“Are you crying?” Mac asked.

Jennifer didn’t answer.

“You’re not being true to yourself. You’re not being honest. Why are you suggesting I go out with Melody?”

“Because I’m not available.”

“Have dinner with me?”

“That’s why I was calling, actually. I invited my friends Rachel and Tom over for dinner.”

“I can go to a movie or something, stay out of the way.”

“They want to meet you. I want you to be there. Please?”

“Jennifer? You do realize you give off a lot of mixed signals, right?”

“Maybe I’m really mixed up?”

Mac smiled. “How does lasagna sound?”

“Depends, am I making it or are you?”

“Me. I’ve got the leftover Bolognese sauce in the freezer. It’ll be a snap. Tell them to come around six o’clock.”

“It’s dinner, not a date.”

“Dinner is all I asked for.”

“Thanks, Mac. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Mac clicked back over to Mike. “Sorry about that.”

“Jesus! What the hell took you so long?”

“It was Jennifer. We had phone sex. I was trying to draw out her pleasure. It took a while to make her come. I’m not quite as good over the phone as I am in person.”

“Wow. Maybe you don’t have to go back to remedial Guy Camp after all. In fact, you might be my new hero. But, she’s your roommate. Couldn’t that get, I don’t know, complicated?”

"I expect it's going to get very complicated. She's a difficult woman to understand." Mac refilled his coffee cup before taking the Bolognese sauce out of the freezer.

"You mean they make a model that's not? I wish to hell someone had told me."

Mac shook his head. "Why does Tameka put up with you?"

"I have this magical tongue. Hey, as much as I'm enjoying this little chat, I was actually calling to speak with Jennifer. I'm bowing out of doing the home visit tomorrow, potential conflict and all. Bonnie over in the Continued Services Department agreed to do it. If all goes well, she can place Sara in the home maybe as early as Wednesday, Friday at the latest."

"Let me give you Jennifer's cell number," Mac offered before rattling it off.

"By the way, the kid's going to need a therapist. She's not talking," Mike said.

"She's been through a traumatic event. It could take a long time before she feels ready to talk about it."

"No. It's not that she won't talk about *it*. She's not talking at all. Not one word. Not since the police found her."

"Is she catatonic?" Mac asked.

"No. She's mute."

"Is she going to be able to go to school?"

"They think so. She's following directions and processing. The shrink says she'll talk, in time, when she feels safe."

"Jennifer was going to get her signed up at Grant. It's within walking distance from here. Think she should hold off?"

"I'm looking at her last report card. The kid got straight A's, so school is a place she's been successful. I'd recommend she set up a visit, see how it goes. If Grant isn't comfortable, we can explore alternatives."

"Good idea. Tell Bonnie we'll plan for Friday. I'll take it off. That'll give us three whole days with her before Monday."

"Sounds good. I'll talk to you on Monday, buddy."

"Thanks for everything." Mac hung up the phone, then walked over to the smaller third bedroom and peered into it. It was completely barren. Not one piece of furniture. Not one stitch of fabric. Not one bit of color. It was empty. He dialed Jennifer's cell.

"Hello?"

"It's me. Did Mike reach you?" Mac asked.

"Yeah. We just hung up."

"I'm not sure Ikea is the best idea."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." He stepped into the sterile room. "Yes, I do. Sara's going to need warmth. She's going to need comfort. She doesn't need cold, hard lines and furniture without history. I'm painting the room yellow."

"Yellow?"

"Yeah. A soft yellow, like the color of butter. Listen, I saw some stuff yesterday while I was out shopping for my table. There was a sleigh bed with a matching nightstand in the same shop. The sales girl seemed to take a shine to me, maybe if I talk dirty for her we can get a deal. What do you say?"

"You'd do that for me?"

"Talk dirty? You know I would. And a lot more. You want to meet down there?"

"Why not?"

"Go buy a twin-sized mattress and box spring. I'll run over and pick up the paint, maybe stop by for some bedding. We'll hook up at two o'clock outside of the Antique Row Café?"

"Okay."

"With luck, we'll be back here and painting by three."

"What's this *we* stuff? I thought you were painting."

"You're painting, too. We'll get it done much faster if we work together."

"I don't know how to paint."

"Good grief, it's not that hard. You just smear the color on the walls."

"What if I make a mistake and mess it up?"

"You won't. But if you do? We'll fix it. Deal?"

"Deal!"

Mac disconnected, then wasted no time in dialing a new number.

"Good morning!"

"Antonio? It's me. I need some decorating advice for a little girl's room. Can you meet me at Bed Bath and Beyond in forty-five minutes?"

Chapter Five

Mac lifted the end of the braid that ran down Jennifer's back. "Uh, Jennifer? I think somehow you dipped your braid in the paint." He walked around to face her and brought the tip up to show her the evidence, a glob of yellow paint. The two of them had been working on painting Sara's room for a couple hours. Since it was empty, it took little time to prepare. After changing into work clothes, they covered the floor with a large drop cloth and masked it off. Then they taped the ceiling and window, poured the paint and went to town. Mac took charge of rolling on the quick-drying cheery yellow latex he had purchased earlier in the day. Jennifer took on the task of cutting in around the baseboards, corners and the one small window. The room had already begun to take on a much different feel.

"How did that happen?" Jennifer asked.

"Don't know, but it's managed to drip down your back, too. Aren't you glad you listened to me and changed into work clothes? Let's hear you say those three little words that every man longs to hear. Come on..." Mac waved the paint-covered tip of her hair in front of her nose.

Jennifer swallowed. "Three little words?"

"Mac, you were right."

She frowned. "That's four words."

He dropped her braid. "Anyone ever tell you you're stubborn?"

"You did it!" she gasped.

"Did what?"

"You did it on purpose! Like some little boy, you went and dipped the end of my hair in the paint."

"I most certainly did not!" Mac bent down and added more paint to the roller. "This second coat is going on much faster. It's a good thing, too, we don't have much time before our guests arrive and I'm in desperate need of a shower. How about you open the window? It's like a bloody furnace in here."

"It's not hot in here, you're just all sweaty!" Jennifer said as she struggled to open the window.

Mac began to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" She turned to look at him.

He placed his hand on her wrist and gently twisted her arm so she could see the long path of yellow paint stretching down its length. "You must have brushed against the wall." He pushed the window open. "You look good in yellow."

Jennifer impulsively dipped her paintbrush back into the paint and flicked it at him, spattering his white T-shirt, chin and neck with the color.

Mac stood there for a second, his mouth gaped open, speechless. He looked down at himself and then up at her. "What did you go and do that for?"

Jennifer burst out in a fit of laughter. "You look...you look... Oh, oh... You look kind of mad. Mac?"

His eyes narrowed as he took a step toward her. "Jennifer."

She looked beautiful, wide-eyed and breathing heavily. The image played through his mind in the space of a second. Jennifer's nude body pressed against the wall, covered in wet paint. His arousal started to build and he wanted desperately to give in to it.

"I'm sorry. I was being playful."

He took another step. "You've been a very naughty girl."

"Please, don't hurt me," Jennifer said.

Mac registered her fear and his expression immediately softened. He set the roller down on the tray and held up his hands in surrender. "I would never hurt you, Jennifer."

Her breaths were coming in heavy pants, her face was flush and she looked almost panicked. The hand gripping the paintbrush was trembling, the knuckles on it white.

"It's all right." Mac walked over to her and slowly placed his hand over hers. "It's all right."

Her eyes tentatively rose to meet his. She gave him a shy, hesitant smile.

"Someone's hurt you," Mac said. "A man."

"I don't want to talk about it." Jennifer turned her head slightly, breaking eye contact.

Mac nodded his understanding. He was content to leave well enough alone, for now. "I wasn't going to hurt you. I was going to resort to that age-old foolproof strategy called tickling to get the brush away from you."

"Wouldn't have worked." Jennifer defiantly lifted her chin in the air, any evidence of fear vanishing. "I'm not ticklish."

"I have a theory about that." Mac began to walk his fingers up the side of her torso. "See? I think I just...need...to find...the right...spot." He wrapped one arm around her waist to pull her closer to him and with the other he attacked the side of her stomach.

Jennifer squealed. She managed to break loose, but only for an instant. Soon he had her again. Peals of laughter escaped her lips and her legs began to fold beneath her. They dropped to the floor and she began to kick her legs back and forth as she pulled away, trying to escape.

"No! Stop! I can't stand it!" she pleaded between breaths.

"Not ticklish, my ass!" Mac rolled her onto her back and climbed on top of her, straddling her hips.

He had her hands pinned over her head. The paintbrush was still clutched firmly in one of them. His eyes locked on hers as he hovered over her face. She was smiling up at him, chuckling softly, her breathing

still labored. As he looked at her underneath him, his smile began to gradually fade. “God, you’re beautiful.”

“Still not getting the brush,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Jennifer,” he said patiently, “let go.”

“No.”

Mac tilted his head to the side. “What are you doing? Are you testing me? Wanting to see if I’ll resort to using my physical strength to dominate you and take it? I’m not going to. I could sit like this for hours, it’s quite comfortable, actually.”

Jennifer’s face was becoming increasingly flush, her breathing was becoming ragged. Her tongue darted out and moistened her lips. She said nothing.

“Ah.” He leaned down and whispered in her ear. “A glimpse of Jennifer Jones’s dark side. Maybe you like it a little—”

She bucked underneath him. “Unhand me!”

Mac smiled. “Well, milady, seems you’ve got it a bit backward. You see, I’m the lord of this manor. You do as I command or I’ll have you thrown in the dungeon.”

“The dungeon?”

“And subject you to endless hours of torture. Now, relinquish your weapon!”

“What kind of torture?”

“Um, let me see. I’m afraid I’m a bit out of practice in the torture department. We’ll pipe Barry Manilow into the cell twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And, you’ll get only bread and water to eat, tap water and day-old bread from the market. But, not from a market that’s part of the UFCW strike, because we need to support those people—”

“Fine.” Jennifer rolled her eyes.

“Fine? Even the Manilow?” Mac asked, incredulous.

“Only if you include Copacabana, it’s my favorite.”

“Stubborn chit! I thought the threat of Manilow was positively diabolical.”

“No. I like Manilow.”

“There is something fundamentally wrong with—”

“Oh! Hey, Rachel, Tom.” Jennifer craned her neck and looked over Mac’s shoulder.

“What?” Mac released her wrists and turned his head toward the door. “Ompf!”

Within the space of a second she had turned the tables on him. As soon as he released her, Jennifer sprang up, pushed him over and pinned him to the ground.

“You cheated!”

“Whoo hoo! Go me! Go me!” she cheered bouncing up and down.

“You like being on top? I don’t mind a bit, truly I don’t. I can be comfortable with turning control over to a woman.”

She froze in place.

“I think you should let me up.”

“You admit I won fair and square, and then we can shower.”

Mac lifted his head to look over her shoulder. “Sorry, it seems the lady of the house has gone a bit daft. We should probably humor her.”

“Oh, right! Like I’m going to fall for that one, sheesh! Rachel and Tom are always late.”

“Not always!” Rachel stood in the doorway, wearing an amused expression.

“Rachel didn’t mention you two were together. Good to meet you, Mac. I’m Tom.”

“What? No!” Jennifer scrambled to her feet. “We are definitely not together. I mean, I know what this probably looks like. But it’s not. What does it look like? You know what? Never mind! Whatever it looks like it’s—”

Mac hopped up and placed his hand over her mouth. “Stop. Breathe. I call dibs on the shower. Okay?”

Jennifer nodded and he lowered his hand. “You’re probably wondering what we were doing,” she said.

Rachel shook her head. “No, it seemed pretty self-explanatory to me.”

“Nice to meet the two of you.” Mac extended his hand first to Tom, then to Rachel. “I’m going to go grab a quick shower.”

“Need me to do anything to get dinner started?” Jennifer asked.

“How about you clean the lettuce for the salad? I shouldn’t be more than ten or fifteen minutes. Then the bathroom is all yours, blonde.”

Mac sauntered off toward his room to gather a fresh set of clothes. Everyone else moved into the kitchen. Within seconds, he’d disappeared into the bathroom.

As soon as the water started running Rachel hopped up onto the barstool. “Oh my God! Spill!”

“There is *nothing* to spill. We’re roommates. Period. End of discussion.” Jennifer busied herself with washing her hands.

“Of course,” Rachel said.

Jennifer turned around just in time to catch her winking at Tom. “Honest! And it’s never going to be anything more. Besides, he’s annoying.”

“Annoying?” Tom asked.

“He doesn’t do dishes.”

“That’s the best you can come up with?” Rachel asked, crossing her arms in front of her.

“Yeah,” Jennifer admitted.

"When he came home last night, did the two of you talk?" Rachel pressed. "Did you decide to give this a chance?"

"No. No chance. I admitted I'm attracted to him—"

"Then I don't get it. What's the problem?" Tom asked.

Jennifer glanced toward the bathroom. "I... You see..."

Rachel covered Jennifer's hand with hers. "Tell us."

"My sister's moving into this apartment in just a few days. She's going to need my attention, my focus. More importantly she's going to need consistency and stability."

"So?"

"I don't want her to become attached, to think he's going to be here forever. He won't. Someday he'll move on. It's inevitable."

"Jennifer," Rachel said softly. "Maybe it would be different this time. Maybe he's the one."

They were startled when the bathroom door suddenly opened. "All right, shower's all yours." Mac emerged, barefoot, but wearing a fresh pair of jeans and a clean T-shirt. His hair was wet but combed. "Hey! You didn't even start on the lettuce." He walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out two heads of romaine.

"Sorry, we got a bit carried away with catching up. Here, I'll do it." Jennifer extended her hand.

"Nonsense." Mac lifted the lettuce out of reach. "Go get cleaned up. *I'll* finish the dinner and set the table. *You* can do the soddin' dishes. How's that for a deal?"

"What is it with you and dishes?" Jennifer asked, curiously.

"When I was a babe, my mum used to bathe me in the kitchen sink. One time I accidentally dislodged the stopper and the water all drained out. I thought I was going to get sucked down, too. It was terrifying, very traumatic," Mac said with a serious expression on his face.

"Lame. Completely lame. You can do better, Mac," she replied before heading for the bathroom. "Behave with my friends."

"I promise I'll work on making a good impression, put my best foot forward and all that rot. By the time you emerge from the bathroom, you won't even recognize me."

Jennifer turned around and frowned. Mac held one hand up in the air; the other was placed, earnestly, over his heart. His face was the picture of innocence.

"On second thought, maybe you should just be yourself."

Chapter Six

January 9, 2004

Mac rubbed his eyes as he walked out of the bathroom and headed back toward his bedroom. He hoped to catch a bit more sleep. It had been a long week, his first out of orientation and at the new job. And, of course, he and Jennifer had been crazy busy getting ready for Sara's arrival.

As he turned to once again close his bedroom door, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. There was a dark outline of a silhouette against the French doors in the living room. Mac stepped back out into the hallway. "Jennifer?" he quietly whispered.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

He walked over to her. "You didn't wake me, blondie. Is something wrong?"

"I can't sleep." She stood there, gazing out at the city.

"How long have you been up?"

"Hours. I'm scared about tomorrow, or I guess I should say today. The sun will be up soon."

"You should have woken me." Mac walked over and grabbed the chenille throw off of the sofa. "It's cold. Aren't you cold? Do you want me to turn the heat up?"

"I don't feel it. The truth is, I haven't felt anything in a long time. Sometimes I think I'm dead inside. Somehow, here in the dark, where you can't see me, where no one can see me, I can admit that."

"But I *can* see you." Mac placed one hand on her arm and gently turned her body until she faced him. He splayed his hand over her chest. "I can see what's in here."

The moonlight streamed in through the panes of the French doors and softly lit her face. She was wearing a long silk nightgown and he wondered, briefly, if it was a recent purchase. If she had given any thought to him when she'd slipped it on tonight. The straps were thin and it plunged low in the front. He couldn't tell what color it was, but he could see the sides of her breasts peeking through. As he removed his hand, his palm brushed across the hardened peak of one nipple.

"Do you like what you see?" Jennifer stepped closer and tilted her chin up in invitation.

"Don't tease. It's not nice, and it's dangerous," Mac warned her.

"Dangerous?"

"You're playing with fire."

"I'm not teasing. I need you," Jennifer whispered. "I want you."

Mac softly caressed the side of her face. "I want more. I want to hear you say it. You've got to know I won't be satisfied with doing this halfway."

She leaned into his hand, nuzzled his palm and closed her eyes. "Those three little words men long to hear?"

"Tell me you love me," Mac demanded, his voice rough with desire and emotion.

"I love you."

He slid his hand behind her head, entwining his fingers in her hair. As he moved closer to her, she parted her lips, and her tongue reached out to moisten them. He could smell the remnants of her toothpaste and the bitter scent of coffee...

"I'm Laura Kane for STAR 100.7 and that's the traffic report!" the voice on the radio said.

"Bloody hell!" Mac groaned as he rolled onto his side and turned off the radio alarm. The odor of fresh coffee wafting in through his slightly ajar bedroom door told him Jennifer was up. Unfortunately, he had to go to the bathroom *and* he was sporting a very noticeable erection. "Now what?"

"Mac?" She knocked twice, then pushed open the door.

He flipped over to face her. "Just waking up." He attempted to hide his erection with his arm.

"Coffee?" She held a cup out to him.

Mac looked at her outstretched hand. "I'm having, well, a bit of a dilemma," he confessed.

"Trying to cut down on caffeine?"

"Yeah."

"I can make you some decaf, or we can start making half-and-half," Jennifer suggested.

"It's not the caffeine," he admitted.

"It's not?"

"The truth is, I seem to have woken up with an erection. I was in the middle of this dream and, well, welcome to one of Mac's most embarrassing moments. Sorry."

Jennifer smiled at him, her expression instantly softening as she saw how vulnerable he was feeling.

"It's okay." She extended the cup toward him again. "I promise I'm not going to run out, virtue fluttering, scared off by the big mean penis."

Mac accepted the coffee from her and took a sip. "Thanks, and for the record, my penis objects to being called mean. The big part he'll happily accept."

Jennifer blushed. "I shouldn't have walked in here without permission. I'm sorry. I've been up for hours. I'm nervous about Sara coming today. When I heard your alarm go off, I..."

"You what?"

"I've been wanting to thank you for everything you've done. I'm not sure I even thanked you properly for the book and your note. It's hard for me, accepting things from people. I'm wary of the strings," Jennifer admitted.

“There are no strings. Anything I’ve done, I’ve done because I wanted to. There is no reason for you to feel indebted to me,” Mac assured her. “Now scoot and give me a minute, or ten. How about we walk down to The Gathering for breakfast? I could go for some of their eggs Benedict.”

“Sounds great.”

As she reached the door, Mac called out. “Jennifer?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t need permission to come in here. You have an open invite. What you do with it is completely up to you.”

She hesitated on the threshold. “What if I’m not sure what to do?”

“We could always try taking things slowly, figuring it out as we go, together.”

“Together?”

“Promise me you’ll think about it.”

“The dream. It was about me, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” he admitted.

“I’ve had them, too,” she confessed.

“So, you’ll think about it?”

Jennifer nodded. “I’ll think about it.” Then she walked out and closed the door.

“Sara, I’d like you to meet your big sister, Jennifer,” Bonnie said.

The young social worker who would be following their case was late and not at all what Jennifer had expected. She assumed Mac was focused on the beautiful Bonnie with her waist-long dark hair and her voluptuous breasts. The frail-looking creature who stood next to Bonnie was mesmerizing her. Sara was small for her age, both in height and apparent weight. She reminded Jennifer of a young colt, all arms and legs. Her hair was long, scraggly and hanging in front of her eyes like a protective shield.

“Come in,” she said, with forced cheerfulness. “I can show you your room if you want. Let me—” She stopped mid-sentence when Mac placed his hand firmly on her lower back.

Mac crouched down, then he reached up, grabbed Jennifer’s hand and gave it a gentle tug. She knelt on the floor beside him and watched as he lowered his head in search of Sara’s eyes.

“There you are.” He said it softly, a kind smile on his face. “I’m Mac. This beautiful gal here is Jennifer. We know you’ve been through a lot and I’m sure this is scary, but you’re going to be safe here with us.”

Sara didn’t say a word.

“We’re sorry about your mum, but we’re both happy you’re here,” he continued. “Aren’t we, Jennifer?”

“Yes.” Jennifer, taking his lead, reached up and took Sara’s hand in hers. “I’m so glad to have you here. I’m...sorry I didn’t know sooner.” Her eyes teared. “I’m sorry about a lot of things.”

Sara gazed down at their joined hands and blinked. For a moment she seemed almost confused. Then she gave Jennifer’s hand a slight squeeze. Relieved, Jennifer squeezed back.

“How about if Jennifer shows you to your room? You can explore all you want while Big Sis and I finish some business with Miss Bonnie?” Mac suggested.

Sara continued to stand there, essentially unresponsive. Mac gave Jennifer an encouraging nod and stood, then watched as Jennifer led Sara over to the small bedroom they had prepared for her.

Once they were gone, he turned toward Bonnie. “Has she said anything to you, anything at all?”

“Not a word. It made for a long, lonely drive.”

“Did the two of you have time to stop and eat?”

“You offering to buy me lunch?” Bonnie tossed her long dark hair over one shoulder.

“I was wondering if I should fix a sandwich for the kid, actually. I could make one for you too if you’re hungry.”

“Oh, I’m hungry, all right.” Bonnie stepped closer, placing her hand on his chest in a way that was overly intimate.

Mac could feel the scratch of her nails through the thin fabric of his T-shirt. His stomach muscles beneath contracted.

The effect it had on him didn’t go unnoticed. Bonnie smiled, coyly. “Would you happen to have something tasty for me to eat?”

“How about an apple?” Jennifer suggested, dryly.

Bonnie leaned up and whispered in his ear, “Do you think she would put poison in it?”

Mac couldn’t help but smirk. “Don’t you have work to do? Tots to protect?” he asked her.

“Yeah.” She sounded obviously disappointed. “I’m expected back at the office shortly. Walk me out?”

“Sure.” Mac opened the door and followed her out without a backward glance.

“I could probably squeeze in a quick nibble,” Bonnie said, just as the door closed. “But I’d much rather take my time over dinner.”

Jennifer was totally caught off guard by the intensity of her emotions as she struggled to fight down tears of frustration and jealousy.

Okay, what do you want to do? Briefly her mind flashed on the image of her opening the door, stomping down the hall, grabbing a handful of Bonnie’s hair and—

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a bang followed by the shattering of broken glass. Jennifer ran into Sara's room to find her cowering in a corner, trembling like a leaf. She quickly scanned the room and saw Sara had opened one of the windows. A pane at the top of it had shattered.

"Sara?"

The girl flinched.

Jennifer remembered how Mac had lowered himself to her level earlier and she quickly moved to the floor. "It's all right. We don't nail the windows down here. That's what you were checking for, isn't it?"

"Everything all right?" Mac asked from the doorway, a concerned look on his face.

"Could you get the dustpan and broom?"

"Sure thing." Mac disappeared only to return seconds later with a broom and dustpan.

Jennifer grabbed the broom. "Enjoy your *nibble* with silicone Barbie?"

Mac frowned. "Bonnie." He leaned down and extended his hand to Sara. Ever so slowly, she placed her small hand in his. "Are you hurt?" he asked, helping her to her feet.

Sara looked up at him, but said nothing.

"I'm not trying to make you talk, kiddo. You don't have to if you don't want to, but we're going to have to figure out some way of communicating the basics. A nod will do. Are you hurt?"

Sara looked at him, her eyes empty and listless. She shook her head.

Mac smiled. "No? Well, that's good. We'll just clean up this mess. Bonnie said the two of you stopped for an early lunch. Are you hungry?"

Again Sara shook her head.

"Mac? Can you hold the dustpan?" Jennifer asked.

"Sure thing." Mac knelt down and held the dustpan in place while Jennifer swept the glass into it. Then he walked over to the tiny trash can by the vanity Rachel and Tom had purchased as a gift and dumped the glass inside.

Jennifer's mind focused on the tinkling sound of the glass shards hitting the bottom of the trash can. Without warning, an unexpected memory came flooding back.

"Mom? Mommy? I have to go potty!" Jennifer shouted for the fifth time.

She was nine. Their tiny house was cold and dark. She had woken up in the middle of the night and had gone to use the bathroom in the hallway. Only the light was on and the door was shut.

Jennifer walked down to her parents' bedroom and saw that the bed was still made, not slept in. Then she remembered the fight, the yelling and the accusations. She walked back over to the bathroom door, turned the knob, and slowly pushed the door open. There was her mother's prone body on the floor, the shattered bathroom mirror, the glass scattered on the white tile, the blood, the blood, and the warm feel of her own urine as it trailed down her leg to form a puddle on the floor.

“Jennifer, are you all right?” Mac asked.

“Huh? Me? I’m fine!” She smiled at him.

“You looked a little pale all of a sudden.”

“You know what might be fun? How about we take Sara shopping! She can pick up a new outfit for her first day of school. Maybe we could even catch a movie. Would you like that, Sara?”

Sara nodded ever so slightly.

“Great!” she said enthusiastically. “Mac, you in?”

“Are you kidding? Of course.”

“We’ll be back in time for you to catch dinner.”

“I was thinking we could do something simple, like burgers on the grill here,” he said.

“You’re not going out with Barbie?”

Mac smiled. This time, he didn’t correct her. “No, blondie. I’d much rather cook burgers tonight for the two of you.”

Chapter Seven

Sara watched, wide-eyed, as her sister slowly shut her bedroom door. Her room was still fairly light since she had opted to leave her curtains and shades open. Her afternoon had been strange and she kept wondering if she were in a dream. Several times during the day she had slipped her hand inside of Jennifer's and squeezed it. It felt good to feel, to be touched.

She sat up in bed and strained to listen to the soft voices coming from the living room. She sat there for a minute or two, waiting for the inevitable yelling to start, but it didn't. She let another minute pass and realized she wasn't able to hear anything anymore. She cursed the almost deafening sound of the pounding of her own heart. Quietly, she climbed out of the bed and tiptoed over to the door to listen. As she walked around the side of her bed the soft heel of her foot came down on a stray shard of glass.

When the scream rang out, followed by the cries of pain, Mac had been in the bathroom. He had removed his T-shirt and was just leaning over to turn on the taps to the shower. In the space of a second or two, both he and Jennifer were in Sara's room. Mac, who arrived first, flicked on the light switch.

"What happened?" Jennifer ran around to the side of the bed where Sara and Mac were already crouched on the floor.

Sara cried out in agony. "It hurts! It hurts!" She was rocking back and forth, clutching her foot.

"Let me take a look," Mac said softly.

Sara looked up at him, her eyes still brimming with tears, her lower lip quivering.

Jennifer knelt beside her. "It's all right, Sara, let Mac look."

As soon as Sara removed her hands, Jennifer saw it. The jagged piece of glass, covered in blood, was sticking out of the heel of Sara's foot. Bile rose up in her throat. Suddenly numb, she wondered briefly why the light in the room was fading.

"Jennifer? Jennifer!" she heard Mac calling from a distance. But she was too far away. She couldn't answer him. Then there was nothing.

Jennifer opened her eyes. Mac was looming over her, concern evident on his face.

"You all right?"

She remembered. "Sara!" Jennifer shouted, alarmed.

"Sara will be fine and so will you," Mac said. There was a quiet knock on the door. Sara was standing in the doorway, one foot planted firmly on the ground, the second elevated so only her toes were touching.

“Jennifer’s good as new, kiddo. Come and see for yourself if you want.” Mac waved her in. “Don’t get any blood on my bed or Big Sis is likely to faint like a sissy again.”

Jennifer watched in amazement as a slight smile began to form on Sara’s mouth. She walked, hesitantly toward them, holding her tattered stuffed bear by one arm, so it dragged on the floor.

“She spoke.” Jennifer rose up onto her elbows.

“Yelled, actually,” Mac said.

“She was cut—”

Mac nodded his head in Sara’s direction and Jennifer began again. “You were cut, I remember. I’m sorry, Sara. I should have done a better job sweeping up. I’m really sorry about that, and about the fainting too. I’ve...never been good around blood.”

Sara clutched the bear to her chest.

“Are you all right? Did Mac take care of you?” Jennifer asked.

Sara nodded.

Mac reached out and ruffled the girl’s hair. “She’s fine, aren’t you, kiddo?”

“No thanks to me.” Jennifer fought to hold back tears. “What good was I? I’m supposed to be able to take care of her. She needs me and what do I do? I pass out cold! I’m as useless as my mother!”

“You’re not useless and you’re not your mother,” Mac said firmly. “Is she, Sara?”

Sara stepped closer to the bed.

“Climb on up if you want.” Mac patted the space on the other side of Jennifer. “I’ve long dreamt about sharing my bed with two beautiful ladies.”

“Mac!”

“What?” he asked innocently as he lifted Sara up into the air, settling her down between him and Jennifer.

“Are you okay?” Jennifer asked, looking at Sara.

“Yeah.” Sara picked up a strand of Jennifer’s long hair. “You?”

“Yeah.” Jennifer wrapped her arm around her sister. “I just feel stupid. Like I can’t do anything right.”

Sara leaned into her embrace and inhaled deeply. “I feel like that a lot.”

“But you’re a kid.” Jennifer smoothed the child’s hair. “You’re not supposed to know how to do stuff.”

Sara released a yawn. “You smell good.” She closed her eyes and in a hushed voice asked, “Jennifer? Is this real?”

Jennifer’s eyes filled with tears. “Yes, Sara.” She placed a kiss on her sister’s forehead. “This is real.”

Within a few minutes, Sara was fast asleep.

“How about you two stay put for a few?” Mac asked. “I’ll go shower and then I’ll carry the kid back to her room.”

“Thanks.”

Mac slid from the bed and headed for the door.

“Mac?”

“Yeah?”

“How did I end up in your bed?” Jennifer asked.

“Well, I had to put you somewhere. If I had just left you to lie there on the floor, we probably would have eventually tripped over you,” he replied with a wink. “I’ll be back in a few. Enjoy this time with her. She’s feeling scared and vulnerable. By tomorrow though, we could easily be back to square one.”

Jennifer nodded her understanding and rolled onto her side, protectively curving her body around the tiny girl who was now hers to care for. She looked down at her face and for a second saw herself. She’d anticipated how challenging the actual tasks of caregiving would be. What she wasn’t prepared for were the emotions, the memories. Not to mention the stark realizations about her own parents’ shortcomings and how they had so ill prepared her. She had spent years cultivating an image of self-assuredness and competence. Memories. Feelings. Those things had become uncharted territory for her. For years she had been consumed with making plans, positioning herself. It had always been about the next step. She closed her eyes, released a breath and tried to focus on the moment.

“Is she asleep?” Mac asked, quietly.

Jennifer’s eyes drifted lazily open. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, next to her, now wearing a pair of black sweatpants.

“I think so. I was just...”

“Savoring the moment?”

Jennifer smiled down at her sister. “Something like that.”

Mac slipped his arms under Sara’s body and scooped her up with ease. “Don’t move.”

“Mac, I—”

“No buts. Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” He headed out the door cradling Sara in his arms.

Jennifer sat up and swung her feet onto the floor, positioning herself to stand.

Mac paused and turned around “Did you not hear the ‘don’t move’ part? I believe I repeated it twice.”

She froze. “I heard you.”

“Good. Do me a favor.” He nodded in the direction of the candle on his bedside table. “Light the candle over there.”

The soft click of Mac’s bedroom door startled Jennifer. She was nervous, too nervous to turn around and face him. Mere seconds had passed since she’d lit the gold candle on Mac’s nightstand. The ginger and lemongrass scent had already permeated the air. The heady aroma, in other circumstances, would have been

calming. But candles meant romance. Mac had expectations, expectations she wouldn't be able to fulfill. Not now, maybe not ever.

"You moved," he said softly as he approached her from behind.

"Only to light the candle."

He stepped closer to her.

Jennifer held her breath.

Mac reached out, gathered up her long blonde hair and swept it forward over her shoulder. "I have this fantasy."

She swallowed. "Yeah?"

He leaned down and whispered. "It begins with you in my bed surrounded by the soft glow of candlelight."

"Mac, I can't. I'm not...attainable."

"Attainable? I don't like that word. I wouldn't want to think of myself as attainable either. We're not bloody prizes or possessions." He dragged his index finger down the long column of her neck. It made her shiver. "You aren't a goal I've set, something for me to conquer, an achievement to boast about."

Jennifer turned around and faced him. He was still shirtless and her breath quickened as she gazed upon his beautifully sculpted chest. He was strong, athletic and confident. She searched his eyes. They were dark with passion, a passion that was raw and real. It called to her.

She placed her hand on his chest, over his heart. "I'm not sure I can give you what you deserve out of a relationship." She could feel his heart beat. "In fact, I'm almost positive I can't."

Mac wasn't deterred, he snaked one arm around her waist. "Can't or won't?"

"I'm not sure I'm capable."

"Of?"

"Connecting. *Really* connecting."

"How could you possibly think that?" Mac pulled her closer and nuzzled her neck. "You're capable. I felt it the night I first held you in my arms. I haven't been able to get it out of my mind since. The way your body molded to mine." He kissed her behind her ear. It was a soft, open mouth kiss.

Jennifer moaned and arched into him. She lifted and turned her head, slightly, offering more of her neck. "I need..."

"Yes, love, tell me what you need." Mac moved his hand up the length of her torso and cupped her breast.

Her breath hitched. "I need for you to stop for a minute."

"Stop?" His voice cracked.

"I can't think with you touching me."

"Thinking is overrated." Mac leaned in for another kiss.

Jennifer held up her hand. “Are you saying you don’t want to possess me?”

His forehead wrinkled in confusion. “Possess you? Of course not. Cross my heart, my sexual fantasies are all pretty vanilla. I’m not in the market for a sex slave. I want an equal and very willing partner.”

“You don’t want to make me yours and only yours? Have me share my bed with only you?”

“Right now, I honestly just want to get closer to you. Take things to the next level.”

“We both know what that means. Sex.”

Mac stepped back, his expression hurt. “I’m not just talking about sex here. I think you know I’m not and... Is the thought of that possibility so horrid? I don’t know where this will lead, but I want to find out. Don’t you?”

“I already know where this is going to lead.”

“Bollocks. You don’t have a soddin’ clue. And, for the record, being in a monogamous, committed relationship with someone and possessing them isn’t the same thing.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, the difference is... It’s just *different*. What is this really about?”

“This is about the inevitable. I’m attracted to you, very attracted to you. This is my fault, I’m probably...”

“What?”

“Giving off the wrong signals.”

“Your signals tell me you want me, maybe as much as I want you. Although frankly, that’s hard for me to imagine. Am I wrong?” He reached out and caressed the side of her face. “This feels awfully right, awfully real. Don’t back away from what’s true.”

“If I don’t, you’ll only end up hurt and disappointed.”

“You won’t even try?”

“I’ve tried. It didn’t work.”

“One failed relationship and you’re willing to throw in the towel?” Mac climbed onto the bed and leaned back, resting comfortably on his elbows. “You’ve got to tell me why?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yeah, you do. We’re friends, first and foremost. As your friend, I deserve an explanation.”

Jennifer frowned. “Could you put a shirt on for the rest of this conversation?”

Mac looked down at his six-pack abs and smiled. “No. But I wouldn’t mind if you evened the score and took off your nightgown.”

Jennifer realized that was all she was wearing. Her nipples were hard and peaked and embarrassingly visible through the sheer silk fabric. She blushed. “I need to get a robe.”

“You don’t need to run away and you don’t need a robe.”

Jennifer glanced toward the door.

Mac sighed dramatically. "I'm not going to ravage you."

"Ravage me? Have you been reading those bodice rippers again?"

"Ha-ha. Come on, out with it. Let me hear the details."

"Details?"

"Your dating and sexual history. I want to understand what I'm getting into here."

"You're not getting into anything."

He patted the space on the bed beside him.

Jennifer shook her head. "I *so* don't remember agreeing to anything."

"You will. It's only a matter of time. I'm irresistible."

"I think you mean irrepressible."

"That too."

"You know?" Jennifer feigned a yawn. "I'm not sure I'm up to this tonight. I think I'm going to turn in." Her gaze returned to the door.

Mac stood and began to pull down the covers. "You win. No sex. No talking. No pressure. Stay."

"What?"

"Stay here with me."

"You mean sleep with you in your bed?"

"I want to be close to you."

Jennifer shook her head. "Not a good idea. You know it isn't."

Mac grinned widely "You don't trust yourself. See, I told you, irresistible."

She couldn't help but smile at his confidence. "You're a hard man to say no to."

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her flush against him. The evidence of his arousal was pressing against her. "I'm hard, I'll give you that. You seem to have that affect on me. But I also know how to control myself."

"Even that dark side?"

"The idea that I might lose control scares you."

"It thrills me and that scares me. I made a mistake once. I can't afford to make that kind of mistake again. I'm not sure I could survive it." Jennifer stared into his deep blue eyes. "Goodnight, Mac."

"Goodnight."

She pulled herself from his embrace and headed for the door. As she placed her hand on the doorknob, he softly said, "This wouldn't be a mistake. Give this a chance."

"I've given myself to someone before. Completely. It wasn't enough. Not enough to keep him."

"I'm not him. I'm me."

"What I have to offer will never be enough, not for anyone. I'm...empty inside."

“You’re not empty. I’ve seen glimpses of the girl inside. You’re more than window dressing.” He was standing right behind her now. “You’re just closed off from trying to protect yourself.”

Jennifer turned back around and leaned against the door. “Protect myself from what?”

“From having to face your demons, whatever they may be. Because if you do, really do, you have to admit it could *all* change. And that’s terrifying beyond belief.”

Her mouth was suddenly dry. She licked her lips.

Mac placed a hand on either side of her head and leaned in, until his forehead touched hers. “You don’t have to be afraid,” he whispered. Seconds ticked away. He slowly lowered his hands until they rested comfortably on her waist. Their breathing became synchronized.

She closed her eyes and felt him, drinking in his scent, allowing the tenderness of the moment to surround her. She let go, if only for a moment, relinquishing control. She permitted him to lead. The pace of his inhalations became deeper, more impassioned. A soft moan escaped her lips. Her resolve was crumbling. She placed her hand, hesitantly, on his forearm.

Mac kissed her on the forehead, then pulled back. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight?”

“Go off to your room and go to sleep, like a good girl. You don’t want me turning into the big bad wolf.”

“Would you eat me?” Jennifer looked up at him, her voice carrying a tone of feigned innocence.

Mac placed his hands on the door above her head, pinning her in. “You know? That was plain mean. I’m never going to sleep now. I’ll be up all night with visions of... You have an evil streak, Jennifer Jones!”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” He opened the door and stepped back. “And I swear, if you offer to let me spank you for punishment I’m going to totally lose it.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what possessed me.”

“Maybe unresolved sexual tension so thick I can taste it from the next room?”

“Yeah. Goodnight, Mac.” She left, closing the door quietly behind her.

“One, two, three...fuck it.” Mac yanked the door open. She was halfway down the hall. In two strides he was on her. He grabbed hold of her hand, yanked her toward him and backed her up against the wall, one hand around her waist, the other around her neck.

“Mac—”

He crushed his lips to hers in a breath-stealing kiss. He didn’t try to hide his arousal. He didn’t try to hold back. He was tired of holding back. He wanted to let go. He wanted her to let go.

Jennifer’s hands flew up and tangled in his hair.

Mac needed her to know what she did to him, how she affected him, to feel the power she had over him. He tilted his pelvis so his erection pressed against her soft stomach. It made her gasp. He took immediate advantage, boldly slipping his tongue inside, letting it curl around hers. She was delicious. Her mouth was warm, wet, and oh-so-amazingly-sweet.

As soon as he tasted her, he knew she had been right. He wanted her, all of her. There was no hesitancy, no doubt, no denial. It was about a need that was almost primal. He thought of himself as civilized and sensitive. But here he was, wanting to mark, possess, consume her. No. Holds. Barred. He pulled back abruptly.

Her hair was mussed. Her eyes were wide. Whether from arousal, fear or a combination of both, he didn't know. In the dim light of the hallway, he could see her lips were red and full from his assault.

"You're right," Mac admitted, turning away from her.

Still panting she reached out to touch him. "About?"

He drew back. "I want to make you mine."

Sadness filled her eyes.

He couldn't help himself. His hand lifted and caressed her cheek. "If I were to be perfectly honest I would tell you I've thought of little else since I saw you in that elevator."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm probably no different than any other wanker you've ever dated, or slept with." He took a fortifying breath before saying what needed to be said. "If you want me to move out, I will."

"If I let you stay, are you going to attack me in the hallway again?"

He stepped back, breaking all contact.

"Mac?"

He looked her in the eye. "You didn't push me away. You kissed me back. I wouldn't have forced—"

Jennifer held up her hand. "I know. Now, it's my turn to be honest. I needed that kiss. I wanted it, as much as you did. What I'm asking is, if you continue to live here, will it happen again?"

"I don't want to lie to you. Maybe. Probably. Not tonight, not tomorrow, but eventually. My kissing you again is a likely scenario."

"You can stay." She continued down the hall, into her room "And, Mac?" She'd paused before closing the door.

"Yeah?"

"You *are* different."

"Goodnight, Jennifer."

"Goodnight."

Chapter Eight

Sara woke. In those few seconds between consciousness and sleep an intense fear set in. Fear that it was all just a dream. She sat up in bed and slowly opened her eyes, first one and then the other. The morning sun streamed in through the window. Tiny particles of dust floated in the air. She climbed out of bed and walked over to finger the delicate fabric of the white lace curtains, establishing they were real. Then she turned and surveyed the room, her room, running her hand along the cheerful yellow wall until she reached the corner where her vanity stood.

A blue and yellow striped skirt had been placed around it. She sat on the matching tufted stool and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Sara picked up her hairbrush and ran it through her hair. Satisfied, she dressed quickly then turned her attention to making the bed. Expertly, she pulled up the light blue sheets and smoothed out the blue and yellow striped comforter. As she was meticulously positioning the white lace throw pillows onto the bed she heard a knock at her door.

“Morning, kiddo.”

She opened it. Mac was there.

“How did you sleep? How’s the foot?”

Sara’s eyes were drawn to an uninteresting spot on the floor.

“Ah. Not feeling chatty this morning? Well, I didn’t sleep so well myself, I’ve been up a while, but Jennifer’s still asleep. I was about to make some French toast. Unless you’d rather have oatmeal?”

She slowly raised her eyes to look at him.

“I’ve got an idea!” He clapped his hands together with enthusiasm. “How about you burp once if you want French toast, twice if you want oatmeal?”

Sara couldn’t help herself, a giggle bubbled out of her.

Mac extended his hand and she took it. “French toast it is. Come on, you can be my assistant. We’re going to start working on cooking lessons now. Your sister’s a horrid cook. I say we break you in early.”

Mac led her into the kitchen and lifted her onto the counter. “This is really easy. We’ll start with butter, the real stuff.” Mac dropped a hunk into the frying pan and lit the flame. He gathered some eggs from the fridge, then quickly scrambled them in a bowl.

“You do the dunking.” He handed her a slice of bread, before demonstrating with a second. “Like so.”

The two of them worked side by side in comfortable silence for several minutes. When the French toast was finished Mac dished it up and carried the plates to the table. He returned to the kitchen, lifted Sara

off the counter, and handed her the napkins and cutlery. “Go finish setting the table. I’ll bring you a glass of milk.”

Sara followed his instructions without protest, carefully setting a fork, knife and napkin by each plate, before taking her seat.

Mac joined her. “Eat up!” He nodded at her plate and poured out a generous amount of syrup for himself.

Sara sat there, motionless.

Mac was about to take his first bite when he noticed. “I wasn’t making fun of you earlier, about not talking. The truth is I’m absolutely sure you have a *really* good reason for it. I’d like to understand, kiddo, I truly would.”

Using his own knife and fork, he cut her breakfast into little pieces, which he doused with syrup. “You’ll find I’m a pretty good listener. When you’re ready to talk, that is” He speared two of the sticky squares with her fork and lifted it to her mouth. “Come on, have a taste. It’s horrible for you, mostly sugar and carbohydrates. Well, there is some nutritional value. I did buy whole-grain bread and there’s protein in the eggs, right?”

Sara opened up and accepted the bite. She chewed for a moment, closing her eyes to savor the taste.

“You’ve never had French toast before?” Mac offered her the fork.

Sara snatched it from his grasp, then quickly filled her mouth with another bite.

“Slow down. You’re going to choke if you keep shoveling it in.”

She paused and looked up at him, her cheeks puffed out like a little chipmunk’s.

Mac tried not to laugh.

Sara sat her fork down and then, with great effort, she swallowed. The momentary silence was interrupted by the sound of the intercom buzzer.

“Excuse me.” Mac stood and answered the intercom. “Hello?”

“Mac? I know I’m a bit early, are you ready?”

“Not quite, I’ll buzz you in, come on up.” He looked at Sara. “Finish your breakfast. I’m going to be leaving shortly.” Mac walked back over to the table and reclaimed his chair. “I’ll only be gone for a bit. I have a fencing date with a mate. What would you think about a picnic at the beach this afternoon? Think you and Jennifer would like that?”

She nodded.

“It’s a date!” He picked up his plate and was on his way to the sink, when someone knocked at the door. Mac made a quick detour to open it. “Come on in, Rick. I’ll wake Jennifer and get my gear. This is Sara by the way. Sara, this is Rick.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sara,” Rick said.

Sara looked down and said nothing.

Mac dropped off the dish before returning to her side. "It's all right if you don't want to talk," he whispered, quietly. "But it would be nice if you could at least shake his hand. What do you think?"

Sara extended her hand and Rick accepted.

"Help yourself to some coffee. I won't be but a minute." He ruffled Sara's hair. "Time to go wake up Sleeping Beauty."

Mac knocked lightly on Jennifer's door then waited a moment. When there was no response, he quietly entered. The room was softly lit. Jennifer was lying on her side on the far edge of the bed, her hair splayed out across her pillow, the sheet down around her waist. Her golden, sun-kissed skin in the glow of morning was radiant. Her expression was serene, peaceful.

Mac crouched down and studied her for a moment. She looked different in sleep. More open, less guarded. He crawled onto the bed, stretching out beside her, head on the pillow alongside hers. "Jennifer? Wake up, Sleeping Beauty."

She rolled onto her back and stretched like a cat, lifting her arms over her head and extending her legs. Her eyes slowly fluttered open.

"Damn. I was really hoping I was going to have to wake you with a kiss, you know, like Prince Charming."

Jennifer rolled back to face him and smiled. "I think Prince Charming was in *Cinderella*, not *Sleeping Beauty*."

"You sure? He might have dated both of them. I heard he was a real player, that one."

"I'm pretty sure Beauty ended up living happily-ever-after with Prince Phillip."

"Wasn't that after she dumped that Charming fellow?"

"It's been a while since I've read the story."

Mac reached up and smoothed down her hair. "You believe it's possible, a happily-ever-after?"

"Absolutely. In fairy tales and Disney films."

"Oh, how I love the smell of pessimism in the morning." Mac placed his hand over his heart. "It gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling right here."

"That's probably heartburn. Living with me is giving you an ulcer."

Mac sat up. "Anyone ever tell you, you can be a real downer?"

She tiredly rubbed her eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't sleep well. What time is it?"

"Eight thirty." He hopped up. "I've given Sara breakfast. I've got to go. I have a fencing date—"

Jennifer leaned up on one elbow. "You're going to help someone build a fence?"

"No. Fencing as in *en garde*."

"Like a Musketeer?"

"More like Jean Luc Picard."

“What’s the difference?”

“Picard is cool. He’s a starship captain and wears a traditional mask. The Musketeers wear foppish hats with feathers in them.”

“Foppish? Is that even a word.”

Mac smiled. “Yes. It means silly.”

“Great. Another roommate who’ll always beat me at scrabble.”

“If it’s any consolation, I suck at poker.”

“You do kind of wear your heart on your sleeve.”

Mac lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck. “Yeah, well. I’ve got to run. Rick’s waiting. He’s taking me down to his club so I can check it out and embarrass him a bit.”

Jennifer tossed back the covers and climbed out of bed. “You’re so confident.” She slipped on her robe.

“Not about everything. Don’t let me fool you. There are plenty of things I find plain terrifying.”

“Like what? And, don’t say dishes.”

“As much as I’d love to spend a lazy morning in bed with you having a heart-to-heart...”

“I know, Rick’s waiting.”

“How about you pick me up around noon at the club? We can grab some sandwiches and go down to the beach for the afternoon.

“Sounds great!”

“I’ll leave the address on the kitchen table.” He opened the door. “I’m going to loan Sara some art supplies and ask her to draw something for me. Can you bring them, whatever she works on and a blanket as well?”

“Anything else?”

“Just you. And the kid of course.”

“We’re a package deal now.”

“That I know. I’ll see you at noon. We can finish the heart-to-heart tonight.”

“Sorry, I’ve got a date tonight. I promised Sara a night of *The Princess Bride* and pizza. You’re welcome to join in. I hear there’s sword fighting, adventure and romance.”

Mac leaned against the doorframe. “Is it a kissing movie?”

“There might be some kissing, in the movie. Are you in?”

“As you wish,” he said, bowing gallantly. “Until tonight.”

It was a few minutes before noon when Sara and Jennifer made their way up the long, narrow staircase leading to the fencing academy. The stairs and the walls were covered in a light gray marble. At the top of the landing was a large, heavy door made of solid wood. It stood slightly ajar. Jennifer pushed it

open and entered the reception area. There was an old desk to the immediate left, which was for the moment unoccupied. Behind it was a rack with masks, foils and jackets. To her right stood an archway. Drifting through it was the sound of metal striking against metal, the occasional buzzing noise, and one very recognizable, “Bollocks!”

Jennifer took Sara’s hand and led her into the vast room. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the brightly colored flags with coats of arms hanging from the ceiling. The floor was wooden and highly polished. The walls, a dull gray cinderblock, were generously adorned with various swords and shields. If it hadn’t been for all the modern equipment, she might have felt like she’d stepped back in time.

Several of the fencers were standing on the sidelines, watching as two men continued their bout. Even with a mask on, Jennifer recognized Mac as one of them. He’d taken a hit as she’d entered, but he’d recovered quickly and was already back in position.

“That one was on target,” the young man standing off to the side said. “Four—One. Ready? Fence.”

Mac was standing sideways, his left foot facing his opponent, his right foot straight out, and his knees bent. He held the foil in his outstretched, gloved left hand. His right arm was held behind him, out of the way and at a ninety-degree angle. He was wearing what she knew was the traditional white pants and jacket. Only the jacket was covered with a silver vest that seemed to somehow be connected to a scoring machine.

“Who’s winning?” Jennifer whispered, quietly, to one of the bystanders.

“New guy, Mac. That’s the first valid touch anyone’s been able to get all morning. He’s amazing.”

Mac lunged forward, attacking his opponent with lightning speed.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“He’s kicking Rick’s ass.” The man grinned.

Rick, however, appeared to have effectively blocked Mac’s attack.

“Retreat,” the man murmured.

Rick stepped back, once, twice. Mac followed, closing in.

“Parry, repost, parry, lunge.”

The sequence replayed. Jennifer couldn’t keep up. Both men’s movements became a blur. Mac was incredible. His agility, coordination and balance allowed him to block attack after attack. His timing was flawless. He patiently waited for just the right moment, and it came. He moved in aggressively.

“You thinking about joining?”

“Nah. We’re just here to pick up Mr. Amazing.”

In the blink of an eye it was over.

“Beat attack. Well done!” the guy called out.

Rick was the first to remove his mask. His face was dripping with sweat. “Well, at least I got a touch in this time.” He wiped his brow.

Mac pulled off his own mask. His hair was wet from perspiration. "Your last feint threw me. Won't happen again. What time is it, anyways?"

"Time to go. Besides, it looks like your ride's here." Rick nodded in Jennifer's direction.

When Mac turned around, she gave him a little wave.

His heart was still pounding. He was practically bouncing on his toes from the workout. The adrenalin coursing through his body was giving him a giddy, almost intoxicating feeling.

"Did you catch any of my last bout?" he asked as he approached.

"You won!"

Mac wrapped his arm around her waist, and dipped her backward, like he had that first time. "Yes, I did." He smiled, broadly. "I always win."

"There's that confidence. You're dripping sweat on me, and people are staring."

"Let them, they're jealous. To the victor go the spoils." Mac kissed her softly on the lips. It was slow and sensuous and left him wanting more.

"I'm spoils now?" she asked as he stood her back up.

"Nah!" Mac waved his hand. "I just felt like kissing someone. You happen to be the prettiest one in the room at the moment. But, give the kid a few more years and she's going to be giving you a run for your money."

Mac stepped back and looked appraisingly at them. "You both got your hair done."

"I had an appointment at Jean-Claude's. It was time for a trim. While I was there, I asked him to cut Sara's hair, too. It looks much healthier now, don't you think?" Jennifer ran her fingers through her sister's freshly shampooed hair.

Mac looked down at Sara. Her bangs were now pulled back with a clip and he could clearly see her eyes. "Beautiful."

Sara beamed.

"Nice to see you again, Sara. I'm Rick, by the way." He offered his hand to Jennifer.

"Jennifer," she said, returning his handshake.

"Listen, Mac, I've got to run. I'm on a mission to find a sitter for tonight. It's our anniversary and the gal we had lined up canceled this morning. She's come down with the flu. Same time next Saturday?"

"You're on," Mac agreed. "Hey, we're just doing pizza and a movie at home. We can watch the little tyke."

"You serious?" Rick asked.

"Of course, I've been listening to Ava talk about this anniversary celebration all bloody week. I'd hate for you to have to cancel."

"It'll only be for a few hours. How about I drop Owen off on our way to the restaurant? Is around seven all right?"

"Seven it is," Mac said. "See you then."

"See you then." Rick gave him a hardy pat on the back, then picked up his bag and disappeared out the door.

"Sorry, I probably should have checked with you first," Mac said.

Jennifer shrugged. "It's not like we had a date. We're not dating. It's just pizza and a movie."

Mac wiped the sweat from his brow. "Yup. I definitely should have checked with you. Want me to call and cancel?"

"Don't be silly. It's just..."

"What?"

Jennifer lowered her voice. "I don't know anything about babies. I mean nothing, nada, zip, zilch."

"I get the picture. How about this?" Mac reached for her hand. "I promise to take care of Owen, you take care of me?" He laced his fingers through hers. "What do you say?"

"I don't know, you seem pretty high maintenance."

"High maintenance," Mac scoffed. "I need to take a quick shower. I won't be but a few minutes. You'll wait?"

"Of course we'll wait."

Chapter Nine

“Now, admit it, using the pallet for a fire was a good idea.”

Jennifer and Mac were settled comfortably on a blanket at the beach. They’d been there for a few hours already. The sun was now low in the sky and there was a chill in the air. But the fire Mac had built in the pit was blazing and keeping them plenty warm.

“It was a good idea,” Jennifer acknowledged.

Mac had spied the pallet in the parking lot of the deli where they’d stopped to buy sandwiches and insisted on commandeering it.

“Told you.” He gave her a nudge with his shoulder.

Jennifer pulled a marshmallow out of the bag that sat between them and popped it on the end of the stick he held in his hand. “The meatball sandwich, however? That was a bad idea, a very bad idea. I can hardly move.”

“You have room for one more marshmallow though, right?”

“You swear roasting them takes the calories out?”

“Oh yeah!”

Jennifer groaned as she shifted to lie down on the blanket. “This is the last one, anymore and you’ll have to carry me back to the car.”

The soft sounds of a child’s laugh drifted back to them. Jennifer leaned up on her elbows and followed Mac’s gaze. The two of them sat in silence for a few minutes and watched as Sara chased the seagulls on the beach. She would stealthily approach first one unsuspecting bird and then another.

Mac grasped Jennifer’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “See that smile?”

“It’s only been a day and already I feel like I’ve made a difference. Not a big difference, but a difference.”

“She’s got a long way to go,” Mac said. “But you have to celebrate every incremental gain. It’s all good, Jennifer.”

The marshmallow caught fire. He blew out the flame then carefully slid the confection off the end of the stick. “Made to order, black and crispy on the outside, white and gooey on the inside. You have very discerning taste.”

Instead of taking it from him, this time, Jennifer opened her mouth. Mac shifted closer to her and she stretched up, blowing gently on the sweet before wrapping her lips around the top half of the dark outer layer and pulling it off, leaving much of the sticky center behind.

“Hey, you’re leaving behind the best part!” Mac popped the remainder into his own mouth and then sucked greedily on his thumb and forefinger. “Did you bring the picture?”

“Yeah.” She reached for his wooden art-supply box. “What is it you asked her to draw?” Jennifer opened the case, pulled out a piece of paper, and handed it to him.

“A picture of her family.” As Mac studied the sketch, his brow creased. “She didn’t use any color.”

“Did you ask her to?”

“She had all the colors in the box at her disposal. She chose not to. Look how empty it is, how little detail.”

Jennifer shifted so she could see more clearly.

“And this is interesting.” Mac pointed at the two, obviously adult, figures. “No ears.”

“Maybe she forgot them?”

Mac shook his head. “It’s significant. I’m certain of it. Maybe she feels unheard.”

“You think that’s why she doesn’t talk.”

“We’ve assumed she stopped talking when your mother died, it could go back farther. Let’s call her old school on Monday, and see if we can find out anything. She has ears on herself. And look, see how they’re disproportionate, almost too big?”

“Yeah.” Jennifer examined the drawing more closely. “Check out the size of Cliff’s mouth.”

“He was a yeller?”

“As far as I know,” Jennifer said. “I wasn’t really around him very long.”

Mac set the drawing aside. “Why did you leave?”

“Why did I leave?” she repeated.

“Tell me.”

“I guess I left because...because she chose him over me.”

“It was that simple?”

Jennifer shook her head. “It was far from simple. From the minute Cliff moved in, he wanted to control everything.”

“Including you?”

“Including me.”

“And you didn’t like that.”

“I’d been taking care of myself for a long time, doing my own wash, getting groceries, keeping up with schoolwork. Hell, I was taking care of myself *and* Mom.”

“You didn’t need some stranger telling you what to do.”

“Or who I could date. Or...so I thought at the time. This guy, an older guy, had asked me out and I’d accepted. Only when I was getting ready to go, Cliff said I couldn’t. We argued and he sent me to my room.”

“But you went anyways?”

“Yes,” Jennifer admitted. “Come early morning I tried to climb back in through my bedroom window. I couldn’t. He had nailed all the windows shut. I used my key and entered through the front door. The house was dark. I went back to my room in time to hear my morning alarm going off for school. He was waiting for me. He had searched the entire place, went through all my things. He was sitting there, reading my diary and...and he was laughing. He was laughing at all my hopes, my dreams.”

“Your innermost thoughts,” Mac added.

Jennifer swallowed. “I tried to snatch it from him. He held it out of reach, taunting me. As I jumped for it I inadvertently scratched him. He backhanded me. I fell, crashing into the nightstand and breaking the table lamp. The noise, coupled with the yelling, was enough to break through Mom’s latest stupor. I remember being so glad to see her, standing there in the doorway of my room.”

“You thought she would protect you, take your side.”

“It’s what a good mother would do, right?”

“Only she wasn’t a good mother. She didn’t protect you.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“You’re so rebellious. Apologize to Cliff.”

“You want me to apologize to him?”

Her mother wearily rubbed her temples. “It’s because you haven’t had a strong father figure, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but I don’t have time for this. I’ve got to get to school.”

“That school is just putting ideas into your head.”

“She thinks she’s going to college,” Cliff interjected.

Her mother looked up, surprised. “College?”

“She thinks she’s smart enough to get a scholarship,” he chuckled.

“It’s worth a try,” Jennifer said, her voice barely a whisper.

Cliff removed his handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the scratch on his cheek. “You’re grounded.”

“I’ll come home right after school.”

He shook his head. “You’re not going to school.”

“Mom, I have three tests today. My grades, they’re important,” Jennifer pleaded.

“I am not letting you out of this house,” Cliff declared.

"You can't stop me from going to school," Jennifer shouted, tearfully. She started to stuff her books into her backpack.

"You walk out of this house, don't even think about coming back!" her mother shouted.

Mac brushed a tear from her cheek. "You realize she probably didn't mean it."

"Doesn't matter now. I believed she meant it at the time. I never went back. I...I couldn't."

"There's that stubbornness. Where on earth did you stay?"

"In a garden shed, in back of the school."

"You're serious?"

"Yes. The guy I was seeing, Joe, his father was in charge of the grounds at the high school. Joe worked there too. He let me stay in one of the storage sheds."

Mac reached for his sketchpad and a pencil. "So, Joe turned out to be a nice guy?"

Jennifer laughed, bitterly. "Hardly."

"What happened between you?"

"It got bad, really bad." She wiped away the remaining tears. "Frankly, that's a story for another day."

"Okay."

"Your turn, tell me about something you find absolutely terrifying."

"Mimes."

"You're afraid of mimes?"

"Uh-huh." Mac continued to sketch.

"Why?"

"I have no idea. But they've always..."

"Creeped you out?"

"Yeah."

"You're a weird guy, Mac."

"We've all got issues."

"We don't all have mime issues. Seriously, mimes?"

He just nodded.

"How do you feel about charades?"

"Never played."

"What about Kabuki? Maybe it's the makeup."

"I don't think so. But you've got that great red silk robe. You could dress up like a Geisha after Sara's tucked in tonight and we can test the theory."

"What are you drawing there?" Jennifer peered over his shoulder.

Mac lowered the sketchpad and blocked her view. "Nothing yet, it's really rough."

She climbed onto her knees. "Come on, show me," she coaxed, dragging a finger up and down the side of his neck.

"Are you coming on to me?"

"No!"

"You sure? 'Cause this feels a bit like flirting."

"You wouldn't know flirting if it bit you in the ass."

"Are you kidding? Women flirt with me all the time."

"Yeah, well this isn't flirting."

"What is it?"

"Merely a distracting enticement meant to cloud your mind so you forget you're not wanting to show me the picture." Jennifer continued to drag her finger up and down the side of his neck. "Is it working?"

He looked out across the sand again at Sara and the seagulls. "Do it with your tongue and we have a deal."

When Mac returned his attention to his sketchpad he felt it. The tip of her tongue as she slowly dragged it from the base of the side of his neck all the way up to behind his ear. The ocean breeze quickly cooled the trail of warm moisture she left behind, causing him to shiver. Or perhaps he had started to shiver as soon as he realized her mouth was on him, tasting him.

"Was that a cold shiver?" she whispered in his ear.

"One thing I can guarantee you." He twisted around and looked her in the eye. "Your touch will never leave me cold."

Jennifer blushed.

He tossed her the sketchpad. The drawing was of Sara, chasing the seagulls on the beach. "Next time I'm upping the ante."

Jennifer looked down at it. "You've given her wings."

"It's still really rough."

"It's amazing. Can I keep it?"

"It's not finished."

"When is it?"

"Sure. And, just for my own information. If I had set the price at a blowjob?"

"A world of no." She continued to study the drawing. "Tell me, how can you be drawing something this sweet and beautiful and be thinking about blowjobs?"

"Blowjobs are sweet and beautiful," he said earnestly. "At least I've always thought so. Besides, guy here, remember?"

"Mac? Have you always been so forward about sex? You do realize it's a bit unnerving, don't you?"

“Sorry. And no. I’ve had to develop a comfort level. There was a time when things between Patricia and I... Well, they weren’t good anymore. We had been together for years but I found I was having a hard time communicating with her, expressing my needs.”

“What did you do?”

“I spent months being embarrassed. I struggled. I didn’t want to leave her, I didn’t want things to end.”

“What did you want?”

“I wanted to recapture something I believed we once had. Now, in retrospect, I wonder if I was essentially just another drug of sorts to her. I went to see a therapist finally. Patricia wouldn’t come with me, so I went alone. I worked on it, being able to express myself. I worked on it a lot, actually.”

“I thought maybe it had to do with your work.”

Mac shook his head. “Not really. That’s not so much about being able to *talk* about it as it is about being empathetic. When I started I was in Initial Services, so I was often the first one to go out and interview a kid. They’re scared. Many of them are so young they don’t even have the vocabulary to describe what’s happened to them. The last thing they need is someone who’s going to get skittish on them, make them feel judged or uncomfortable in any way.”

“You must hear some horrible things.”

“Far too many, truth be told.” Mac leaned back on his elbows and looked up at the darkening sky. “We should probably get going, especially if we’re going to stop at the video and grocery stores on the way home.”

“How about I drop you off after we pick out the movie just in case they’re a bit early? Sara and I can run back for the pizza.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Mac waved to a group of kids who’d just walked onto the beach, blankets, coolers and a couple bundles of wood in tow. “We’re leaving. Want our spot?” he called out.

Several of them waved back and the group started to head in their direction. Mac stood and started to pack up.

Jennifer gathered up the last of the trash, then scrambled to her feet to help him shake the sand out of the blanket. “I wish you had been there then.”

“When?”

“When I called the hotline.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Not much to tell. It was right after I left home.” Together, they folded the blanket in half. “I told them about my mom’s drinking and how she was pregnant. I told them about Cliff hitting me. I told them I was safe with friends, but worried about the baby.” They walked toward one another, meeting in the middle.

“And?”

Jennifer handed Mac her end. “The person I spoke with said there really wasn’t much they could do. Oh, they told me I should call back if I witnessed anything further.”

“But in order to witness anything else, you would have had to go back.” He stowed the blanket in the canvas bag along with the leftover marshmallows and potato chips.

“And I couldn’t. I just...couldn’t,” Jennifer finished.

Mac pulled her into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around her protectively and kissed her on the top of her head. “You feel guilty.”

“And ashamed. Once I got out of Los Angeles, I was so focused on myself, my future, I never bothered to look back.”

“You were a child, blondie. Your response was understandable. Don’t judge yourself too harshly. You’ve done amazingly well, considering.”

“Thanks.” Jennifer pulled back slightly and called for Sara. “I want to make up for it. Do you think that’s possible? Do you believe I can change things for her?”

“Absolutely.” Mac said it with complete conviction. “Don’t you realize? You already have.”

Chapter Ten

“Mac, this is Owen.” Ava handed him the car seat.

He placed it on the dining room table. “Oh we’re going to have a great time. Aren’t we, Owen?” he cooed.

“I’m afraid he’s not much of a talker yet. Everything you need is in this bag,” Rick said, hoisting the enormous bag off his shoulder and onto the table.

“He’ll need to eat probably soon after he wakes up,” Ava explained. “The car always puts him to sleep. I suspect this will just be a short catnap.”

Sara and Jennifer entered the apartment carrying a large pizza box. “Hey!” Jennifer set the pizza on the table.

“Jennifer, Sara, you remember Rick. This is his wife, Ava.” Mac rocked the car seat slightly. “And this is little Owen.”

“He’s so tiny.” Jennifer peered down at the slumbering babe. “How old is he?”

“Three months,” Ava answered. “I’ve been back at work for a couple of weeks now. This is actually going to be our first night out and...”

“He’ll be fine,” Mac assured her. “You have our number. I’ve got Rick’s cell. Go and enjoy yourselves.”

“We really appreciate this, Mac.” Rick extended his hand.

Mac grasped it firmly. “No problem.”

As soon as the couple walked out the door, Owen woke up.

“He may be little, but he’s awfully loud,” Jennifer observed.

Mac carried the pizza into the living room, then headed for the kitchen. “Does he need to be changed?”

“Changed?” she asked, a puzzled expression on her face.

“His nappies.” Mac pulled out a beer from the fridge and held it up. “Want one?” “No, thanks.” She shook her head. “Beer tastes awful.”

Mac twisted the cap off and took several swallows before sighing contentedly. “I think I’m going to agree to disagree on that point.”

Owen stopped crying. When the couple glanced back, they discovered Sara was gently rocking the car seat.

Jennifer smiled. "Okay, let me have a sip." She held out her hand.

He lifted the bottle out of reach. "I thought you didn't like it?"

"Maybe I've changed my mind. Maybe you're right."

"Oh, be still my heart!" He handed it to her.

Jennifer tilted the bottle to her lips, taking a sip. "Blech! No. You're definitely not right."

"Diet Coke?"

Jennifer nodded.

"Here." Mac handed her the soda.

"Thanks."

Owen started to fuss again.

Mac set his beer down on the table, unbuckled Owen's car seat and lifted the babe up, cradling him to his chest. "There, there, poppet." He gently bounced up and down. "There's nothing to cry about. Uncle Mac is here. Jennifer, can you serve me a slice of pizza?"

"I'm on it." Jennifer served plates for the three of them while Mac walked a path back and forth behind the sofa. "You all ready for the movie?"

Sara nodded.

"We men are ready. Aren't we, Owen?"

Jennifer inserted the DVD. Within a few seconds Owen's crying ceased.

They were halfway into the movie when Jennifer hopped up and started clearing the plates. "Anyone want anything else while I'm up?"

"Can you get his bottle and the bag? He needs to be changed," said Mac. "Do you want to help, kiddo?" Mac laid Owen down on the rug in front of the TV and then unsnapped the closure of his pajamas and pulled the babe's feet out. "Look how tiny his toes are. You started out this small. You ever change a baby?"

Sara shook her head, reached down, and with her fingertip she gently tickled the bottom of one of Owen's feet. The sensation made him retract his leg and she pulled back, slightly alarmed.

"He's okay. It probably tickled."

Jennifer watched on as he guided Sara through the steps of changing Owen. She did an excellent job.

"Here, you hold him while we go and wash our hands." Mac tried to pass the child to Jennifer. "You can start feeding him."

"I don't want to hold him." Jennifer stepped back, quickly.

Mac froze, stunned. "He's not going to bite you. He doesn't even have any teeth for heaven's sake. I'll just be ten feet away."

"I've never held a baby. I'm not sure how and I—"

“Don’t be daft, it’s simple. Here.” Mac handed over the child, positioning Jennifer’s arms and hands around him. “You’re an intelligent woman with a college degree. You run your own business. You can hold a baby for two minutes, yeah?”

“Okay.”

The evening passed quickly. As the movie came to a close Owen resumed fussing.

“I think he’s getting tired.” Mac tried walking with him again.

Sara picked up the remote control for the television and changed the station.

“One more hour until bedtime,” Jennifer declared.

“Okay,” Sara said, absorbed in the show.

Jennifer’s and Mac’s eyes met and he shook his head slightly. “I think I’m going to take Owen back to my room for a bit,” Mac said. “It’ll be darker, quieter, maybe he’ll fall asleep.”

Jennifer sat down on the sofa next to Sara. Within minutes Sara had moved closer to her. Instinctively she wrapped her arm around her sister’s shoulder. The two of them sat, cuddled together, and for the first time ever Jennifer watched the Powerpuff Girls.

It was close to ten when Jennifer the intercom buzzed, its grating sound shattering the still silence of the apartment. She’d just finished dressing for bed. Sara was already down for the night and Mac and Owen had yet to re-emerge. She quickly donned a robe and went to let Rick in.

“Sorry,” he said. “We’re a bit later than we expected.”

“It’s okay. That means you were having fun, right?”

“We had a fabulous time.”

Jennifer waved him into the apartment. “I was still up. The boys are hanging out in Mac’s room.”

Rick followed her into the hallway. She knocked softly on Mac’s door, then pushed it open. He was in his leather chair; legs sprawled out in front of him, head back. He had removed his shoes and unbuttoned his shirt. Owen was draped across his chest, the babe’s tiny head resting in the crook of Mac’s neck. The two of them were fast asleep.

“Looks like they wore one another out.” Jennifer smiled at the image.

“I’ll tuck the little one in. You’re going to have to deal with the big one,” Rick whispered. He tiptoed over to the chair, carefully lifted his son off of Mac’s chest, and cradled him in his arms.

Jennifer followed him back to the living room and watched as he placed Owen in his car seat and buckled him in.

“I hope he wasn’t much of a bother.”

“He was terrific.” She passed Rick the diaper bag. “Here’s all his stuff.”

“Thanks.” Rick accepted the bag and moved toward the door. “We really appreciated this. Make sure to thank Mac for me.”

“Will do, it was fun,” she said honestly before closing the door and turning out the remaining lights.

As she walked by Mac’s room she paused. The only light on in the room was the one on his nightstand. She debated whether to wake him or to just turn off the light and let him sleep. Quietly, she entered and tiptoed over to the chair.

His legs were sprawled out in front of him and parallel to the bedside table. Jennifer got as close as she could. Then she leaned over and flipped off the switch. When she turned to walk away, his hand reached out and encircled her wrist.

With a gasp she looked toward him. But in the dark, she couldn’t see his face.

Mac shifted in his chair and moved his legs, pulling her closer, until she stood between them.

“Rick came and picked up Owen a few minutes ago. I was just turning out your light.”

Wordlessly, he began to move his thumb in tiny circles across the back of her hand.

Jennifer closed her eyes, giving in to the sensation.

“Mac—”

“Shh.” He buried his head in her stomach, nuzzling, inhaling her scent.

She laced her fingers through his hair knowing if she let things go much further, there would be no turning back.

Mac moved his hands to rest on either side of her hips. He was being patient, cautious, almost painfully so. A full minute passed, maybe two, before he slid his hand down and across her backside.

For a moment, Jennifer held her breath.

He lifted his head slightly, snaking his hands under her nightgown and caressing the globes of her bare ass.

His hands were warm, his touch sure. Mac took the sash of her robe between his teeth and slowly pulled, until it opened. Then he guided her up, onto the chair so that she straddled his lap.

It had been a long time, a very long time since she’d wanted a man as much as she wanted Mac. She knew he wanted her. His desire was patently evident. She could feel the hardness of him beneath her. Instead of following her instincts and telling him to stop, Jennifer moved against him in a rhythm that was slow and languid. She let his hands glide over her body, confident and sure. She wanted him to take in every curve, memorize every line.

Mac traced the edge of her collarbone, his calloused fingertips dipping into the hollow of her neck before brushing over the tops of her breasts. She arched in to him, seeking out more of his touch, craving friction, yearning for something she thought she’d come to accept she’d never have. Mac tilted his hips up, grinding his erection between her legs.

The silk robe she was wearing slid from her shoulders and puddled on the floor next to the chair. Jennifer closed her eyes.

Mac had spent so many hours anticipating this, he not only wanted to feel her, he wanted to see her. He reached back, extending his hand, searching for the pull cord to the blinds. Upon finding his target he yanked. Suddenly the room was painted in bands of light and dark. The pattern fell across Jennifer, illuminating her. Her eyes searched out his, wide and wondering.

She opened her mouth to say something. This time he silenced her by placing his fingertips over her lips. His heart was racing but his movements were unhurried and deliberate. Mac reached up and slid down one thin strap of her nightgown, exposing a dusky nipple that made his mouth water. He sighed in appreciation before slipping the other strap off of her shoulder and easing her nightgown down until it was gathered at her waist.

"Is this...okay?" he whispered, his throat suddenly dry. "Please, say it is. I want to touch you. I want to make love to you."

"I want that too, but I don't want you to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere," Mac responded, his hand hovering over her left breast.

"Don't make promises you might not be able to keep."

"This will change things between us. If we do this, there is no going back for me."

"What happens when I get to the point where I can't take this any further? When it's no longer enough for you? When I'm no longer enough for you?"

Mac swallowed. She wasn't ready, she was still hesitant. He slid her arms back into the straps of her nightgown and raised it up the length of her arms. As he settled the straps back on her shoulders he saw the hurt and confusion on her face. "Hold on." Mac stood. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck. He encircled her waist with one hand and pulled the bed covers back with the other before laying her down on the soft feather-top mattress.

Mac gazed down at the tempting display. "What happens is we change, we grow, there is no limit." Mac let his shirt fall to the floor, then stripped off his jeans. "We're people. We evolve. We're never done, unless we want to be." He crawled in alongside of her, wearing only his boxers and pulled her toward him, wrapping one arm around her small waist and rubbing up and down the length of her back with the other.

Her head rested on his chest and he could feel her breath as she softly inhaled and exhaled.

"What happens when you get to the point where you can't take it further?" he continued. "If you want to, if you believe it could be worth it, we'll work together to get past that barrier."

"What if I can't?"

"Did you not read the soddin' book I gave you? It wasn't long, for heaven's sake."

"It's not that simple."

He rolled Jennifer over onto her back and brushed her hair back. “No. It’s not.” Mac leaned up on one elbow and propped his head up with his hand. “Look, I’m thirty years old. I’ve had my share of failed relationships and broken hearts. I want something real. I want something lasting. There is something about you that has reached out and grabbed my heart. I know this is fast, but there’s this connection between us. I can’t explain it. Frankly, I don’t need to. This past week, you’re all I thought about. I’m consumed by thoughts of you all day and I dream about you at night. I’m surrounded by your scent. I long for your touch. Jennifer, I’m drowning in you. And, God help me, I don’t want to be rescued.”

Chapter Eleven

As she woke, Jennifer sensed something was different. Or, maybe it was that everything was different. Mac's warm body was wrapped protectively around hers. His arm was draped over her waist. His knees bent to follow the curve of hers. His hand innocently cupped her breast. Last night they'd held one another and talked, endlessly, about everything and nothing. When she'd finally drifted off, she didn't know. But she'd slept like a baby in his arms. There was so much to be afraid of, uncertain about, but one thing was undeniable. She couldn't go backward either. She inhaled deeply and her eyes fluttered open.

Sara gasped and Jennifer's attention was immediately drawn to her. She was standing there, at the side of Mac's bed, her bear in hand, staring down at the two of them. Tear-stained tracks covered her delicate face.

Jennifer shifted slightly and lifted her head off the pillow. "Sara? What's wrong?"

A sob escaped Sara's lips and she lifted her hand to muffle it. Mac opened his eyes and leaned up to peer over Jennifer. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know." Jennifer held her hand out to Sara. "I woke up and she was here, crying. What's wrong, sweetheart? Why didn't you wake me?"

Sara reached out with a trembling hand. "You were so still. You weren't moving. I was... I was afraid you'd be cold."

Jennifer pulled Sara closer to the bed and lifted the edge of the covers. "I'm fine. Mac and I are snug as bugs. You're the one freezing. Climb in."

Wordlessly Sara climbed under the covers.

"Sara," Mac said. "Did you mean you were afraid we were dead?"

"Oh God!" Jennifer exclaimed. "Is that what you thought?"

Sara buried her head in Jennifer's breast and began to weep, heartfelt, gut-wrenching sobs.

"Please don't cry," Jennifer said, moved to tears herself. "Mac and I are both fine."

"She needs to cry. She needs to grieve. This isn't about us. It's about your Mum."

Too choked up to speak, Jennifer nodded.

"It's okay for you to cry. This is your loss, too." Mac wiped at his own eyes before turning to look at the clock. "Bugger!"

"What is it?" Jennifer asked.

"I'm going to be late. Someone distracted me from setting the alarm last night. I've got a football game this morning. Maybe I should cancel."

"Go. We'll be good."

"Are you sure?"

Sara looked up. "You're coming back?"

"Always," Mac said. He smoothed Sara's hair and leaned over to kiss Jennifer's bare shoulder.

Jennifer reached for Mac's hand. "I have to do some work with Rachel today. She and Tom invited us over for dinner, just burgers and such. You available?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." He quickly climbed out of bed and slid on a pair of jeans. "Leave the address and time on my voice mail. I'll meet you there." He ran over to his dresser and pulled out a sweatshirt. "Sorry, I've got to run like this. I'll see you both later?"

"We'll see you later."

Mac grabbed his workout bag from the closet then raced out of the apartment.

Sara and Jennifer lay side by side in his bed for what seemed like an eternity.

"It's nice in here," Jennifer said finally. "Cozy."

Sara nodded in agreement.

"Okay, why is it so hard for you to talk?" Jennifer asked. "I mean, I get that being kind of invisible around Cliff would have its advantages. But Mac and I aren't Cliff."

"It's my fault," Sara whispered.

"What's your fault?"

"Mom. Her dying was my fault."

Jennifer sat up. "Sara, Mom was depressed, she was really troubled, even long before you. You shouldn't blame yourself."

"But I wished it." Sara started sobbing even more intensely than before. "I wished it!"

"Wished what? I don't understand, Sara. What did you wish?"

"She was yelling at me, because I told her I needed new shoes. They... What I had didn't fit anymore. They hurt. She yelled she didn't have the money. But she had enough money for her booze. She always had money for that. Know what I mean?"

Jennifer nodded. She knew all too well. "She was an alcoholic, Sara."

"She was opening up a brand new bottle. The living room was filled again with empty ones. All she'd been doing since Cliff left was drinking and sleeping. I was hungry, there was no money for dinner, no money for me to do laundry."

"I'm sorry, so sorry."

"I screamed at her. I told her I hated my life, hated her."

“That’s understandable, sweetie. Moms are supposed to take care of their kids. Ours...well, she couldn’t.”

“I told her I wished she were dead.”

Jennifer swallowed.

“And she did it, that day, while I was at school. When I came home, I found her. I don’t deserve to talk. Bad things happen. I’m bad! What did I do?”

“You are not responsible for Mom killing herself. She’s tried at least a half a dozen times over the years. It wasn’t about the shoes. It wasn’t about you. It was always about her. Mom was sick, Sara. Alcoholism is a disease.”

“A disease?”

“Yes.”

“Can I catch it, like a cold?”

Jennifer smiled. “No, not like a cold. I’m not Mom. Neither are you. Our lives can be different, we have to *make* them different.”

“How?”

“Truthfully? I’m not sure. I don’t have all of the answers. I’m just...” Jennifer sighed. “I’m not sure. But we’ll find our way, together. We’ll keep trying until we get it right.”

“Maybe we could get some help?” Sara asked. “Ask someone smart what we’re supposed to do?”

Jennifer gave Sara a squeeze. “Yes, Sara, we’ll do that.”

“H’lo,” Mac answered.

“Hey, I was calling back to make sure you got my message earlier. Rachel and I are about to wrap things up for the day. How was the game?” Jennifer asked, cheerfully.

“Game?”

“Are you okay? You sound funny.”

“Sorry. I’m...I’m completely pissed. I’ve screwed up.”

“You don’t sound mad, you sound—”

“Drunk. Pissed is drunk.”

“Oh.” After a long pause she asked, “Why are you drunk?”

“Long story. I think I need to take a rain check on dinner. Give my regrets to everyone. Maybe I should crash at Uncle Henry’s for the night.”

“Where are you?”

“At a bar, downtown. Came here with some mates after the game for lunch. We had a couple beers to celebrate the win. Then I stayed to work at catching up on mail, found the letter, and switched to scotch.”

“Letter?”

"From Patricia. It was forwarded from my old address in Los Angeles. I should have known I'd hear from her again, that she'd track me down. I guess I wasn't prepared."

"She's the one you told me about? Your former girlfriend?"

"Yeah."

"Is that you, Mac?" The voluptuous redhead hopped onto the barstool next to him.

"Melody?"

"Hey! It is you! How are you? Oh! Not so good, huh? I bet I can cheer you up. Bartender? We'll have two more."

"Mac!" Jennifer called out, firmly.

He turned his attention back to the phone. "What?"

"Make yours a coffee and tell me the name of the place. I'm coming to get you. Let me grab a pen."

"You don't have to do that."

"I *want* to do it. I'll have Tom and Rachel watch Sara for a bit. They can bring her home once you're settled."

"All right."

"But, Mac? Let's not make a habit of this. I don't want to be taking care of a drunk boyfriend."

"Is that what I am?" Despite the melancholy, he found himself smiling.

"Let's just say I'm considering your application."

Thirty minutes later Jennifer walked into the dimly lit room. She spotted Mac immediately. He was sitting at the bar, hunched over a cup of coffee. There was a pained expression on his face and a leggy redhead glued to his side. Melody. She was flirting shamelessly with him.

"Really, you don't have to sit with me. I've got a ride coming," he said as she approached.

Melody seemed to take his speaking to her as a sign of encouragement. She wrapped her hand around his bicep and leaned toward him, brushing the side of her breast against his arm. "I could give you a ride, Mac. No waiting."

Jennifer resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Some things are worth waiting for."

Mac spun around on the stool then made the mistake of trying to stand. He was a little unsteady on his feet. "And you would be one of them."

Jennifer wrapped her arm around his waist. "Ready to go home, big fella?"

"Yeah. Thanks for coming to get me."

"You're *living* with someone?" Melody asked. "While you're dating me?"

"We're not dating." Mac swayed a bit.

"You were hitting on me, just now. You were about to ask me out for dinner."

Mac turned to Jennifer. "No. That's not right. I was *not* hitting on her. I would remember. I'm not *that* drunk."

"What?" Melody slapped Mac across the face.

He stumbled into the bar and knocked over her martini.

"Now look what you did." She grabbed her purse. "You can have him," she hissed before storming out.

Jennifer picked up the overturned glass.

"She slapped me!" Mac gasped, holding his cheek.

"She sure did."

"Why?"

"I'll explain tomorrow. Trust me, it will be much funnier then. Are you all paid up?"

"Yeah. I wasn't hitting on her. I swear. Cross my heart and dope to hie."

"Dope to hie? Come on, Prince Charming, let's go home." Jennifer steered him out the door. Fortunately, she'd managed to get a parking place right in front.

"Dope to hie," she giggled as she unlocked the door.

Once Mac was tucked safely into the passenger's seat, Jennifer buckled his belt and slammed the door.

"I sure know how to pick 'em," she muttered, rounding the car. She slid behind the wheel and started the engine.

Mac groaned.

"What's wrong?"

He was holding his head in his hands.

"My head hurts. I think I'm sobering up. Remind me to never drink again."

Jennifer held out the bottle of water she'd grabbed from Rachel's fridge and then fished through her purse for aspirin. "Take two of these."

Mac opened the water bottle and drank down a few swallows with a couple aspirin.

"So that was Melody?" she asked as she pulled out of the parking place.

Mac leaned his head against the window of the car and closed his eyes. "You believe me, right?"

"Yes, I believe you."

"Good."

They drove in silence the remainder of the way back to their apartment.

Jennifer unlocked the security door to the building and called for the elevator.

"You okay?" she asked him.

Mac nodded and stepped into the elevator.

He didn't look okay. In fact, he looked miles from okay. His silence was unnerving. Normally, he was so eager to share, so comfortable communicating.

The elevator stopped on their floor. Jennifer followed him down the hall and into their apartment.

Chapter Twelve

Mac immediately walked back to the bathroom, stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jennifer asked from the other side of the curtain.

He leaned back against the cool tile of the shower wall. “Yes. No. I don’t know.”

There was a long pause.

“Are you moving out? Are you going back to her?” she asked.

“No and no.” He pulled back the curtain, completely heedless of his nudity. “How could you even think that?”

“I...” Jennifer averted her gaze. “I don’t know.”

With one swift tug, the curtain slid back into place. “The letter... It just made me sad. And incredibly angry. Patricia’s been sober for a few months. She said she was making her way through the step-work and wanting to make amends.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“That’s bullshit. No way she’s gotten to step nine yet. Patricia was saying what she thought I wanted to hear. Trying to draw me back in. I thought I had put her and all those old feelings to bed.”

“But you haven’t.”

“I miss...”

“You miss her?”

“No, not her. I don’t miss *her*. But the truth is a part of me misses feeling...”

“What?”

“Loved. I miss feeling loved. I had that once. I miss it.”

Jennifer could tell from the change in the sound he had stepped back into the stream of water. Her heart ached for him. She wondered for a moment if she, ever in her life, had experienced the feeling of being loved, truly loved. She searched her memory for a time. She couldn’t come up with one, not one. Had she ever even gotten close? She had, she realized, with him. He had given her so much over the past couple weeks, so much of himself. And now he needed something in return.

She shed her clothes, then quietly peeled back the curtain and stepped into the shower.

“What are you doing?” he asked as her body pressed up against the back of his.

She slid her arms around his waist and rested her head on his back.

“Don’t.” He placed his hands on her arms and tugged gently. “Why this? Why now?”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever been loved, Mac, truly loved.” She murmured her confession against his back. “But last night, all you did was hold me, watch me sleep and it felt like heaven.” Jennifer placed a soft kiss between his shoulder blades, then released her hold on him. “I want to comfort you. I want to take away the pain, make you feel better.”

She squeezed some of his shower gel into the palms of her hands. The spicy aroma filled the room. She inhaled deeply as she once again slipped her hands around his waist.

“Is this okay?” she asked, repeating the very question he’d asked her the night before. Her fingertips trailed across the hard plains of his abdomen and chest.

Mac’s left hand slapped against the tile wall, every inch of his body was suddenly tense. “You should leave.” His voice was rough with passion.

She stepped in closer. Her breasts were brushing against him, her nipples grazing his back. “Maybe. That would be the safe thing. But I can’t. I won’t. Not this time.” She wrapped her hands around his cock. He was already long and hard.

Mac hissed. “No turning back?”

“All you have to do is turn around.”

In the blink of an eye Jennifer found herself wrapped possessively in Mac’s arms. He held her body, flush against his and he kissed her deeply, passionately, with a sense of urgency that ignited something within her. His restraint crumbled. Mac’s tongue entered her mouth, curling around hers, taking, demanding possession. Jennifer threaded her fingers through his wet hair and surrendered, sharing his desperate desire, his raw need. The intensity of the moment took her breath away and she broke off the kiss with a gasp.

“God, how I want you. It seems I’ve wanted you forever. I need you.” His lips moved down her neck. His teeth grazed back up the same path.

“I need you, too. I want you...so much.” She was clutching his biceps, her nails digging into his flesh. She was holding on, anticipating the fear, readying herself to guard against it, only this time it didn’t come.

“What do you want?” His hand was on her breast, his mouth at her ear.

“Want you inside of me.”

He bit down on the flesh of her earlobe.

“Now!” Jennifer pulled back. Her breaths were coming quick and heavy. Her eyes drank him in. Every inch of his body was pumped and ready. She reached for his cock and licked her lips.

Mac placed his hand under her chin and tilted it up. “I want that too. Inside you. Now.”

“Here?”

He picked up the shower gel. “Turn around.”

She did as he instructed, the muscles in her stomach tightening in expectancy.

“Christ, you’re so beautiful.” Mac began to stroke her. “So fucking beautiful.” His strong hands traveled down the length of her back, over her ripe bottom and across the tops of her thighs. He stepped closer. She could feel his cock pressed between them.

Jennifer leaned forward, her hands supporting her against the tile wall at the back of the shower. His mouth was on her neck, his arm around her waist. He reached down with his other hand. “Lift up your leg.” He guided it to the edge of the bath. “That’s it. Open up for me.”

His fingers found her wetness.

Slick with arousal, she pushed back, encouraging him.

Mac separated her folds and dipped two fingers inside. “Are you sure?”

She moved against him, seeking friction, wanting more. “I’m sure.”

He filled her in one deep thrust. It forced her forward and she quickly had to place her second hand on the wall. Mac held onto her tightly. He pulled out almost completely before thrusting in again, this time angling up and penetrating her even deeper.

Jennifer gasped.

His movements stilled. “All right?”

For a moment she held her breath.

“Jennifer?”

His voice was tense, whether from worry or his efforts to control himself, she wasn’t sure.

She nodded.

He started to move again, this time using slow, measured thrusts. He kissed her neck, her back, her shoulders. The pressure started to build. She closed her eyes and bit her lip, letting the sensation wash over her.

“Christ you feel good.” He angled up again, this time continuing the same, slow pace.

She stayed right there, in the moment, savoring each and every sensation. “You’re so deep. I...” Tears started to cloud her vision.

She felt Mac start to pull out. “Don’t want to hurt you.”

It wasn’t the physical feelings that were becoming too much, it was the emotional. Mac had somehow managed to touch something within her that she’d long ago buried. He’d been doing it since the second they first laid eyes on one another. He’d done it so many times, in so many ways. But this...now... Never had she felt so connected.

She pushed back, driving him in farther. “You’re not hurting me.”

“What’s going on? Talk to me.”

She was on the verge of crying. Jennifer reached back and snaked her hand around Mac’s neck. “Don’t stop. Don’t leave me.”

“Never. Not going to leave you, baby.”

Her body trembled as the excitement built. She was almost there, right at the edge.

Mac reached around and pinched her clit.

Jennifer threw her head back. "Oh, God!"

He was rolling it now between his thumb and forefinger. His thrusts were coming faster, his rhythm more erratic. He was close, so very close.

"I'm going to..." Mac pulled out quickly. He wrapped his hand firmly around his cock while continuing to hold her around the waist with his other arm. He pumped it a few times and then watched, panting and wide-eyed, as long ropes of come spurted out over his hand and across Jennifer's backside.

"Christ, that was brilliant!" he shouted, slapping her playfully on the bottom and then giving it a sensual rub. As he brushed his thumb across her lower back he felt her tense. He looked down. "What's..."

She spun around. "It's nothing." She nodded toward the spray. "Do you mind? Somebody managed to get me all sticky."

Mac bent down and kissed her softly. "I believe that was me. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

"Only about the sticky part." He switched places with her, then chuckled. "That's a complete and total lie. Truth is, I'm not even sorry about that."

Jennifer moved beneath the water. She couldn't help but smile.

Mac leaned back against the wall. "Although I admit, this isn't how I envisioned it happening between us."

She started to soap her body. "How did you envision it?"

"Not this wet." He stepped closer and started to help, gliding his hands up the length of her arms, across her shoulders, then down over her breasts and stomach. "Candlelight, music, searching out your eyes, watching the expression on your face as you climaxed for the fourth or fifth time, me coming deep inside of you, of course," he finished sliding one soapy hand between her folds. "I finished too fast. Let me take care of you."

She placed her hand on his wrist. "Why?"

"I want to make you come."

"No, not—"

"No?" He stepped back, confused.

"I meant... Why didn't you come inside of me?"

She suddenly looked incredibly vulnerable.

"No condom?"

"Right! Of course."

Mac raised his eyebrow in question.

“It’s been a while. I thought maybe I wasn’t—”

“You felt amazing.” He leaned down and began to trail a line of kisses across her jaw and down the side of her neck. “You feel amazing.” His hand moved between her legs.

“I liked the way you felt, too.”

Mac slipped two fingers inside of her and began to slowly pump them in and out. Sliding inside her velvety channel, touching her, fingering her clit with his thumb. Her lips parted in a gasp and he slid his tongue inside her mouth. It curled around hers, stroking, exploring, savoring.

Her hands were gripping his biceps again. He felt a tremor run through her body.

“Mac, I...”

He watched her fall apart as she was seized by orgasm. Her knees weakened, her legs buckled. “Let go,” he whispered, pushing her just a bit further, until she was utterly swept away. He’d never felt so powerful.

The water on his back had minutes ago gone from hot to lukewarm. Now it was fast approaching cold. “Steady,” he whispered, holding her close, not daring to let go. “I need to turn off the water. You all right?”

“Never been better,” she said breathlessly.

“Going to let go now, okay?”

As soon as Jennifer nodded he pulled away, quickly spun around and began to fumble with the shower taps.

She jumped back. “Shit! It’s like ice. You’ve been standing there with cold water coming down on your back?”

Mac opened the shower curtain, stepped out and quickly wrapped a towel around his waist. “Well, there was this...distraction.”

Jennifer leaned against the shower wall and sighed contentedly.

“Liked that, did you?” Mac offered her his hand.

She stepped out of the shower. “Uh-huh.”

He grabbed a second towel and held it out for her, bowed slightly. “Milady.”

“Why thank you, kind sir.” She turned around and he wrapped it around her naked body.

“My pleasure. You are a far better remedy than scotch.”

“How are you feeling?” Jennifer walked out of the bathroom and into the kitchen.

“Better.” He followed her.

Jennifer opened the refrigerator and peered inside.

Mac snaked his arm around her waist. “Of course, I may require regular doses of Jennifer between now and morning to stave off the hangover of the century.”

“Drink up.” She handed him another bottle of water. “You also need water, food and rest.”

“No, really. I just need more of you.” Despite his protests, Mac opened the bottle and began to drink.

Jennifer picked up the phone and dialed.

“Jennifer?” He placed his hand on hers.

She paused. “Yeah?”

“I can guarantee you there are going to be moments when you regret this. I’m not perfect, you know.”

“Really?”

“Well, guess you saw that today.”

She nodded. “And you’re annoying sometimes.”

“And I can be arrogant, and snarky, and you already know about the dishes thing.”

“Let’s not forget the weird issue you have with mimes.”

Mac smiled. “But, you’re willing to give this a go?”

“Yes.” She kissed him softly on the mouth. “We need to talk about testing and birth control.”

“Whatever you want. You’re exquisite,” he whispered huskily, nuzzling at the crook of her neck. He began to unwrap her towel.

“Hey, mister!” Jennifer slapped his hand and stepped back. “Sara. Food. Then after she’s tucked in bed and fast asleep you can have Jennifer.”

“But, Mac want Jennifer now.”

Jennifer gave him a disapproving look.

“All right! I’ll go get dressed and be a good boy.”

“Promise?”

He headed back toward his room. “Promise.” Upon reaching the hall he paused, turned around, winked at her. “But that’s just for now. Later, I intend to be very, very naughty.”

Chapter Thirteen

January 17, 2004

“Well, kiddo, Big Sis is going to be late tonight. She’s got work to do. So, it’s just me, you and the *Pirates of the Caribbean*.” Mac held up the DVD.

“Cool!” Sara said excitedly. “What’s for dinner?”

“My famous tacos. How did it go with Cecily today?”

“All right, I guess.” Sara shrugged. “I started working on a painting with her.”

“You’ll bring it home when you’re finished?”

Sara nodded and looked out of the car window.

Mac sighed. Communicating with Sara had been touch and go during the past week. She would engage here and there, sometimes responsive, other times reverting back to old patterns, and shutting down completely.

He pulled into his parking space and cut the engine. “Any homework?”

“I’m supposed to write a paragraph about why I think we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Why do *you* think we celebrate it?”

Mac reached into the trunk and grabbed the bag of groceries he’d picked up earlier. Sara slid her backpack on. “There’s an exhibit this weekend about King and the two Kennedy brothers at the Museum of Photographic Arts. I was thinking about going Sunday. Want to come?”

They stepped into the elevator. “Do all social workers do that? Cecily does it all the time.”

“What?”

“She answers my questions with questions.”

Mac smiled. “I think Cecily and I both want you to reach your own conclusions about some things.”

Sara nodded.

As they walked down the hall, Mac reflected on how quickly and drastically his life had changed. It had been one week since Sara had arrived, five days since he had first been intimate with Jennifer. In that short period of time the three of them had fallen into a comfortable routine; Jennifer bringing Sara to school in the mornings, Mac picking her up in the afternoon. Somehow, in the space of a couple weeks, he and Jennifer had gone from being complete strangers to sharing meals, sharing a bed, sharing their lives. And he was happy, incredibly happy.

It was close to seven o'clock before they finished making and eating their tacos. Mac was placing the DVD into the player when the intercom buzzer sounded.

"Wonder if Jennifer forgot her keys?" He pressed the button to the intercom. "Hello?"

"Hey, Mac! Hope we're not intruding. Jennifer said it was going to be a quiet night at home. Tom and I just came from dinner in Little Italy. We've brought some cannoli," Rachel said.

"Come on up. I'll make some coffee. We're about to watch a movie." Mac buzzed them in.

Within minutes Tom and Rachel were settled on the sofa, Sara between them. The opening scene started.

"Where's Jennifer?" Rachel asked quietly, her eyes glued to the television.

Mac walked over and sat in a nearby chair. "I thought she was working with you," he said, softly.

"With me?" Rachel looked at him, confusion clouding her face. "We both knocked off a little early today. I thought she said she had some errands to run."

"I must have misunderstood."

"Gotta admit, I'm surprised to see you back here. You don't call, you don't write. What's it been, two years?" the brunette asked from behind the desk.

Jennifer paced back and forth within the confines of the office, picking up an odd object here and there. "Something like that."

"So, what's brought you back?" Arlene asked. "I'm happy to see you, don't get me wrong. But usually when a patient calls me a bitch... Well, it's a bad prognosis for forming a long-term therapeutic relationship."

"You remember? I was kind of hoping you'd forgotten." Jennifer blushed.

Arlene leaned back in her chair and tapped the side of her head. "Mind like a steel trap."

"Well, if it's any consolation, I think you may have been right."

Arlene dramatically clutched at her chest. "Be still my heart!"

Jennifer smiled. "All right, are you through giving me a hard time? Are you willing to work with me here?"

"I've always been willing to work with you, Jennifer. I still am. Are *you* willing to work this time? As I recall, that's where the breakdown was before. You were in a relationship, it was going from bad to worse and you wanted to save it but—"

"I didn't think I had the time to do what you were asking. I didn't see the point. I wanted a quick answer, a neat and tidy solution."

"Did you find one?"

"Only the wrong ones."

"And they've led you back here."

“Yes.”

They sat in silence for several minutes before Jennifer spoke again. “My mother killed herself, recently. I have a sister. She’s nine.”

“I don’t remember you ever mentioning a sister.”

“She’s living with me now. And I have a... There’s this man... We’ve...” Jennifer felt herself blush.

“You’ve become lovers?”

“Yes.” She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “Arlene, I want to be more.”

“More than lovers?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Help me understand.”

Jennifer leaned back and studied the ceiling for a few minutes. “I’ve always felt like there’s been this empty space inside. Like there’s something wrong with me. Something missing. I don’t know. Like whatever I am, it’s not enough, I want to be more. This guy, he’s really great. He deserves...more.”

“What if it’s not about being more? What if it’s just about being who you *really* are?”

“I’m not sure I even know who that is.”

“Then, that’s what we work on.”

Jennifer unlocked the door to the apartment and pushed it open. The first thing she noticed was that Rachel and Tom were there. The second thing she noticed was Mac. He was sitting in the chair. His eyes were on the door to the apartment instead of the television, and they were filled with undisguised accusation. Jennifer swallowed and looked away. His anger was too much to bear. She placed her purse on the counter, nervously ran her fingers through her hair and secured a plastic smile firmly to her face.

“Welcome home,” he said.

“Thanks! I think I’ll go freshen up a bit,” she said with practiced ease.

“Shh!” Sara and Rachel said in unison, their eyes fixed on the screen.

Jennifer walked quickly back to her bedroom. Her mind was racing. She entered, then closed the door and looked down at her hands. They were trembling. This was something she hadn’t expected. Mac knew she wasn’t with Rachel, he knew she’d lied. Before she could even begin to think through a plausible explanation, he barged in. No warning. Not even a knock.

“Mac!” she gasped keeping her tone low.

He didn’t even spare her a glance. He immediately walked over to her bed and looked under a pillow.

“Mac?”

He checked under the bed and in her closet.

“What are you looking for?”

Now he was searching through her jewelry box. “Don’t you feel it? What’s missing here? I’m sure it’s around here someplace.”

“What’s missing?”

“It was here just this morning.” Clearly agitated, he started to pull open her drawers one by one and rifle through her neatly folded clothing.

Jennifer placed a hand on his to still his movements. “Stop! What on earth are you talking about?”

“Trust!” He glared at her. “I’m talking about trust.”

She could see the tightness in his jaw and the look of hurt in his eyes. She swallowed.

“You said you were working. Only I don’t think you were,” he said. “I think if you were working, Rachel would have known about it.”

She couldn’t look him in the eye.

“Fine. Shut me out. Keep making the same mistakes. But don’t expect me to.” He opened the door and started to walk out.

“So I wasn’t at work. I needed some time to myself.”

“Time to yourself,” he repeated.

“To do something. What’s the big deal?”

He closed the door and turned back to face her. “I’ll tell you why this is such a big deal. You lied to me.”

“Look, Mac, just because I let you fuck me, doesn’t mean you own me.”

Mac looked as if he’d been struck. “That’s your answer?”

“We have company. We don’t have time for this, now.”

“We need to make the time.”

“We’ll continue this discussion later.” She walked past him and out the door, her stomach a bundle of knots.

A minute later Mac came out, coat on, keys in hand. Wordlessly, he passed her. Jennifer followed him to the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“Oh! Think you’ve earned the right to keep tabs on me, do you?” He was fuming, his tone angry. “It’s a two-way street, Jennifer. Besides, you’re busy and all, not sure you have the time to listen to the elaborate details of my evening’s plans.”

“So, keep it short.” Jennifer glanced self-consciously over at Sara, Rachel and Tom who were staring now at them. “You’re only doing this to make a point.”

“Keep it short? I’ll keep it short!” Mac pulled up the collar on his jacket. “Out! Goodnight. Don’t bother waiting up.”

Jennifer stood there, alone, Mac’s final words ringing in her ears. *Don’t bother waiting up.*

“Shit!” She stomped her foot. When she turned around, she practically bumped into Sara.

“Aren’t you going after him?”

“I don’t...” She looked from Sara to Rachel.

“It’s now or never,” Rachel said. “You’ll lose him if you don’t.”

Sara pointed to the door. “Go!”

Jennifer nodded. “Okay. But—”

Rachel rose from her chair, strode over to the door, and opened it wide. “No buts, we’ll wait with Sara. Hurry!”

Jennifer ran out without a coat and without her keys. The elevator was already in motion.

“Damn it!” She raced down the hall and into the stairwell. As she burst through the door to the ground floor she was breathing heavily. A quick glance at the elevator confirmed he’d beaten her. Like a flash she continued, pushing through the entrance.

He was at the corner, waiting for the light to change. “Mac! Wait!” He didn’t turn around as she approached. “I’m sorry.”

He held up his hand. “It’s really not a good time. I’m angry and I’m hurt. I need to think.”

She walked around to face him. “Thinking is overrated. Some really smart guy told me that once.”

The light changed. He didn’t step off the curb. Instead, he stuffed his hands inside his pockets. It was a small victory, but it gave her home.

“He was right,” she continued. “Turns out he’s right about a lot of things.”

The wind was beginning to pick up outside and the temperature was dropping.

“You don’t even have your coat on, you silly bint.”

“I know. But I had to tell you something really important.”

“I was just going to go for a quick walk.”

“Please, don’t walk away.”

“I was coming back, you know. I just wanted to cool off.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “What I have to tell you, it can’t wait.”

Mac looked up at the dark sky. Large drops had begun to dot the sidewalks. “It’s starting to rain.”

“I don’t care,” Jennifer said. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Mac gazed down, intently, at his boots. “Are you seeing someone else?”

“What? God, no! You think I’m seeing somebody else?”

“In my experience, when a woman starts lying about where she’s been, it’s either because she’s doing drugs or shagging someone else. You don’t seem to have a drug habit—”

“I wouldn’t do that to you.”

He nodded. “What a relief. So, I’m the only guy you let fuck you these days?”

“Mac—”

“Is that supposed to make me feel special, because it doesn’t.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“You didn’t *mean*... Tell me, what am I to you? Am I here to scratch your itch whenever you feel the need? Or am I a part-time nanny? Maintenance man? Cook? Perhaps I’m just someone to split the bills with? You haven’t even told anyone about us. Rachel and Tom were in complete shock!”

“I have. I was talking to someone tonight as a matter of fact. I’m not like you, Mac. I’m not good at this. I’m going to make mistakes. I’m going to say the wrong thing. I’m probably going to lose you. But...but...”

Jennifer paused. She was starting to breathe heavily now, almost gasping for air as she fought to choke back sobs. An overwhelming sense of panic set in. This was exactly what she was so afraid of. She was losing him. Her chest clenched. She felt the earth move beneath her feet, the buildings on the street start to spin around her.

Mac could tell Jennifer was struggling, but she was close, close to telling him what was going on for her, *really* going on. As she fought to keep her emotions under control, he fought the urge to wrap his arms around her and tell her it was all going to be okay. They needed to get through this. They would. And once they did their relationship would be that much stronger.

“I’m going to make mistakes. I’m going to say the wrong thing. I’m probably going to lose you. But...but...”

Suddenly, her eyes rolled up. She swayed and began to slide to the ground. Mac swept her up in his arms.

“Jennifer!”

The sky opened up and rain began to pour down on them. He ran with her back into the building, struggling to hold on to her while at the same time unlocking the security door.

As soon as they were inside the entryway, he leaned his back against the wall and slid down until he was cradling her in his arms on the floor. Jennifer’s eyes fluttered open.

“What happened?”

“You cheated. Don’t think I’m going to back away from a good fight just because you faint on me. It’s completely unfair.”

“I fainted?” She tried to sit up.

“Give yourself a minute.”

“I’m sorry. It was a busy day. I...I didn’t eat.”

“You have got to take better care of yourself. Let’s get you fed. We can finish our talk later.”

Jennifer shook her head. “I told Arlene. I told Arlene about you, about us being lovers.”

“Who’s Arlene?”

She turned away in embarrassment. "My therapist."

"All this cloak and dagger is about you seeing a therapist?"

Jennifer nodded.

"You're kidding, right?" Mac chuckled.

"No, and why are you laughing?"

"What? You thought I'd be all shocked or...or what exactly? What was going on in that pretty little head of yours?"

"Nobody wants damaged goods, Mac. Nobody wants something broken and...you think I'm pretty?"

"Got a newsflash for you," Mac said. "One, I already know you're not perfect, none of us are. Two, *I* want you. Three, you're bloody gorgeous and you know it. Four, thank you."

"For what?"

"For revealing this to me. For being honest."

Tears started to stream down her face, mingling with the drops of rain.

Mac wiped them away with the pads of his thumbs. "Most of all, for trying so damn hard. Don't think this all comes easy to me. It doesn't. I'm just as likely to make mistakes, say stupid things. I'm certain I don't deserve you... You're shivering."

"Not from the cold." Jennifer leaned in and kissed him.

It wasn't a passionate kiss. It was soft and gentle, like a whisper. As she pressed her lips against his, he felt them tremble. He tasted her salty, achingly sweet tears. Then brushed his cheek, tenderly against hers. "It's going to be all right. We're going to be all right."

She pulled back slowly and looked up at him. "Are you sure?"

Mac nodded. "Let's get you upstairs."

"I have a story to tell you. It's about a girl named Jennifer and a boy named Joe."

"You said it got bad between you two."

"You have no idea. But I want you to. I want you to know, to understand."

Mac leaned his forehead against hers and released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "We'll put Sara to bed, fix you something to eat, and then you can tell me."

Jennifer nodded. As she and Mac climbed to their feet, he took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thanks."

He wrapped his arm around her, guided her over to the elevator and pressed the call button. "So, when was the last time you saw this Joe?" Mac asked, casually. The elevator doors opened and he and Jennifer stepped inside.

"The last time?" Jennifer pressed the button to their floor. "Seven years ago, April 17th, the night I killed him."

“The night you—”

She looked up at him, eyes haunted. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He’d known from the beginning she had demons, a dark past she was running from. But he had no idea how dark. “After Sara’s in bed. This isn’t a story she needs to hear.”

The elevator doors opened. Mac followed Jennifer into the apartment. All was quiet. The elevator ride up felt surreal. Had she really said what he thought she had? There was a quiet voice coming from Sara’s room. As they approached Sara’s door, they saw she was already in bed, cuddled between Rachel and Tom. Tom was reading. Just as he was about to pull Jennifer aside to question her she preceded into the room, leaving him in the now-darkened hallway.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt,” Jennifer said.

Sara sat up. “Did you—”

Mac stepped into the doorway.

Mac!” Sara scrambled off her bed and ran to him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“I was only going for a walk, kiddo.”

She looked at him. “You were fighting.”

Mac lifted her up. “People have arguments. Jennifer and I had a disagreement, that’s all. Sometimes when you don’t see eye to eye and you’re angry, it’s a good idea to cool off.”

“It’s okay, it’s not like you hit her.”

Mac put Sara down, then led her over to the bed. He sat on the edge of it, positioning her so she was standing in front of him. “Did Cliff hit your mum, kiddo?”

“Yes.”

“Did he hit you?” Mac asked.

“I didn’t give him reason to.” Sara leaned forward and in a hushed voice added, “I made myself invisible.”

“I’m not like Cliff, kiddo. I would never hit your sister, that I can promise you.”

Sara smiled with a confidence she rarely displayed. “I know, silly. You and Jennifer love each other, like Ariel and Eric!”

“Ariel and Eric?” Mac asked.

“*The Little Mermaid*,” Rachel clarified as she climbed off the bed. “I think it’s time for us to go.”

“*The Little Mermaid*, huh?” Mac leaned in to give Sara a kiss on the forehead. “Seems I missed that one. Maybe we can watch it together sometime.”

She nodded enthusiastically.

Mac pulled back the covers and patted the mattress. “In you go, missy.”

The little girl happily obliged.

“Gotta tell you something though.” He tucked the covers around her. “Jennifer and I, we’re real people. Relationships in real life tend to be a lot more complicated than Disney makes them out to be. I mean, you don’t even want to get me started on the whole Pocahontas thing. Anyway, I think Jennifer and I are still trying to figure out some things. It’s going to take us a while.”

“Not too long, I hope.” Sara stifled a yawn.

Mac smiled and picked up the book Tom had just laid down. “Why don’t I finish the story? Then Jennifer can see the two of you out.”

Jennifer walked over to Sara, and gave her a big hug. “Goodnight, Sara. Thanks, Mac.”

“Give us a second, Tom.” Rachel pointed toward Jennifer’s bedroom. “In there, now.”

“What?”

“What? Don’t give me that, I’ll never sleep tonight. Spill!” Rachel closed the door.

Jennifer began to take off her wet clothes. “You know? I’m kind of tired—”

“No excuses, I’m not budging until you tell me why you didn’t say anything.”

“About?”

“About? Are you kidding me? Don’t make me kill you. I so don’t have time to train a new best friend, never mind a new business partner. About you and Mac!”

“I’m sorry, it’s all happening so fast. I’m scared, and it...”

“It what?”

Jennifer slipped into her favorite robe. “I don’t know! Did I mention the scared part?”

“Maybe this time it will be different?”

“This time I’m going to make it different. I think he’s someone I could love. Maybe I do already. I started seeing Arlene again and I’m going to stick with it this time.”

Rachel eyes widened in surprise. “You went back to see Arlene?”

“Yes.”

“And...you used the ‘L’ word.”

Jennifer nodded. “I did, didn’t I?”

Rachel stepped closer. “Have you told him?”

“That I love him? No. I said I think he’s someone I *could* love. We have this connection...it’s incredible.”

“I meant have you told him about Joe?”

“Some. We’re going to talk more tonight. I know not telling Eric was a mistake, maybe if he understood or—”

Rachel shook her head. “Eric was a mistake, period.”

“You’re right. I’m not sure how to do this, Rachel.” She swallowed, hard. “It’s been so long since I’ve talked about it.”

“Truth be told, you’ve never *really* talked about it, have you?”

What Rachel said was true. “I guess not, not in the way you mean.”

“Not even to me.” Rachel reached out and pulled Jennifer into her embrace. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Call me if you need to? I don’t care what time it is.”

“I will. Thanks, Rachel.”

Chapter Fourteen

Mac emerged from the bathroom, freshly showered and wearing dry clothes. “I’m afraid we ate all of the tacos. I could make you an omelet.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You’ve got to eat something.” He pulled out a frying pan.

“My tummy is filled with these nervous butterflies. I won’t be able to eat until I get this over with.”

He set the pan down. “Maybe the food thing is secondary at the moment.”

“The trouble is, I don’t know where to start. I feel like my chest is going to explode.”

“How about you start with whatever pops into your mind? We can do this however you want. There’s no right way. We can stay up all night if we need to. You said you wanted me to understand.”

“I do.”

“I want that too, so very much.”

Jennifer untied the sash of her robe. “The scar.”

“The scar?”

“That’s where I’ll start.” Jennifer slipped the garment off her shoulders and down her back then turned around. “Look at it.”

Mac wrinkled his forehead and bent down, turning Jennifer slightly so her back was better lit. He remembered now, the day they had first had sex in the shower he had gotten a glimpse of it. It was so fleeting and he was so distracted, he had promptly forgotten. Their couplings since had been in the darkness of his room. But there it was. Plain as day and crudely carved into her flesh at the base of her spine, just at the rise of the curve of her buttocks. MINE.

Mac’s stomach clenched and his throat constricted. He slid one arm around her waist and leaned his forehead against the back of her neck. “Joe did that to you?”

“And worse.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t you.” Jennifer rested her hand on top of his. “It was a long time ago.”

“I know. But I still feel...”

Jennifer stepped forward, slipped her robe back onto her shoulders, secured the sash and then sought out his eyes. “I need to know if you can handle this, Mac.”

"I've known your past wasn't all sunshine and roses." He reached out to caress her cheek. "Yes. Whatever it is, I can handle it."

"You're not going to look at me in the same way after this." A tear rolled down her cheek. "The truth is going to change everything."

Mac took her hand in his and led her over to the sofa. "I'm counting on it."

Jennifer took a deep breath, closed her eyes and began. "I can remember it as if it were yesterday, although sometimes it seems as if it were a lifetime ago. I was so in love. Well, I thought I was. I was also very naïve. He was completely different in the beginning."

"What changed?"

"What changed?" She mulled over the question. "You know? I'm not even sure. Looking back, there were signs. I guess I saw what I wanted to see. That day, the day I left home I went to him, my knight in shining armor."

"Don't cry, it'll be all right," Joe said.

"You don't understand, I have no place to go," Jennifer cried.

"You'll stay here for a while and pull yourself together. Then you'll go to school and concentrate on your tests."

"Then what, Joe?"

"We'll work something out. Meet me back here later. Maybe I can fix this place up a bit. You can stay right here."

"Here?"

"No one will ever know. It'll be our secret. I'll take care of you," he promised.

"Really?" Jennifer's voice was filled with gratitude. "You would do that for me?"

"So, that's how you came to live in the garden shed?" Mac asked.

Jennifer nodded. "Yeah, it wasn't a huge space, probably eight by ten. By the time I got there after school, the place already looked different. He had laid an old section of carpet on the floor and found a twin-sized mattress, a blanket and a lantern."

"Oh, Joe, how can I thank you? This is wonderful!" Jennifer reached up on her tiptoes to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"I'll show you," Joe said, huskily. He held her face in his hands and leaned in, crushing his lips to hers in an almost brutal kiss.

Their kisses up to then had been sweet and slow and tender. Jennifer felt him bite her lower lip and she gasped in shock.

“Ow!”

He pinned her against the wall and aggressively plundered her mouth with his tongue.

She could feel the metal of the shed’s wall against her back. The coppery taste of her own blood filled her mouth and she moaned in protest. She tried to snake her hands between them to push him off, but he was so much bigger and her struggles only seemed to encourage him and excite him further. She felt the unmistakable evidence of his arousal as he began to grind his erection into her. Jennifer’s heart was pounding, her mind was racing.

Joe pulled back from the kiss. He noticed the bead of blood on her lower lip and smiled down at her. “Did I hurt you, baby?”

Jennifer’s tongue darted out, instinctively to touch the site.

“Let me.” He rested one hand on either side of her head, trapping her. Then he leaned down and lapped up the blood. “Mmmm. You taste so good. Now... I want you to taste me.”

“So not a vampire here.”

“No.” He placed his strong hands on Jennifer’s shoulders and pushed her to her knees. “I want you to suck me off. I want to fuck your mouth.”

Jennifer tried to pull away. “No, Joe. I’ve never... I’m not—”

He grabbed a handful of Jennifer’s hair and yanked up. Her hands immediately flew to his. She tried to climb to her feet, to decrease the tension. “You’re hurting me. Why are you doing this? I thought you loved me.”

“Loved you?”

“Please, don’t hurt me!”

“I don’t want to hurt you. You’re making me hurt you. It’ll be good, I promise. You’re going to love it. I want to take care of you. All I ask is that you take care of me in return. Is that too much to expect from my girl? I’m not seventeen, Jennifer. I’m a man, with needs. I guess I could go to someone else—”

Joe released her and turned to walk away.

“No!” Jennifer felt confused and desperate. “I don’t want you seeing anyone else. I’m just not ready, Joe. I don’t even know what to do.”

“It’s not like it requires a complex skill set. Whores do it all the time. Just open up.”

“And this begins to explain the blowjob issue,” Mac said. “He forced you and you hated it.”

“The first time was a disaster. As soon as he touched the back of my throat I started to gag.” Bile rose up in her throat at the mere memory. “I was nervous and scared. I felt dirty. The taste of his pre-come was nauseating and I panicked. I felt like I was suffocating. As soon as he started to come, I began to retch and

released him. Joe was furious. He reached down, grabbed my hair and came all over my face, and then he slapped me, hard. I fell in a heap onto the floor.”

“You know, if I didn’t know how crazy you are about me, I might have ended up walking away with the impression you weren’t enjoying yourself!”

“I’m sorry—” Jennifer was sprawled on the floor, loose fragments of cement grinding into the palms of her hands. The musty smell inside the damp shed coupled with the smell of Joe’s spendings was overpowering. She tried to deliberately slow her breathing.

In those next few moments time seemed to stand still. She caught sight of a small spider, crawling near her hand and watched as it slowly crept over to the corner. When it reached the edge of the elaborate web Jennifer noticed for the first time the smaller insect trapped there. The spider approached it inch by inch. Jennifer’s eyes began to fill with tears. As she brought her forearm up to wipe her face, Joe reached down and grabbed it.

“Don’t be sorry. Get better.” He released her and tucked himself back into his pants. “You’re a smart girl, do some research. Learn to like it.” He crouched down and dropped a silver key on the floor in front of her face. “Here’s a key to the side entrance. Dad locks up at six o’clock. You can use the locker rooms next to the gym at night.” He tilted her face up, bent over her and smiled. “You look good with my come all over you.” Then he licked the side of her face from her chin to her temple. “I have so much to teach you. This is only the beginning.”

Jennifer shivered at the memory of those words. Mac wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to his chest. “How long? How long did it go on?”

“It was only three months until graduation. I figured I could put up with anything for three months. Then I was going to escape. Within a week of leaving home I found out I was going to get a scholarship to SDSU. I figured I would get a part-time job. Meanwhile, I had no one to turn to, no one to confide in. I spent every waking minute thinking of the future, of what my life would someday be like.”

“How horrible.”

“The present didn’t matter. It was just something to get through, until I was able to escape and begin to really live.” Jennifer quietly wrapped her arm around Mac’s waist and squeezed.

He returned the pressure with reassurance and kissed the top of her head. “So you lived in that hellhole, at that monster’s disposal for three months before escaping.”

Jennifer nodded and sighed.

Mac shifted.

Jennifer sat up and watched as he stood, walked to the kitchen, opened up a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of scotch and two glasses. He walked back to the sofa, poured himself a drink and took a swallow. She noticed his hand was shaking.

“Want one?”

She nodded.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” He poured a second and offered her the glass. “You didn’t exactly escape, did you?”

“No. It took him a few months, but he found me.”

“I love Elizabeth Barrett Browning, don’t you?” Robert held the door to the coffee shop open so Jennifer could exit first.

“She seems so fragile. I wonder if she was as isolated as she sometimes sounds?” she asked as he joined her on the sidewalk. “I admire the way she was able to express herself. It’s like her soul is right there on the page, for everyone to see.”

“Sometimes all it takes is the right person to draw you out. To inspire you.” Robert placed his arm over her shoulders. “I’ve been working on a sonnet and, well, I finished it. I’d like to show it to you.” They turned the corner, and walked into the alleyway where he’d parked his car.

“I’d like to see it.” Jennifer tilted her head back and gazed up at the sky. “The moon is full tonight.”

“It makes you glow.”

She looked away, shyly.

“You do realize how beautiful you are, don’t you?” he asked.

“Well, well, well, the first bloom of young love. Isn’t this just nauseating?” Joe stepped out of the shadows. “Now, what’s wrong with this picture?”

“Joe!” Jennifer stepped away from Robert, quickly distancing herself.

Joe smiled. “Hello, baby. Long time no see. Miss me?”

She took a step backward and shuddered. “I have a different life now, Joe.”

“Really?” He took a step forward, then another and another until he was crowding her, towering over her. She was trembling in fear, but she didn’t turn, she didn’t run. She stood her ground.

“Jennifer?” Robert hesitantly placed his hand on her arm.

Joe turned to look at him, a surprised expression on his face. “You’re still here?”

“Leave him alone, Joe,” Jennifer said, taking another step back, this time pulling Robert with her. “He hasn’t done anything.”

Joe advanced on her, backing her into the wall. “Are you kidding me?” He grabbed her wrists and pulled her arms up over her head. “He touched what’s mine.”

"He hasn't." Jennifer shook her head. "Get out of here, Robert. Please, Joe, he hasn't touched me. I swear. We were just talking, studying."

Robert had only been kind to her. He was sweet, gentle. He didn't deserve to get mixed up in this.

"Did you really think I would let you go?" Joe growled.

"Please," she begged. "I can't do this anymore."

"Look, Joe—"

Robert was of no consequence to Joe. He wasn't even worth a second glance. Joe had come for one reason and one reason only, to teach her a lesson. He pulled out a knife and held it up to Jennifer's throat, tilting the blade slightly so it glinted in the moonlight. "You've been a naughty girl. You need to be punished and the boy's going to watch your humiliation."

"Robert, get out of here," Jennifer shouted, more insistently this time.

"Don't move. I'd just as soon kill her as kiss her," Joe countered.

"Don't listen to—" Before she could finish her sentence, Joe backhanded her across the mouth and then spun her around and roughly pushed her face into the brick wall of the building.

Jennifer struggled against him, trying to break free.

"That's it, baby. Wiggle your sweet ass for me. You know how hard it makes me." Joe lifted her skirt up over her hips before forcefully pulling down Jennifer's panties and giving Robert a fleeting glimpse of her bare bottom. "You ever see such a beautiful ass?" He slapped it.

Robert was frozen in place. "Man, you don't want to do this!" His voice quivered in fright.

The knife tip skimmed down Jennifer's back into the waistband of her bunched up underwear. He slipped the cold metal inside, and with the flick of a blade, he cut them loose "You know what, Robert?" He unzipped his pants and released his cock. "I really, really do!"

Jennifer would have screamed when Joe began to brutally pound into her, but he'd clamped his hand over her mouth. Normally he liked it when she screamed, he'd take her places where the screams didn't matter. In fact, he'd encourage it. But tonight wasn't about Joe's enjoyment. It was about her punishment. Although in her experience, for Joe one seemed to lead to the other.

"You know what the worst part was?" Joe asked no one in particular. "Pretending I loved her. If I'd known how easily she'd give it up, I wouldn't have even bothered. She's nothing but a whore, Robert. Nothing but a whore."

Jennifer couldn't breathe. It was too much, the pain, the humiliation, the fear. She listened to Joe grunt as he repeatedly thrust into her.

"Please!" Robert was closer now.

Joe dragged his knife superficially across Jennifer's back, slicing it open. "No distractions!"

Jennifer's knees began to weaken.

"Not quittin' on me already, are you? Come on, baby, we're just starting to have some fun. You know you want it, huh?" Joe goaded as he felt her weakening. "Geez, this is a bit disappointing, Robert. She used to have better stamina. She used to...take it...like a real pro." He thrust into her one last time and came before releasing his hold on her.

Jennifer fell bonelessly to the ground, landing facedown in the filth. "All that training, gone to waste. Just another piece of alley trash, that's what she is." Joe climbed on top of her and straddled her back. Then he viciously lifted the back of her shirt up and pulled down the waistband of her skirt, exposing her lower back. "But, make no mistake about it. This piece of trash is mine!" he said. Then he carved the word into her, laughing and taking pleasure in her muffled screams of pain.

Jennifer was only vaguely aware of the sounds of someone retching nearby. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. She was far away. Someplace warm. Someplace safe. If only she could imagine a place like that and hold onto it. She was covered in her own blood, trails of the sticky substance streamed down the side of her waist and pooled on the ground beside her, covering her hands. They were raw from scraping against the tar. She tried to move. If only she could get some leverage, she could turn. Maybe then she could sit up and right her clothing.

"Oh, God. Jesus." Robert was crying. He was on his knees beside her.

"He's gone?" Jennifer was still facedown in the alley.

"He just walked away. I'm going to go get help. Okay? Jesus! I'm afraid to leave you."

"Help me up. Take me back to the dorm."

Robert helped her move into a sitting position. "We need to call the police!"

"Robert! Look at me!"

The boy wiped at his tear-stained face.

"Nothing happened. Do you hear me? You don't want to get involved in this. You're going to take me back to the dorm and we'll never speak of this again. We'll never see one another again. It didn't happen."

"But, Jennifer, you... You were raped."

"Joe's dangerous. He's insane. Now that he's found me, if you continue to show an interest in me, you'll get yourself killed. I'm not worth it, Robert. Go find yourself some nice, normal girl."

"You expect me to just forget about this?"

"If I can, you can. You're never to tell a soul. Promise me."

He started to cry again. "But I just stood there. What kind of a man does that make me?"

"A smart one. An alive one. He would have just as soon killed me. I need to clean myself up so I can go back to my room. Can you help me?"

"Of course."

"And you won't say another word about this? Not to anyone?"

"No."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"That's it?" Mac growled. He was pacing back and forth in front of the French doors in the living room. "He just dropped you off?"

"He was a kid, he was eighteen. We both just wanted it behind us. Plus...Joe...scary."

"God, I'd love to get my hands on that fucker!"

"Dead, remember?"

Mac stopped and looked at her. He nodded once and rejoined her on the couch. "You're tired. I can see it in your eyes, your face." He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"Exhausted, but I want to finish this."

Chapter Fifteen

She interlaced her fingers with his. "We're close to the end. Shall I continue?"

Mac lifted their clasped hands to his lips, kissed the inside of her wrist, and nodded.

"Joe moved to San Diego. He started to follow me. I did my best to stay with people...lots of people. I went to school year-round, so I could continue to live in the dorm. I tried to stay away from him, to keep my distance. But I couldn't, not always. So, there were other instances. As the year went on he became more and more desperate, more and more obsessed. It seemed he was forever watching, forever waiting. I could feel it, feel him.

"Why didn't you ever go to the police?"

"I was too ashamed, too embarrassed, too weak," Jennifer admitted, unable to look him in the eye. "He told me if I told anyone, he would kill me. I...believed him."

"You sure you don't want to come home with me for spring break?" Rachel asked.

"Nah! I've got work. Plus, I've got a paper due as soon as break is over and I'm a bit behind."

"I don't like you being alone." Rachel nervously bit her lip. "What if that guy, the one that hit you shows up again?"

Joe had started to get sloppy. He was leaving bruises where they showed.

"He's not going to. I told you, I'm not seeing him anymore."

Rachel zipped up her backpack. "I wish you'd report him. It's not too late, you know."

"It's over. Let it go."

"Is it? Someone's been calling here and hanging up when I answer. It started right after you came home with that black eye. Who is he? What's going on? You're my friend, Jennifer. I care about you."

Jennifer turned and looked out the window. "I care about you too. That's why I'm not telling you. There are some things you're better off not knowing. This is one of them. Go home. I'll be fine."

"What if—"

"It's only for a week. All of my shifts are during the day. I'm just going to stay holed up here. I'm going to be study-girl. Plus, I haven't seen or heard from the guy in weeks. He's probably moved on to a girl who doesn't say no."

"Call if you change your mind? I won't be far from here. I can come back and get you any time."

"I've got the number."

Rachel picked up her backpack, gave Jennifer a hug and walked out the door. It was mere seconds later that Jennifer heard a knock.

"Forgot your keys again?" She unlocked the door and swung it open. "Joe!"

She tried desperately to close it, but she was too late and far too weak. Joe stepped back and hit the door, full force, with his shoulder. Jennifer was thrown back, her head smashing into the wall behind it. When she opened her eyes she was dazed and Joe was there, his height, his size, intimidating as always.

"Did you miss me?" He cocked back his fist and punched her.

Jennifer heard her nose break. Blood began to gush down the front of her face. She looked down and watched as drops fell onto her new white Keds.

Joe grabbed a fistful of her hair, yanked her head up and looked her in the eye. "'Cause I've sure missed you."

He followed the stream of blood intently with his eyes as it wound its way down her neck. He reached up with both hands and pulled open her starched white blouse.

Jennifer moaned as she heard the tearing of fabric. Buttons flew everywhere.

"He had come prepared. He'd planned it all out, every detail. He gagged me. He tied me to the bed. For three days I lay there while he used, tortured and raped me. He was mad. He left me only to get food for himself. I wasn't given anything to eat, anything to drink. By the third day I had given up any hope it would end. I began to pray for death."

"You smell." he said as he climbed off of Jennifer. "Christ, this place reeks of sex!" He bent over her and inhaled deeply. "You know? I kind of like it. Well, I'm off to shower. Don't go anywhere."

She was feeling almost delirious. Jennifer watched through hooded eyes as Joe walked into the bathroom and closed the door. She heard the old pipes squeal in protest when he turned on the hot water. Then she heard something else, the jangling of keys outside in the hallway. She turned her head toward the sound. At first she thought she was hallucinating. Rachel was standing in the doorway, backlit by the stark light of the hallway.

"Oh, God!" Heedless of any danger, Rachel ran into the room.

Jennifer's eyes darted to the bathroom door in warning. Joe was now singing, merrily, in the shower.

Rachel released Jennifer's gag. "Are you all right?"

"Get out of here. He's insane," Jennifer croaked, her voice dry.

Rachel's eyes swept over Jennifer's naked body, taking in the cuts and bruises. "I'm not leaving you here like this." She ran to the desk and began to frantically search through the drawers. "Scissors! Scissors!" she quietly chanted.

"Use his knife! It's on the nightstand!"

Rachel grabbed it and swiftly cut through the silk scarves Joe had used to bind her feet. She then ran around to the far side of the bed and made short order of cutting through the one securing her left arm to the bedpost.

“Just one left.” Rachel rounded the bed. “You’re almost free. Can you walk?”

As she began to slice through the last of the bindings they heard the water turn off. Their eyes met. “Go!” Jennifer whispered.

“We’ll leave together.”

As she felt the knife slip through, severing the last of the silk scarf, Jennifer heard the door open. Before she could shout out a warning he had grabbed Rachel by the hair and thrown her, headfirst, into the wall. Rachel slid to the floor, unconscious, releasing the blade. Jennifer flew off the bed and scrambled, sprawling onto the floor, searching desperately for the weapon.

Joe effortlessly kicked it away before wrapping his hand around her throat. “You know what?” he said, squeezing. “You’re beginning to bore me and that’s dangerous. The only reason you’re still alive is that you can be amusing...on occasion.”

Everything was spinning around her, the room in which she’d been trapped began to fade to black. Relief came as she felt the welcome slowing of her own heartbeat. She was so close...so close. Then he released her.

“It’s not going to be that easy,” he spat, his face just a hairsbreadth from hers.

Jennifer rolled onto her side and coughed. She watched him slip his shirt on and step into his jeans.

“Touch me again and I’ll kill you,” she gasped.

He laughed. “You don’t stand a chance against me, baby. You never have.”

Using the bed for leverage, she climbed, slowly to her feet. She felt unsteady, weak. The room around her swirled and she had to fight down a wave of nausea.

“Look at you,” he said. “You can barely stand. And you’re not nearly as pretty as you used to be.”

“Fuck you!”

“That all you’ve got? I don’t mind telling you, this is turning out to be a real disappointment. I thought we’d get to spend a beautiful week together, just the two of us. There’s no fight left in you anymore. It’s no fun when you don’t fight back.” He glanced down at Rachel’s unconscious form.

“I need to build my strength back up. Like you said, we have a whole week. Give me a few days to rest and I’m sure—”

He spun around and backhanded her. “Shut up. I’m thinking.”

Pain shot through her cheek and eye. He’d broken her nose that first day and her eye had already been black. She had some broken ribs too, she was sure of it, and at least two broken fingers. She caught a glimpse of herself in the nearby dresser mirror.

"I've never had a redhead before. I hear they have a reputation for being really feisty." He reached down and cupped his crotch.

Bile rose up in Jennifer's throat and she started to gag.

He grabbed her arm and pushed her, roughly in the direction of the bathroom. "Go clean yourself up."

She stumbled and collided with the dresser, its corner digging into her rib. She had to hold on with both hands to keep from falling.

"If you're a good little girl, I'll let you watch me play."

She could see Joe's reflection in the mirror in front of her. He was looking down at Rachel and smiling. It was the same, sick smile she'd seen dozens of times. She glanced down at the clothes iron that had been left out. It was sitting there, right in front of her on the dresser. She wrapped one, shaky hand around the handle.

"Joe?"

"Yeah?"

As he turned to look at her, Jennifer swung. With every ounce of strength left in her, she swung. Joe never saw it coming. The first blow merely stunned him. Whether it was the second or the third that shattered his skull, she wasn't sure.

"Playtime's over."

"Rachel came to a few seconds later. She found me, still standing there, naked. I was covered in blood, the iron in my hand. She called her father. He was a detective with the SDPD at the time. Within minutes the place was teeming with cops," Jennifer finished.

"There was an investigation?"

"Not really. I was in pretty bad shape. Rachel had a concussion. It seemed pretty clear to everyone that he'd attacked her while she was trying to help me escape. They thought it was self-defense."

"You were protecting yourself. You were protecting Rachel."

"She saved my life."

"Remind me to thank her," Mac said softly, as he wiped the tears from his eyes. "Although by the sound of things, you turned around and saved hers."

Jennifer leaned her head back on the sofa and closed her eyes.

"I'm not the first man you've been with...since Joe. Am I?" Mac asked.

*"No," Jennifer replied. "But you're the first one, the *only* one, I've told."*

"It means a lot to me that you did." Mac ran his hand over her hair. "What is it that really made you decide?"

Jennifer pulled away and climbed to her feet. Putting distance between them would make this next part easier. She opened the French door and stepped onto the balcony. It was still dark outside and the sky seemed shrouded in a surreal, purple glow.

Mac followed her. He placed his hands on her shoulders, making tiny circles with the pads of his thumbs.

"It's past midnight. It's a new day," she whispered, gazing out over the sleeping city.

"That it is. Maybe we've done enough talking for tonight."

"It's better we do this now, finish this now." Her voice started to falter. "In the long run, it will hurt less."

"What will hurt less?" Mac asked, confused.

"If we end things before we get more involved."

"Don't you want me anymore? I thought we were off to a good start here."

Jennifer spun to face him, her eyes glistening with tears. "Of course I want *you*! There's nothing wrong with *you*!"

"And I still want you," he said gently as he took her hands in his.

"How can you?" She saw her own pain reflected in his eyes and it was too much. "How can you possibly want me? I'm n—"

"Because I love you."

She turned away, heart pounding. "You don't have to say that."

"Hey, look at me. You don't have to say it back. There are no strings here. I'm not asking you for anything." He moved around to face her. "Jennifer, I love the woman you are. You're kind and strong and smart. You're sexy as hell. I swear, every time you look at me, you take my breath away. And when I make love with you? When I'm inside of you? I feel as if I've finally come home."

"Mac—"

He placed his fingertips over her mouth. "I love you, plain and simple."

Tears rolled, unchecked down her face. "Been working on the speech long?"

Mac nodded. "My entire life. I've just been waiting for the right girl so I could try it out. How did I do?"

"God, if I wake up now, I swear I'm going to be really pissed." She wrapped her arms around his waist, rested her head against his chest and sighed. "I don't deserve you. I'm going to work really hard with Arlene, I promise."

"Don't make your work with Arlene about me. It's about you. Do it for you, because you want it."

Jennifer's stomach audibly growled. She glanced down at it. "Well, that was romantic."

"Oh!" Mac stepped back. "I almost completely forgot! Speaking of romantic..."

"What?"

"I'd like to whisk you away tomorrow. One of Sara's friends is having a birthday party, a sleepover thing. Apparently, the invitations went out before Sara started at the school. The girl's mother called earlier this evening and said Jamie wants to include Sara."

"Sara has a friend?"

"It seems so." Mac led Jennifer back into the living room and locked up.

"Did you accept?"

"I didn't want to without checking with you. I gave her a tentative yes. We were supposed to call back and confirm hours ago. One of us needs to ring her in the morning. Sara really wants to go."

"That's good. Right? We should let her. But, what if—"

"We'll only be a phone call away. I'm not taking you far. We won't even leave the city limits. What do you say? Twenty-four hours? Just the two of us?" Mac asked, hopefully.

"What if this Jamie's family isn't nice?"

"I've met the mum, the father's out of the house. They divorced a few years ago. Her name's Carmen and she's an emergency room nurse over at Mercy Hospital. They live close by in the home she grew up in. Jamie is an only child. There are no guns in the house. Carmen's a Democrat. She doesn't believe in spanking. She's on some low-carb diet and it's killing her because she misses potato chips. I think she's okay. You can call her in the morning and chat." Mac walked over to the kitchen.

"How on earth do you know all that?"

Mac turned the light on over the stove. "She picks Jamie up around the same time I pick up Sara. We've talked a few times."

Jennifer was caught off-guard by a sudden pang of jealousy. She was envious of this woman, Carmen, a woman she didn't even know. Envious because she had easily revealed so much of herself in the space of a few casual exchanges. "I'll call her in the morning. What time is she supposed to be there? We'll need to get a gift."

"Carmen said we can drop her off at noon, pick her up around the same time Sunday. The other girls aren't going to arrive until around four. When I mentioned I might take advantage of the opportunity to take you on a little holiday she offered to have Sara come early. I figured I'd go embarrass Rick over at the club, then stop and get some supplies on the way home. You and Sara can take care of the gift. We can all meet back here at, say, eleven thirty? After we drop Sara off, you'll be all mine. How does that sound?"

"It sounds good."

"Good?"

"I mean, it sounds great!"

"Be honest," Mac said.

"It sounds both inviting and...intimidating."

"I was going to go with intimate."

“Just you and me, no distractions.”

“I promise I won’t bite you.”

“Well, that’s a relief! But, hey, what if I like little, you know, light sexy bites?”

Mac smiled at her. “That I can do. Want to split a sandwich?”

“Sure.” Jennifer followed him into the kitchen. “Actually, I could probably eat a whole sandwich. I’m suddenly starving.”

“Coming up!” He rummaged through the fridge.

Jennifer climbed up onto one of the barstools. “You realize you’re spoiling me, don’t you?”

Mac winced, then laid the sandwich supplies on the counter.

“What?”

“Well, seems you’ve found me out, uncovered my sinister little plan.”

“Your plan?”

He opened the jar of mayonnaise and scooped out a knife-ful. “I intend to ruin you. I’m going to spoil you so thoroughly and completely no other man will ever want you.”

The apartment was dark and quiet, save the dim light illuminating the area over the stove. Sometime earlier Mac had removed his shoes and socks. He was barefoot. His T-shirt, which was wrinkled and contained traces of her makeup, was sloppily untucked. He set down the knife and screwed the cover back on the jar of mayonnaise.

“I think I love you,” Jennifer said, softly. At first she hadn’t even realized she’d said it out loud. But then his head flew up and his eyes connected with hers.

A long moment passed.

“Well, you be sure to let me know when you’ve decided for sure, won’t you?” Mac asked, a slow smile forming.

Jennifer nodded.

He stacked some turkey and cheese on top of the bread. “Do you want lettuce and tomato?”

“No thanks.” Jennifer laid her head down on the counter and yawned.

Mac chuckled. “Am I going to have to eat this for you?”

“No, sorry. I’m just tired.” Jennifer lifted her head and took a bite.

“Let’s eat and get some rest. My alarm is going to be going off in a few hours to wake me up for fencing. If you want to stay in your own room, I’ll understand.”

Jennifer looked up at him and froze, then swallowed. “Do you want me to stay in my own room?”

“No. I’d *much* prefer you sleep in my bed.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, you know, technically the bed in your room is mine, too.”

Mac set his sandwich down. “Maybe we should start calling it *our* bed.”

“Our bed,” Jennifer said out loud, trying it out. “I like the sound of that.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Come on, Mac!” Jennifer begged. “Give me a hint?”

“No.” He walked to the back of the store, pulled a bag of ice out of the freezer and then headed for the checkout counter. “It’s a surprise. We’ll be there in ten minutes. You can wait.”

Mac accepted the change from the cashier.

“Jennifer? Hey, it is you!”

Mac turned around as a tall, brown-haired man wearing a U.S. Marine Corps T-shirt approached.

Jennifer smiled. “Eric, how are you? It’s been a long time.”

“I’ve been great, actually. You’re looking good. What brings you to Harbor Island?” Eric asked.

“I’m afraid I’ve kidnapped the lady.” Mac extended his hand.

“Eric.”

“Mac.”

The door chime sounded and in walked a very pregnant dark-haired woman. “Honey, can you get some mint chocolate chip, too?”

Eric waved her over. “Hey, Angie, come and meet someone. Jennifer, this is my wife, Angie.” He wrapped his hand around her waist and rubbed her swollen belly. “The rest of the family will be popping out in just about a week or so.”

“Congratulations,” Mac said, spontaneously.

Eric nodded “Thanks! Angie, Jennifer Jones and Mac...”

“Moore.” There was an uncomfortable moment of silence. Mac realized Jennifer hadn’t said anything, her gaze seemed fixed on Angie’s protruding belly. “So, is this going to be your first?”

“First and second actually.”

“Twins?” Mac asked.

“Yup! Can you believe it? Both boys. Angie here has weathered pregnancy like a champ. Fortunately, we both wanted a big family.”

“That’s...great, really great,” replied Jennifer.

“You two have any kids?”

“Us? No. Well, there’s my sister. She lives with us now.”

“Jennifer’s mum passed away recently.”

“Sorry to hear that. I didn’t even know you had a sister. Did I?” Eric asked.

Jennifer reached for Mac's hand and bent down to check the time on his watch. "I'm sure at some point I must have mentioned it."

"Eric made Captain last month," Angie announced, oblivious to the awkwardness of the moment.

"Captain? Wow. We kind of have to get going. Don't we have to get going, honey?"

Mac checked the time himself. "You're right, it's getting late. It was nice to meet you."

Jennifer was already halfway out the door. She made a beeline for Mac's car. As soon as he unlocked it, she slid inside. "Talk about awkward."

Mac closed the door, dropped the ice he'd purchased in the trunk, and then climbed in himself. "Seat belt, blonde."

"What? Oh!" Jennifer fastened her seatbelt and resumed looking out the window. A moment or two passed as Mac drove on. "He looked happy, didn't he? Eric looked happy."

"Seems he's got a lot to be thankful for, recent promotion, lovely wife, two children on the way. I'd say happiness is an understatement."

"Yeah." She sounded a bit wistful.

Mac pulled into the parking lot of the Marina, quickly found a parking space, and cut the car's engine. "You were in love with him once?" he asked. "Maybe you still are?"

Jennifer shook her head. "No, I wasn't in love with Eric. But, I wanted to be. He seemed...normal. For a long time I thought he was my chance to have the kind of life I always dreamed of having. He was the reason I started seeing Arlene the first time."

"The first time?"

"I saw I was losing him. I went to Arlene so she could fix me." She lifted her hands in the air and placed quotes around the word fix.

"What happened?"

"We had been seeing one another for a year and a half. It was Eric's birthday. I got up early and made muffins, blueberry, they were his favorite. I drove over to his apartment at the crack of dawn and parked across the street. Before I got out of the car, the front door to his house opened to reveal he and...and Angie. I didn't know her name then but, she'd obviously spent the night."

"Did you confront him?"

"No. Well, not directly. Not like Arlene suggested. I asked if everything was all right between us. He told me..." Jennifer paused and began to play nervously with the hem of her top. "He told me something was missing. He didn't believe I loved him. He...needed more. I wasn't good enough. I should be happy for him and Angie."

"Feel whatever is true." Mac opened the car door.

"Where are you going?"

"We're here. Get on out."

"We're here?" Jennifer looked out at the sea of sailboats in front of her. "I thought we pulled in to talk."

"Nope!" Mac slammed the door shut and walked around to the trunk. "Did you ever stop to think the reason it didn't work out with Eric wasn't about you? Maybe the right chemistry wasn't there."

"Envy." Jennifer joined him at the rear of the car. "I guess I feel a tad envious."

Mac lifted an eyebrow. "Just a tad?"

"Remember how I told you when my father left, I decided right then and there I would never get married and have children?"

Mac stepped away to retrieve one of the dock carts. "Yeah." He pulled it back over to the car and started to unload the contents of the trunk. "Let me guess. The truth is there is a part of you that wants it all, the house, the husband, the two-point-five kids."

"And the dog." Jennifer sighed. "I always wanted a golden retriever."

"Maybe someday it'll happen. You might stumble upon Mr. Right yet." Mac slammed the trunk closed and pulled the cart toward the metal gate that led to the docks.

"Do you think?"

He inserted his key in the lock and opened the door. "Maybe you already have."

"I don't know." Jennifer proceeded down the ramp to the dock. "Sometimes I feel like I'm running out of time. I'm getting pretty old."

"You are *not* old." Mac said staring appreciatively at her behind. "And you've got a great ass."

Jennifer turned and looked at him over her shoulder, a brilliant smile on her face. "You think so?"

"Oh, yeah!" Mac chuckled. "It's the kind of ass that inspires men to write poetry."

"Stop it!"

"It's completely true, I swear it. Perhaps I'll surprise you later with a bit of verse." He pointed to the left. "Ours is the fourth boat on the right."

"Thunder 'n Raine." Jennifer stopped to read the gold script painted across the red transom of the forty-two-foot boat. "With an E?"

"Yup! This would be it." Mac effortlessly leapt over the cabled rail surrounding the perimeter of the boat. "Hand me the stuff, will you?"

"Sure. Whose boat?"

Mac accepted the last of the bags. "My father's. Raine is his last name."

"Your father's? I didn't realize you had a father."

Mac extended his hand. "'Course I have a father. I wasn't hatched, you know. Hop on."

Jennifer took Mac's hand and climbed on board the boat, stepping over the line and down onto the fiberglass bench where he was standing.

"Does he live in San Diego?"

Mac jumped off of the bench onto the deck then lifted her down.

"He spends most of his time in London. He's got a place in L.A., but he's rarely there anymore. When I moved down here, he told me to take the boat with me." Mac unlocked the cabin cover and removed it.

"You've never talked about him. He and your mom never married?"

"She would never agree. Hand me down the supplies."

"Why not?"

"Nathan's got a bit of a reputation with the ladies. He loved Mum, asked her many times, but she knew how he was, the kind of life he led. She wanted something quieter, simpler. So, when she found out she was pregnant she moved here to the States to join Henry. He was living in L.A. back then."

"So you were born here?"

Mac nodded. "It took until I was around three for Nathan to talk her into returning to England. We moved back and forth across the pond several times over the years. I probably spent as much of my childhood in London as I did here in Southern California," Mac explained. "That's the last of it. Need a hand?"

"I'm good." Jennifer turned around and climbed down the ladder into the main cabin.

It was surprisingly spacious. To the left was a galley, which held a refrigerator, stove, sink and oven. There was a table on the right. In front of it was a sitting area containing a red suede loveseat, chair and television.

"Wow!" She looked around. "Who knew? Mac, your dad's rich! Can I peek in the bedroom?"

"Explore to your little heart's content. I'll put away the groceries, then we'll be off."

Jennifer opened the door to the bathroom. "Everything looks brand new."

"It's not, nine years old in fact. But Nathan never uses it and I take good care of her. She's my baby." He placed the bottled beer he'd brought into the fridge.

Jennifer opened the door to the forward cabin. "I thought the Harley was your best girl.

Mac walked up behind her, slipped his hands around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder. "No, you're my best girl. And you're much more fun to have around than a bloody boat or bike. Why don't you unpack? I'll go throw your empty suitcase back in the trunk, it'll give us a bit more room."

"Okay."

Mac returned to the kitchen, put away the last of the groceries and was about to go up top to check the lines when he heard her gasp.

"Oh my God!"

"What?" He ran back to the cabin, alarmed.

"Nathan Raine!" Jennifer was pointing at the family portrait which had minutes ago been obscured by the open closet. "Your father is Sir Nathan Raine? How is it you never mentioned this?"

Mac placed his hands in his pockets and struck a casual pose, leaning against the doorjamb. “I guess it just never came up?”

She tilted her head to the side and studied him. “Bull. I can totally see the resemblance now. Why didn’t you tell me?”

He picked up Jennifer’s now-empty suitcase and pushed it under the bed. “I tend to avoid the subject. At least until I get to know someone, *really* know him or her, and even then, sometimes I keep it to myself. There. Doesn’t look like I’ll need to put it back in the trunk after all.”

“Why?” Jennifer followed Mac back into the galley.

He pulled out a beer. “It wasn’t easy, growing up the bastard son of a famous actor. People can be cruel, the press can be cruel, and other children, especially, can be cruel. He did his best to shield us from it. It was hardest on Mum.” He tossed the beer cap into the trash, then took a swallow. “Shall I open some wine?”

“I think I’ll wait until later for that.”

He opened the fridge. “Soda?”

She snatched one out of the door. “Thanks.”

Jennifer followed Mac topside.

“It was her choice, to stay in the shadows, in the background. But there were times she resented him deeply for it. There were times I resented him deeply for it,” Mac explained as he checked the lines.

“I didn’t even know Nathan Raine had a son.”

“He never used to talk about his personal life in interviews. Although now...”

“Now?”

“See these?” He held up one of the bumpers hanging off the side of the boat. “When I push off, I want you to pull these up.”

“Okay.”

He hopped off the boat, back down onto the dock.

“So, do you ever see him or talk to him?” Jennifer asked.

Mac made short order of untying the two lines that secured the boat. “Yeah, seems even more so now that Mum is gone. He stopped working for a while and crawled into the bottle. But he’s back on track now, doing rehearsals for *Macbeth*.” Mac pushed them off and then jumped back on. “They open in London next month.”

“I’ve never been to London.”

“Want to go?”

Jennifer laughed. “That wasn’t a hint.” She pulled the bumpers up.

“I didn’t think it was. Sara will be off for spring break in a couple months.”

“You’re serious? Would the County let me take her?”

"We won't know if we don't ask." Within a few minutes, Mac had managed to maneuver the boat out of the slip.

The day was glorious. Jennifer sat down on the bench, closed her eyes and tilted her head back. The warmth of the sun bathed her body in its glow. Mac smiled. The rocking of the boat as it made its way across the water appeared to be lulling her to sleep.

"Am I losing you?" he asked, quietly.

Her eyes flew open. "Huh? Sorry. It was a long week and a long night."

"It's all right. It's actually nice to see you so relaxed. Can I get you to steer her into the wind while I unfurl the sails?"

Gone were the black boots Mac normally wore. He had traded them in for a pair of rubber-soled tennis shoes. His long-sleeved white shirt was casually untucked from his blue jeans and it billowed in the wind as he stood at the wheel of the boat.

Jennifer presented herself with a smart salute. "I am at your disposal, Captain Moore. Ready to follow orders, sir!"

Mac grinned. "I'll keep that in mind for later." He moved so she could join him at the helm. "See the point over there?"

"Point. Check."

"Keep the bow lined up with it. Turning the wheel to the right makes it go—"

"Right? And, left for left? Now, where's the brake?" Jennifer asked, looking on and around the console.

"Ha-ha." Mac left her in charge while he took the cover off and hoisted the mainsail.

"What about the other one?" Jennifer asked pointing to the front of the boat.

"Let's go with simple, for now." Mac took control of the wheel, placing his hands directly on top of hers. "Thought we'd sail over toward the Coronado Bridge, drop anchor, throw dinner in the crock pot and relax."

"Sounds wonderful." Jennifer leaned back into him. "Thanks for thinking of this."

"You're welcome."

A few minutes passed.

"You're awfully quiet. What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Wondering about how you managed to get involved with what's-her-name.

"Patricia?"

"Step away from the girl," Mac said.

"Look, man, you're new around here. So, I'll forgive the interruption...this time. Trust me, you don't want anything to do with this one. She's not worth the trouble."

The boy had a fragile-looking girl pinned against the wall of the dark hallway. School had ended hours ago. Mac had just finished swim practice and was returning to get something from his locker.

“Patricia, you know the rules. If you don’t have the cash...” He reached down and began to pull up the hem of her skirt.

“Please, I’ll get you the money.” She looked over the boy’s shoulder, her eyes connecting with Mac’s.

Mac had no idea what possessed him. He had seen her in the halls a few times. They even shared a class or two. But they had never spoken. Not with words. Not even then. As he looked into her eyes he saw her fear. He knew what she wanted, what she needed from him. Quick as a flash he had the older boy on the ground. Mac had his hand placed firmly around the boy’s throat.

“I don’t think the lady’s interested, mate.”

“Sweet Maclain.” Patricia swayed, then dropped to her knees beside him. “You’re my savior.” She giggled, glassy-eyed.

“What did you give her?” Mac asked, applying pressure to the boy’s throat.

“Weed, but who knows what else she’s taken. Get off of me! You want to be her knight in shining armor? Pay her bill! She owes me a hundred.”

“We should go,” Patricia bent over and whispered.

Mac released the boy and climbed to his feet. “I’ll have the money for you tomorrow. Stay away from her.”

He left the building and walked, swiftly around to the back alley. His hand was shaking as he pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his coat pocket and lit up. Mac tilted his head back against the brick wall and exhaled a thin stream of smoke.

“There you are.” She was standing at the entrance of the narrow passage, backlit by the low afternoon sun.

“You should go home.”

She moved with the grace and deliberation of a panther, deeper into the alley, her eyes trained on his. “I don’t want to go home.” Mac watched, unmoving, as she approached, her predatory gaze unwavering. “I want you. You were wonderful back there. You deserve a reward.”

“I don’t need a reward.”

“I know just what you need.” She reached down and began to expertly unbuckle his belt.

“What are you—” Her small hand surrounded his quickly growing erection.

“Shh.” Patricia reached up and licked the outline of his lower lip. “Shy boy, let me be your first.”

Patricia slowly slid down the length of his body, dropped to her knees in front of him and slipped the head of his penis between her ruby red lips.

Jennifer turned around and poked Mac playfully in the chest. “Only you can make getting a blowjob in an alley sound like a religious experience.”

“I was sixteen, painfully shy, and had never been with a woman. Trust me when I say it was a religious experience. I thought Patricia was my salvation and I faithfully worshipped at her altar for more than a decade.”

“Worshipped at her altar? Real guys do not talk like that.”

“I was in love with her. It was mind-blowing. I’d never been so connected to another human being. She...consumed me. Leaving her was the hardest thing I ever did.”

Jennifer started to turn away from him, unable to bear hearing the regret in his voice. But, he would have none of it. He tilted her chin up and searched her eyes. “But it was also the smartest thing I ever did. You see, it started me on this new path.”

“What path is that?”

Mac leaned down and kissed her tenderly on the mouth.

“The one that’s led me to you.”

Chapter Seventeen

“More wine?” Mac asked as he poured himself a refill.

Jennifer held out her glass. “Why not?” She sighed, contentedly. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a gorgeous sunset.”

“It’s probably just the spectacular company.” Mac gave her a peck on the cheek. “Getting hungry? Dinner will be ready soon.”

“I’m not in a hurry. I’m really enjoying this.” She pulled the blanket they were wrapped in more tightly around her shoulders. “I wish there were more stars.”

“They’re there. The city lights make them hard to see. Hey, how about I take you and Sara out camping in the desert sometime. We could bring a telescope. Out there we’d be able to see all sorts of stars.”

“Camping. You mean, like in a tent?”

“That would be the general idea.”

“Outside?”

“Obviously not a *good* idea. Hey! We could take the boat out to Catalina sometime. I bet we’d get a better look at the stars from there. This summer, maybe. There’s bound to be a flotilla we could hook up with,” he suggested. “Sara will be out of school.”

“Oh my God! I never even thought about her not having school this summer. What am I going to do?”

“I heard one of the club members here say the marina gives sailing lessons. If Sara’s interested, we could sign her up and she could learn how to sail.”

“I don’t even know if she swims.”

“They have swimming lessons too. We’ll figure it out.” Mac stood and gathered up his glass, the blanket and the wine bottle. “You stay put, I’m going to turn on the running lights now that it’s dark. I’ll come back for you.”

“You don’t have to help me. I can make it back.”

“The decks get slippery at night and you’re not used to it. Indulge me. Besides, I’m the captain of this ship, you surly wench. You’ll bend to my will.” Mac bent over her and lowered his voice. “Do as I say.”

“Aye, aye.”

He was gone for a few minutes before the outside lights turned on. It was a few more minutes before he returned. She saw him reach out for her in the dim light. Jennifer slipped her hand wordlessly into his

and allowed him to lead her from the bow, where they had been sitting, back down the side of the boat to the stern. Then she followed him down the ladder. The only illumination inside came from the red glow of the power indicator on the Crock-Pot and the flickering flames from the vanilla-scented candles he had lit in the forward cabin.

“The candles are lovely.”

He paused to kiss her. It was soft, almost chaste. “Not nearly as lovely as you.”

Mac turned the radio off. The soft sounds of the water as it rhythmically lapped against the hull of the boat drifted through the air. He led her back to the cabin.

“Now what, Captain?”

Mac gathered up the hem of her sweater and pulled it up over her head. “Don’t know.” He traced the top of her bra with his fingertips, drinking in the fullness of her breasts before slowly lowering the straps. “I’m improvising.”

“Improvising?”

He reached down, unsnapped, then unzipped her jeans. “Sit,” he commanded as he pulled them past her hips. “Lean back.”

Jennifer climbed on top of the denim comforter and scooted back on her elbows. “Like this?”

“Exactly.” Mac knelt on the floor and removed her shoes, socks and pants. When he was finished, he slid his hands up the length of her legs, massaging her calves, drawing circular patterns with the pads of his thumbs. “Have I told you how amazing you are?”

“Not in the last few minutes.”

“You are so beautiful.”

Jennifer’s eyes spontaneously filled with tears. “I can’t believe you still think so, after all I’ve told you. I can’t believe you still want me.”

“Believe it.” He hooked his thumbs in the sides of her panties. “Lift up.” He tugged her matching red panties down over her bottom. “Did you buy these when I asked you to?” Mac twirled them around on one finger.

“Yes.” She was already breathless.

“How come I haven’t seen them until now?”

“Because I didn’t want you to know.”

“That you bought them?” he asked, letting them fall to the floor.

“For you,” she added. “I bought them for you.”

“I want to make love to you,” Mac whispered. “No, that’s not right. I want to make love *with* you. Can you do that? Can you make love with me?”

“Kind of thought we—”

“Now, you know that’s not true. Just last night you called what we’ve done fucking.”

Jennifer winced and began to sit up.

"You were right." He placed one knee on the edge of the bed and leaned over, coaxing her back into a relaxed position. "Having sex and making love aren't the same thing. I want to make love with you. I want..."

"What?"

"I want you to feel it. I want to feel it with you." Mac reached down and unclasped the front of her bra, baring her breasts. Then he leaned forward and flicked one hardened nipple with his tongue while palming the other, running his thumb over its peak. Jennifer arched up, into his touch, and he latched on.

She gasped. "We don't have to use condoms anymore. The pill should be working." She laced her fingers through his hair. "I want...I want to feel you, too. I want to feel you come inside of me."

"And you will." Mac slid to the floor in front of her and began to coax her knees apart. "I'm going to make this so good for you. I want to taste you, Jennifer. Will you let me? I promise I won't hurt you."

"I...I don't know, Mac."

He moved back onto the bed and stretched out alongside her. "I'll never force you to do something you don't want to do."

"Do *you* want to?"

"Yes, very much," Mac said unabashedly, gazing intently into her eyes. He moved his hand down to touch her, separating her folds, stroking her, coating his fingers in her wet juices. "So wet for me." He bent forward, stealing a kiss, the slide of his tongue matching the stroke of his hand. He dipped two fingers inside her sopping channel.

"I love your lips," she whispered as he pulled back from the kiss.

Mac removed his fingers and, smiling down at her, slowly brought them up to his mouth. He drew first one glistening finger in, and then the other, snaking his tongue around them, savoring the taste of them, of her. "You're so good, baby." He lowered his hand between their bodies, once again searching out her heat. As he slipped his fingers back inside of her, he leaned in, covering her mouth, giving her a languid kiss.

"See how good you taste? Can you taste yourself on my tongue?"

"Yes." Her voice was tremulous with need.

Mac added a third finger. "Tell me what you want." His thumb circled her clit, his lips brushed up against the shell of her ear. "I want to bring you pleasure."

"You do, I mean, you are."

Mac began to move down her body, leaving a trail of hot openmouthed kisses. "Honey, I've barely started." He lapped up the length of her slit with a wide, firm tongue.

Jennifer gasped, her hips jerking upward slightly.

Mac placed his hands confidently on the insides of her thighs. “Open up for me; that’s a girl.” He blew a cool stream of air onto her engorged clit, taking it into his hot mouth, sucking on it, pulling, tugging and rolling it between his lips. Then he slipped two of his fingers back in, expertly searching for that one spot.

Jennifer moaned as she fisted the comforter beneath her in her hands. She pushed up, pressing her mound into his mouth; her back bowed, her neck arched up.

“Oh! Oh, God! I...I’m—”

As her juices flooded out, onto his tongue, he eagerly drank them up. He felt it, as her body convulsed in orgasm around him. He removed his mouth, slowed down his thrusts and concentrated on watching her. Her hair was splayed out across the bed; her neck and cheeks were flush with passion, her rosy nipples hardened from arousal, her sex still wet and dripping. She was exquisite and she was his, each and every inch of her. He listened to her breathing and grinned.

“That was...”

“Not over.” Mac quickly shed his clothes.

Jennifer, still spent, struggled to lift up onto her elbows. “I don’t think I can move.”

“I’ll help you.” Mac curled an arm under her waist and pulled her closer still to the edge of the bed. “Hold on.” He wrapped her legs around his waist. As the head of his penis slipped inside of her they both gasped.

“Christ, you feel like heaven.”

“Mac—” Jennifer reached up and caressed his face.

“Don’t move. Give me a minute?” Mac closed his eyes.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.” He reached for her hand and placed a gentle kiss on the inside of her wrist. “Everything is right. I just needed a second. The feel of you surrounding me, it’s so intense, so amazing.” He began to move with slow, shallow thrusts.

“You’re teasing me.”

Mac smirked. “Is my girl ready to start telling me what she wants and how she wants it?”

“Want more of you.”

“What part of me?”

“Please, Mac.”

“More of this?” He thrust into her again, but this time up to the hilt.

“Yes!” she yelled, pulling him in with her legs and holding him close to her.

Mac reached between them for her clit, rubbing it as he thrust in and out, each time pushing himself into her a little harder, a little faster. Just as she was about to reach orgasm he broke pace, slowed down and pulled out.

Jennifer was writhing on the bed. “Don’t stop!” she cried out. Her legs, which were wrapped securely around his waist, were trembling. He reached around, encouraging her to unwrap them.

“Scoot back.” He pulled back the covers of the bed so she could crawl between the sheets.

As soon as he joined her in the bed Jennifer wrapped her hand around his erection and guided him back to her entrance. “I believe this is where you belong, Captain.”

Mac hovered above her, resting on his forearms. He bent down, kissed her neck and pushed, once again, inside of her. In and out, he slid.

“Christ, you’re so beautiful. So wet...wet for me. And tight. God, how I want you.”

“You have me. You have me, baby. I’m right here.” Jennifer came again, another orgasm washing over her.

“Look at me, sweetheart,” Mac demanded.

Her eyes immediately found his.

“I love you.” He placed his fingers over her mouth. “No, don’t say it back. I know it’s not fair to say it like this. But I can’t help it and I...I can’t hold on any longer.” He thrust into her again.

Jennifer removed his fingers from her lips. “Come for me, Mac. I want to feel you come. I want—”

Mac let go. With a roar he drove inside of her one last time, shooting his come deep within her welcoming body.

Her arms wrapped around his back. He was slick with sweat. Her fingers stroked him, soothing him gently. He had collapsed on top of her, his arms failing to hold him up any longer. Mac nuzzled her neck as he tried to get his breathing under control.

“Lack of breathing becoming an issue,” Jennifer groaned.

“Sorry!” He rolled off, pulling her with him and draping her across his chest. “Lord, woman, you’re brilliant. An inspiration is what you are.”

“I’m also messy. I’ll be right back.” She started to sit up.

Mac pulled her back into his embrace. “Don’t go.”

“If I don’t get up, there’s going to be a wet spot.”

“Sod it! I’ll sleep in the wet spot. I want to hold you.”

“You’ll sleep in the wet spot?”

“Sure. We’ll sleep for a bit, then we can get up and eat, replenish our strength for later.”

“You’re insatiable!”

Mac spooned up against her, curving himself around her body. He draped his arm over her waist and cupped her breast in the palm of his hand, its full weight resting comfortably there. He gave it a slight, possessive squeeze. “Stop whining, you thankless wench!” he growled.

Jennifer giggled.

“You’re lucky to have found me and you know it,” he whispered in her ear.

“Yes, I do,” Jennifer admitted. “I love you, Mac. I’m certain of it.”

“Love you too, baby,” he murmured before surrendering to sleep, the warm air from his breath heating the back of her neck. “Love you too.”

Chapter Eighteen

January 26, 2004

"Thanks for including me, Rachel." Mac lit the grill.

"Jennifer sort of insisted. Not that I didn't think it was a good idea, you coming with Jennifer. I mean, you and Jennifer coming together. I mean, having the two of you over for dinner. You know what I mean."

Mac smiled. "I know what you mean."

She nodded. "I want you to know I think it's good, great even, if it makes Jennifer happy."

"Me coming with Jennifer? Are we still talking about the dinner invitation?"

"Of course!" Rachel began to toss hamburgers onto the grill. "What would we be talking about?"

"Sex? Relationships?" Mac tilted his head to the side and studied the nervous redhead. "I think you brought me out here to have *the talk*."

"What talk?" Rachel closed the lid to the grill and turned to face him.

"The one where you tell me if I hurt your friend you're going to bust my balls?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of skinning you alive, or beating you over the head with a shovel." Rachel smiled sweetly as she patted Mac on the shoulder.

"Right."

"I don't want to see my friend hurt," she said, somberly.

Mac chuckled. "Are you asking me what my intentions are?"

Rachel looked at him steadily, her stern gaze cutting off his laughter.

He shook his head and looked down at his feet.

"Jennifer and I, we look out for one another," she said. "She's more than my friend. She's like a sister to me. You might mean well, you might even have good intentions, but in the end, it's not intentions that count, Mac."

"I know."

"She's in love with you. It's taken her a long time to get to the point where she would even consider the possibility of a future with a guy."

"I know."

He walked to the edge of the deck and looked through the doors into Rachel's kitchen. Tom and Jennifer were sitting at the table. Sara was perched comfortably on Jennifer's lap, a book in her hand. The three of them were roaring with uncontrollable laughter.

Tom laughed. "That's hilarious! I never get tired of the adventures of Captain Underpants. David Pilkey is an absolute genius." He ruffled the top of Sara's hair. "You're a great reader."

"Thanks!" she said, glowing from the praise. "And, thanks for the book!"

Jennifer looked past Tom's shoulder. Outside, Mac and Rachel appeared to be in the midst of a serious conversation.

Tom followed her gaze. "She worries about you."

"I know." Jennifer watched as Mac shook his head and looked down at his feet.

"He treating you right?" Tom asked.

Jennifer smiled. "Yeah."

"If he's not I can kick his ass for you. Well, I can try."

"Are you kidding?" Sara piped up. "They're an embarrassment. I can't have anyone over. You'd think someone put a stupid love spell on them! 'Love you.' 'Love you too, babe.' 'Oh, but I love you more than life itself...more than all the stars in the sky...more than'... Eek!"

Sara squealed as Jennifer tickled her.

"We do not sound like that!"

"Do to!" Sara insisted between peals of laughter.

"Do not! We've never said anything about the stars in the sky."

"Maybe not out loud."

"What do you mean?" Jennifer asked, suspiciously.

Sara looked down at her new book. Jennifer didn't believe for one second that she was actually reading it again. "Mac keeps a journal."

"You read Mac's journal?" Tom asked.

"What someone writes in their journal is personal, you shouldn't be peeking," Jennifer scolded.

"I know that...now."

Jennifer couldn't help herself. She had to know. "He said in his journal he loves me more than life itself...more than all the stars in the sky?"

Sara continued to flip through her book. "Yup. He writes a lot of poetry about you. There's this really weird one...about your ass."

"Sara!" Jennifer gasped.

"What?" She looked up, innocently. "I didn't write it!"

"You are not to be reading Mac's journal. What he chooses to write in there is...is private."

"Relax," Sara said. "Mac caught me on Tuesday. I already got the big ol' lecture about personal boundaries and trust. I won't be snooping again."

"Mac must have been very angry," Tom interjected.

"No, worse. He was hurt and disappointed. But we're good now. We worked it out."

"I'm glad, honey."

"He loves me too, you know. Not in the same way, of course."

Jennifer gave her sister an affectionate squeeze. "Well, you are pretty lovable. Who could resist you?"

A long moment passed. "Do you know who my father is?" asked Sara.

Jennifer shook her head. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I don't."

Sara shrugged. "That's okay. I have you."

"That you do."

Mac looked back over his shoulder at Rachel. "I'm going to marry that girl. Spend the rest of my days building a life with her."

Rachel dropped the spatula she had been holding in her hand. At virtually the same time, she and Mac bent down to retrieve it, only Mac got there first. He stood back up, slowly, and handed the spatula back to her.

"You're serious?" she asked as she accepted the spatula.

"Yes. In fact, I've never been more serious."

"You really, truly love her?"

"With all my heart, and I've got a pretty big one."

"Mac, if you—"

"I can't promise you it's going to be perfect. I've got loads of faults. And it's probably going to take a while yet to convince her. But I love her, Rachel."

Rachel's eyes filled with tears. "You'll convince her."

"There will be rough times, guaranteed. She's not the easiest woman to live with."

Rachel started to laugh. "Don't I know it."

"Bit of a neat freak."

"True."

"But whatever problems we have, we'll work them through."

Rachel pointed the spatula threateningly at him. "You better, mister, 'cause I don't want to have to have this talk with you again."

"That makes two of us. You know, you're a lot tougher than you seem. You can be downright scary when you set your mind to it."

"Really?" Rachel breathed a sigh of relief. "I've kind of, you know, been working on the assertiveness thing."

"Nicely done."

"I'm glad we had this little chat, Mac."

He took the spatula from her, opened the grill and started to flip the burgers. “Anytime, Red. Anytime.”

Epilogue

Ten years later, June 17, 2014

Mac had been sitting in the living room by the fireplace absorbed in a book, when the front door opened. The yellow Labrador at his feet lifted his head, thumped his tail on the floor a few times, and then lay back down with a groan. “Who is it, boy?” Mac removed his glasses and turned toward the hallway. “Sara? Is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m just grabbing a soda. I’ll be right in.”

“We weren’t expecting you home this weekend. Everything all right at school?”

Sara walked into the cozy room and sat down on the brown leather sofa, across from Mac. “Classes are going fine.” She leaned down and stroked the dog’s soft coat.

“What is it?” Mac asked, concerned. “Whatever it is, we’ll work it through.”

“Roger asked me to marry him,” Sara said, quietly, avoiding eye contact. “And, I said yes.”

He looked down and caught a glimpse of the rather sizable diamond she was now wearing on her left hand. “Why on earth would you say yes? Last week you were saying you were relieved he’d be graduating and moving on to law school.”

“I know.”

“You said the extra space would be a welcome reprieve.”

“I know.”

“That it would give you a chance to think about where you wanted the relationship to go.”

“I *know*, but...”

“What?”

“He’s a nice guy.”

“That’s it?”

“He’ll make a good husband,” Sara said.

“For someone, maybe. But for you? I thought you—”

“Perfect guys... They don’t exist, Mac!”

“Of course they don’t.”

“I can’t just hang around forever, waiting for my prince. What you and Jennifer have, it’s what every little girl dreams of, but only one of us in like a million ever get that!”

“You’re wrong!” Mac set his book aside. “I’m no prince, Sara. What Jennifer and I have, it’s not perfect, it never has been and it never will be. Our relationship is a constant work in progress and I emphasize the word *work*. You’re a grown woman now, and you’re not asking for my advice—”

“Since when does that stop you?”

Mac smiled and leaned back in his chair.

“Jennifer and I decided a long time ago, long before we even were married, leaving one another would never be an option. The commitment we made means something, to both of us, and we reaffirm it every single day. Sometimes, I have to reaffirm it several times a day. Your sister can be awfully stubborn, you know.”

Sara rolled her eyes. “Don’t I know it.”

“*But*,” Mac continued, “no matter what happens, no matter what curves life may throw our way, we work them through. Jennifer and I aren’t always on the same page about things. We’re different, in some ways very different. And, what’s important to us as a couple and as individuals has changed over the years. We’ve changed, evolved together. That requires constant examination, holding on to what’s important to you and wanting, really wanting, the other person to do the same, and compromising when they do.”

“Roger wants a commitment. He doesn’t want to lose me. He says he can’t go off to law school uncertain about our relationship.”

“Forget about Roger for a minute. What about you? Are you certain?”

“What do you mean?”

“There is one thing I’m sure of beyond all else. Jennifer and I were meant to be together. We both had our share of failed relationships before finding one another. Either one of us, or both of us could have settled for something else, for someone else, but we didn’t. There is no one else for me. She’s the one. All I want is to deserve her and what she’s given me. Can you say the same for Roger?”

“You know you’ve ruined me, don’t you?”

“I’ve ruined you?”

“You and Jennifer.” Sara balled her fists up in frustration. “Providing a healthy, loving environment to grow up in, giving me expectations, making me believe it’s possible, making me believe I deserve—”

“Roger?”

“I was going to say happiness.”

“Not the same thing?” Jennifer swept into the room. “What’s going on?”

“Are the kids asleep?” Mac asked.

“Doubtful, they’re waiting for their kiss goodnight from you.”

“Well, I’ll go say my goodnight to Gracie and Elliott. I’ll leave you two to chat this out.” Mac kissed Sara on the forehead. “I’m sorry for so thoroughly ruining you. I’m happy to pay for counseling.”

“I don’t need counseling.”

“You’ll need it if you marry a man you don’t love.” Mac winked at Jennifer.

“What?” Jennifer sat next to Sara on the sofa and reached for her hand. “Roger proposed?”

“Yeah.”

“And you said yes?”

It was an hour before Jennifer slipped into their bedroom. Mac had been waiting, impatiently, for her return.

“You’re still up?” She walked into the closet and began to undress.

“Damned straight! What happened?”

“She’s going to give him back the ring.” Jennifer slipped her nightgown over her head.

“Oh, thank God! What did you say to convince her?”

“I have no idea. I mostly listened.”

“That’s it?”

“Until she asked me a question.”

“What was the question?”

“She asked me why I thought you loved me.”

Mac looked over at her, standing in the doorway to their bathroom, toothbrush in her hand. The sheer fabric of her long silk nightgown was almost translucent, backlit by the glow of the overhead lamp behind her. She reached up and pulled the clip out of her hair and he watched as her sensible updo cascaded about her bare shoulders.

Mac climbed from the bed and walked over to her. “What did you tell her?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Mac reached for her hand. “Yes. What did you tell her?”

“I told her I had absolutely no idea.”

Mac frowned.

“I told her I was certain I didn’t deserve you, but by a twist of fate you had come to me and in each other’s arms we’ve somehow managed to find happiness. I told her... I told her I couldn’t imagine a life without you.”

“Really? You said that?”

“Yup. Pretty good on the spur of the moment, don’t you think?”

“Even after all these years, you still take my breath away.” Mac placed his hands on her hips and pulled her toward him. “Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.”

“Why do I never tire of hearing that?” Mac teased as he began to rain a trail of kisses down her neck.

“‘Cause deep down inside you’re a greedy little boy?”

Mac tossed her toothbrush aside then swept her up into his arms. “And, guess what I want?” He carried her over to their bed.

“What do you want?” Jennifer asked, breathlessly, as he lowered her onto the mattress.

Mac turned off the light, climbed into bed and settled himself in the familiar space between his wife’s legs.

“What do I want?”

“Tell me.”

“Not a bloody thing.” He brought his hand up to her face, outlining the shape of her lips with his fingertips. “Ask me why.”

“Why?”

“Because, I already have everything I want,” he whispered. Then he lowered his mouth to hers, sweeping her bottom lip with his tongue, begging entrance and once again simply...loving her.

About the Author

Samantha Sommersby lives in San Diego with her husband and teenaged son. She is the author of multiple novels and novellas including the critically acclaimed *Forbidden* series. In 2007 Samantha left what she used to call her “real life” day job as a psychotherapist to pursue writing full-time. She now happily spends her days immersed in the world of the *Forbidden*, a world where vampires, werewolves and demons are real, where magic is possible, and where love still conquers all.

To learn more about Samantha Sommersby, to follow her on Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, or Yahoo, or to sign up for her monthly newsletter, visit www.samanthasommersby.com. You may contact the author through her website or by sending an e-mail to samantha@samanthasommersby.com.

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Now Available:

Forbidden Series

The Sacrifice
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Beauty vs. power—a dangerous game with the heart as the prize...

For His Eyes Only

© 2009 Avery Beck

Jacey Cass radiates confidence and sensuality just once a year, when she meets her rich and powerful lover for a night of anonymous sex. The rest of her calendar is filled with the daily struggle to survive. Her cashier job at Insomnia, Miami's hottest lingerie shop, doesn't go far toward college tuition, but she's determined to rise above her mother's freeloading legacy.

Alex Vaughn is one promotion away from realizing his life's ambition. For years he's been forced to stand by and watch his father systematically destroy the values that made Insomnia great. Now, with an expected vacancy in the summer catalog, he takes a chance. He's never formally met the fascinating woman he takes to bed every year, but he knows a marketable body when he sees one. The last thing he expects is for her to turn the opportunity down flat.

Jacey won't consider a handout—even from the man whose white-hot caress is the one bright spot of her life. Then a modeling competition's prize money lures her from behind the register and into the blinding spotlight, unaware of what the cost could be to her heart...

Warning: This title follows a young woman's journey from fear of intimacy to trust in love, with frequent, explicit descriptions of the sensual lessons learned on the way.

Enjoy the following excerpt for For His Eyes Only:

They waited for the elevator. She wrapped her arms around Alex's neck and kissed him, a chaste kiss appropriate for the public eye should anyone catch them. But when she pulled back and stared at him, the way her eyes darkened spoke volumes about the *unchaste* activities she expected to take place once they made it to his room.

Thankfully, the elevator doors closed before anyone else joined them. She slipped her arms inside his jacket, and the heat of her touch penetrated his shirt fabric while he pressed her to the wall, thrust his tongue into her mouth and ground his hips against hers.

"Well," she teased when he rested the solid crotch of his pants against her thigh. "I can tell you're ready."

He closed his eyes, his hunger for her made almost unbearable by the taste of sweet wine she left on his lips. "Oh, don't worry. You'll be ready too."

He put his hand beneath her skirt and trailed his finger along the satin edge of a soaking wet g-string, smothering her approving moan with another kiss. The ache in his groin intensified.

"I think you're right," she gasped when he let her go.

The doors opened. They greeted an older couple waiting to take the elevator and managed to maintain their composure until the door to his room locked behind them.

Then he couldn't take it anymore.

"I've got to have you," he insisted, expressing the thought that had plagued him all evening. He stepped up behind her and kissed the back of her neck, then lowered the zipper of her dress, his mouth following each tooth as it opened.

By the time he reached the zipper's end, he was kneeling on the floor with the skinny strap of those panties right in front of him, urging him to tear the thing off. But he had just one night a year with her, and he wouldn't end it within the first three minutes.

The dress and the lingerie hit the floor before he had a chance to contemplate his next move. He looked up, managing to catch the mischievous grin on his lady's face before she turned and strode across the room, the silken curves of her ass draped in nothing but moonlight.

He stood, his fingers clenched with the need to touch her. "Where are you going?"

"You'll see."

She opened the French doors that led to a private terrace and disappeared around the corner. "Care to join me?" her voice called through the darkness.

He nearly ran to the balcony, stopping just long enough to pull protection from his pocket and take off his suit. When he found her, she was shoulder-deep in the hot tub, curling her index finger at him.

"Hurry," she whispered. He could see her squirming beneath the bubbly surface.

"You sure know how to make a man crazy."

He sank into the warm water and pulled her against him, relishing the reunion of their naked bodies. The money and power that accompanied his position at Insomnia never left him without a date for long, but this woman was no ordinary piece of arm candy. She charged him like an electric current, and their annual rendezvous was just about the only time he felt like a flesh-and-blood man instead of a corporate puppet.

Without exception, when he took other women out, they immediately brought up his job. Each of them shared a mammoth interest in his money and his ability to discover the next pin-up girl.

But not this one. The woman in front of him was wet, naked, and beautiful—and completely uninterested in his paycheck. He didn't think he'd find a more perfect woman if he could design one himself.

Her fingers entwined in his hair, tugging him from his thoughts. She kissed him with a desperation that seemed to match his and pushed him down until he sat on the tub's ledge, the water swirling around his ribs. Then she straddled his lap.

"I need your touch."

Her words energized him and brought his full attention back to the reason they were there. He dropped his hand under the bubbles, skimming her torso until he found the softness between her thighs and unraveled her desire.

“Here?”

“Alex...” She surged against his chest and her fingernails dug into his shoulder.

“That wasn’t a scream,” he objected.

“Not yet it wasn’t.”

He massaged her, increasing the pace of his stroke while she squirmed and begged and then came hard, bucking against him and crying out loud. Still trembling, she shifted in his lap, took his shaft in her hand and rubbed it against her flesh.

“Do it,” she urged.

Her pleas turned to moans when he complied, slipping inside her and reacquainting himself with her warmth, her kisses, her cries. When he was lost in the taste and scent and feel of her, once again sharing with her the deepest kind of intimacy, he realized there was one problem with his perfect woman.

He didn’t know her, not the way he should. At least she could list some of his basic information, like his position at the company and what his mother had been calling him since birth. He couldn’t do the same for her. He knew that if he leaned down and sucked on her nipple right now, she’d come again. And if he gently bit the tender spot on her neck, right behind her earlobe, she’d arch backward and push him farther into her body.

It was incredible, but it wasn’t enough. Not when he held her so close that he couldn’t tell his breath from hers, and when he kept imagining waking up in his bed at home with her beside him.

He anchored one hand on her hip and brushed the other through her mass of platinum curls, the ends wet and clinging to her breasts. “Tell me your name.”

She blinked, uncertainty clouding her face. But he looked into her eyes and moved slowly within her, and she relaxed. “It’s Jacey.”

“That’s a lovely name.”

“Thank you. Alex.” She giggled, then gasped and held tightly to him as he began to thrust harder. Her hips matched his intense rhythm, and he broke into a sweat caused by more than the temperature of the water.

At last, he knew her name.

Rebuilding the fire—one kiss at a time.

All Lit Up

© 2010 Cathryn Fox

Pleasure Inn, Book 3

When interior designer Anna Deveau is hired to create a room made for romance at a Victorian inn, she is thrilled—and a little wistful. A fairy-tale ending will never be hers, but perhaps tapping into abandoned dreams will fan the flames for someone else.

Then she learns the only bricklayer available to build the room's fireplace is Daniel Long. The sexy boy-next-door who filled her teen years with angst, broke her heart—and still colors her nights with red-hot fantasies.

Daniel never understood why Anna stopped talking to him a week before her sweet-sixteen party. Or why the wall between them remains a mile high. But now that he's back in town, he intends to figure it out once and for all. Pushing the limits of her seductive design, he sets out to prove he didn't burn her in the past.

Anna finds herself doing the one thing she swore she'd never do again: laying herself bare. Until the ghost of rumors past threatens to snuff out the fiery fantasy that, this time, Anna thought was real...

Warning: Years of sinful fantasies about the sexy boy-next-door lead to a night of wild indulgence. Be sure to keep a bevy of toys on hand when reading this tale, or better yet, get a boy-next-door of your own.

Enjoy the following excerpt for All Lit Up:

The wind picked up, and as she hugged herself to stave off a shiver, heavy footsteps heralded someone's approach. She turned around and came face to face with Daniel. The second his body came into contact with hers and she caught a whiff of his warm, familiar scent, heat unfurled inside her, and she struggled to maintain a coherent thought.

"You cold?" He pulled her close and ran his hands up and down her arms, but the friction merely created heat in the needy spot between her legs.

"I'm okay."

Daniel slipped off his jacket, draped it over her shoulders, and pulled her in tight. Feeling warm and wanting and in need of a distraction, she glanced at the towering maple tree. She momentarily wondered if his parents had redesigned his room after he'd left, or if they'd left it the way it was. Not that she knew how it was before his departure, since he'd never invited her in.

"Want to climb it?"

She chuckled as her body absorbed his warmth. "I don't think so."

He gave her a boyish wink. "Come on, it'll be fun."

“Fun?”

“Where’s your adventurous side, Anna?”

“I’m not dressed for climbing trees.” Her voice lacked conviction.

“It’s your only way out, you know.” He pulled a face, fear dancing in his eyes as he pointed to her parents’ living room. “Unless you want to go back in there with those sharks, you don’t have a choice.” He gave a mock shiver. “I’ve never seen such an interrogation. When I first arrived I thought I was in the middle of an intervention.”

Anna laughed and Daniel joined in, and in that instant, she felt like the world had been lifted from her shoulders. Honestly, she’d been strung so tight over the last few days it felt so good to laugh, to let go for a few minutes.

“It’s *was* an intervention,” she said. “A let’s-get-Anna-hitched sneak attack.” She paused to shake her head. “I didn’t see it coming.”

He touched her gold chain, and when his warm fingers grazed her skin, her hands curled in his shirt. Eyes smoldering, he wet his mouth and in a low voice said, “I think they only have your best interests at heart.”

Needing to lighten things up before she went to mush in his arms and remembering how he’d toyed with her mother, she whacked him on the shoulder and he let loose a moan.

“Hey, what’s with all the abuse?” he questioned, faking exasperation. But that exasperation quickly gave way to passion. “You keep it up and you’re going to get a spanking of your own.”

Anna’s breath grew shallow, and she gulped air, trying for normal. “What’s with teasing my mother like that and telling her you wanted me to go to a football game? She’ll be clinging to that for weeks. You know as well as I do that she wants us together.”

Without an ounce of humor in his voice, he said, “So do I, Anna.”

Her insides twisted. Okay, she understood he wanted her physically, the last few days had proven that. But what she wasn’t sure about was why. Because she was the one he couldn’t have? Or had he changed and matured over the years, and like her, knew how good they could have been together?

“Why, Daniel. Why do you want this?”

He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. Despite the cold, her cheeks flushed hot and her legs felt a little shaky beneath her. The tender intimate way he looked at her took her breath away. Heaven help her, she was fighting a losing battle here. He was charming, seductive, persuasive—the attraction far too powerful for her to ignore any longer. “Daniel—”

Instead of answering her, he grabbed her hand and tugged. “Come on.”

“Where?”

He gestured toward the huge tree branch that hung over the fence. “We’re going up. I’ll show you the view.”

With unhurried movements, he dropped her hand and grabbed the branch to test it. As he pulled himself up, her glance moved to his perfect backside, enjoying the view from where she stood. Instantly, with her brain on overdrive, she couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe he was right and an adventure was in order. And she wasn't necessarily talking about climbing the tree.

As she warmed to the idea, she slipped her arms through his coat, zippered it, then grabbed the branch to climb. Her tight jeans protested the movement. "These are my favorite jeans, so help me if I rip them—"

"I'll buy you a new pair," he offered and reached down a helping hand.

She scoffed, half-heartedly, aware that she found the situation a little exciting. Not to mention fun and spontaneous. "Couldn't we be normal adults and use the front door? I'm not really a fan of heights."

"Nope. The only way to my front door, is through your front door. And since you're avoiding the sharks..."

He was right, the fence circled the yards, and she wasn't quite ready to go inside and face another swarming.

"Plus this is a little exciting, don't you think?" he teased with a wink. "Sneaking into my room late at night."

In spite of herself she laughed. "I've had more excitement watching paint dry," she lied, masking her enthusiasm. Heck, she didn't want to make this too easy on him, letting him think he was finally going to get what he'd been after for years.

But deep inside her she was excited. Damn excited. Growing up, Anna had always been a rule follower and had never done anything quite like this before. Being here with Daniel and climbing this tree took her back to her teen years when she used to go to bed and dream about sneaking into his room with him, dream about being the one girl he wanted, really wanted.

She grabbed his hand and he hauled her higher. Once they reached the top, Daniel shimmied his window open, climbed inside, then helped her in.

When her flats hit the floor, she let out a breath. Feeling much more comfortable on solid footing, she shut the window behind her. Daniel flicked on his lamp, and as the warm light bathed the room, she took in the décor. A single bed was up against one wall, a navy blue comforter haphazardly thrown over it. On the other wall, there was an open laptop sitting on a small wooden student desk. Trophies and medals adorned the numerous shelves above the bed, and a football lamp sat on his nightstand.

"Nice room."

He walked across the floor and locked his door. A fine tingle ran through her. Despite being all grown up, something about sneaking into his room felt so forbidden, and it shocked her how much that excited her.

"It's a shrine," he teased. "Mom left it the way it was, hoping I'd come back to it I guess."

"Now her wish has come true. You're staying here, aren't you?"

He grinned. “Just temporarily.” Something strange passed over his eyes—it was the same look he’d given her earlier but one she didn’t recognize—when he went on to announce, “I bought the old Murphy house down by the lake. Now I’m just waiting for my goods to arrive. I never thought they’d sell it, but lucky for me, the Murphys recently retired and moved to Florida.”

“You bought the old Murphy place?” She widened her eyes in surprise. “I love that place.”

Again, there was that odd look. “I know you do.”

She pulled a face. “You suddenly seem to know an awful lot.”

He backed her up until her knees hit the bed, and something in his voice hitched. “I know a lot more about you than you think I do.”

Her heart raced, her body grew damp and needy, and her voice came out a little rough around the edges. “And I think you’re a sweet talker.”

He offered her a cocky grin, and she damn near wilted. “Is it working?”

“No.”

“Then why are your cheeks flushed?”

As his primal essence completely overwhelmed her, she responded, “Because it was cold out.”

“And your body, it’s trembling.”

“Like I said, it’s cold outside.”

In a move that took her by surprise, he pulled her close, anchoring her body to his and she could feel his arousal press against her midriff. His cock felt glorious, hard and primed to go, and it took all her willpower not to moan out loud and rub up against it. As her body burned with desire and pent-up passion, pleasure gathered between her legs. She placed her hands on his shoulders, and in a bold move that seemed to catch him off guard, she ran her fingers over his muscles and could feel strength radiating off him.

Daniel swallowed and his powerful hands shook like a juvenile on his first date as they slipped around her back. “And...what about...your nipples...?” His words came out a broken, choppy. “Are they hard because it’s cold out too?”

His cock pressed against her stomach. “I could be asking you the same question.”

“Is it my nipples you’re talking about, Anna? Or something else?” he teased, his voice a little rusty as he gave her a boyish grin that turned her inside out.

As she enjoyed the sexy banter, he dipped his head, the light from the lamp washing over his face and making him look so sweet and innocent. Angelic, even. When she parted her lips, he drew a deep, sharp breath. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted to kiss you?”

She gave a needy sigh. “What are you waiting for?”



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