



# Pandora's Box

By

Kimberly Zant

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## Chapter One

I felt like I had a bull's eye painted on my forehead—like someone who had a contract out on them and knew it.

Sort of.

There was a thread of excitement and anticipation beneath the absolute terror that dogged my steps as I made my way along the busy city sidewalk. I was wearing red, my signal that I'd agreed to the terms of engagement.

*I must have lost my mind*, I thought in sudden anxiety, hesitating in front of a store window and staring at the reflections behind me. I didn't focus on my own. I'd worked hard at buoying my self-esteem and convincing myself I didn't look thirty five even if I was and that I looked hot enough to appeal to the handsome stranger I was about to have a rendezvous with. I didn't want to risk losing that self-deception with too healthy a dose of reality. Even so, I could see my dark blond, shoulder length hair, which I'd worn loose, flapping wildly around my head. Trying to convince myself it would give me a sexy windswept look rather than the tangled bird's nest of a bag lady, I focused on searching the streets for a man who might be looking that would fit the description I'd been given.

The wind caught the flared skirt of my short dress at just that moment and flipped it up my back. By the time I'd fought it down, I discovered I had the attention of every male within viewing distance.

Big surprise! Wearing a thong on such a windy day had been a stroke of brilliance!

Feeling my cheeks pulsing like a neon sign, I decided to gather what was left of my dignity and move, ignoring the smirks of the strangers around me. I hadn't spotted the tall, dark, and debonair Brit that was supposed to fulfill my favorite fantasy, but I decided to leave it in the hands of fate. If it was meant to be, he would be right on time. He would've spotted me by now. He would follow me into the expensive department store that was my goal and ....

I'd probably have a panic attack!

Coward! Spineless, lily livered twerp, I chastised myself! It was no wonder my entire life had been dull, uneventful, colorless! I didn't have the balls to have fun! I wasn't wild and carefree! I was a prudish spinster, to use the barbaric, archaic term for women who failed to find a mate!

Not that I wanted one, by damn! There'd been a time when I had, but after one failed relationship after another, I was thoroughly jaded.

I was pretty set in my ways, if it came to that. I was pretty sure I'd moved way past any ability to compromise for the sake of a relationship.

No, I just wanted to do something daring ... for once in my life.

Trying to shake the little voice in the back of my mind reminding me why I never did anything daring, I walked briskly toward the department store at the end of the block. But there it was, sprung full blown from the recesses of my mind—the answer I didn't want.

I never did anything daring because it always turned out badly for me. I was pretty sure I had the worst luck in the world. As a teen, my first attempt at going 'all the way' in the backseat of a car had backfired humiliatingly. I'd no sooner bared all than a damned cop had stuck his

flashlight to the rear window, illuminating me in all my imperfect splendor! I didn't think I would've felt nearly as badly about it if I'd had the body of a temptress, but back then I'd looked like a stick with bumps—two front and two back!

I'd certainly made up for it, I thought wryly! It was a damned shame voluptuous wasn't in style any damned more!

Actually, I thought with a healthy dose of honesty, *volumptuous* was probably closer to the mark, but I firmly pushed that from my mind! I wasn't going to feel sexy if I let my fantasy image of myself as a modern day Marilyn Monroe slip.

Of course, my hair was more brown than blond, I didn't have quite as much cleavage, and I had a good bit more trunk space ....

Bad thought! Bad Chloe! Bad, bad, bad! And that wasn't the way I wanted to be bad, damn it!

I discovered the front door of the department store looming before me. Indecision hit me. As *if* I hadn't been wavering almost from the time I'd climbed out of the cab that had deposited me in the downtown area!

Maybe I should just turn around, grab a cab, and scurry back to my apartment? I could always tell my best friend, who'd arranged the rendezvous for me, that I'd done it and had a fabulous time.

I certainly couldn't tell her I'd chickened out! She would be very put out with me after all she'd gone through to make the arrangements for my birthday surprise! She'd be disappointed in me.

I didn't think I could live that down any time soon.

Squaring my shoulders, I marched up the steps and grabbed the door handle. As I pulled the door open, I caught a glimpse of the British Don Juan that had been ordered up just for my private fantasy in the reflection on the glass! My heart skipped several beats. My stomach went weightless. I felt faint and dizzy and hot and cold, all at the same time. I was going to pass out and roll down the steps to the sidewalk!

Reminding myself to breathe, I completed the action I'd frozen in the middle of. I pulled the door wide enough to enter and staggered inside on the spiked heels I wasn't used to wearing.

It couldn't be *him*, I told myself! He was just too, too gorgeous! No way was he in to the kinky/weird Pandora's Box crowd!

Ok, so I supposed that was a little insulting to my dear friend, Rebecca, but, truthfully, I just couldn't see a male that looked that yummy *needing* to resort to the cloak and danger kink of the club! I'd imagined most of the members must be desperate or they wouldn't *have* to join a club like Pandora's Box just to get laid!

I was mistaken, I told myself, commanding my heart to stop trying to beat its way up my throat. Even if I'd misjudged the members of the club, the hunk of burning love I'd spotted on the sidewalk was still too far up the food chain to consider joining such a group.

And actually, I didn't know a hell of a lot about it. Rebecca was the member, not me. I'd thought she was losing it when she'd told me about the club she'd joined. Pandora's Box. The name alone sounded naughty and intriguing. Unlike the fabled box, however, this one, according to Rebecca, was formed to prevent the evils from escaping. It was a safety net in a dangerous world so that adults could play out their fantasies, where every member had a thorough, and regularly updated, background check to insure the safety of all members.

I'd liked the sound of that, but I didn't spend a lot of time entertaining myself with fantasies, sexual or otherwise. I hadn't seen any sense in spending the money to join when I was miserable enough with the occasional flings I had.

But then, I'd had one too many one night and let my guard down. Rebecca had managed to pry loose the one fantasy I'd had for years and years—even before I got old enough to be what they called a 'cougar' these days. Actually, the cougar hadn't been part of the fantasy. I just happened to find men in their late twenties, early thirties appealed to me most, even though I'd now passed those milestones.

Which totally sucked, of course! Even when I'd been in my late twenties and early thirties men that age had been looking for younger women.

Shaking my wayward thoughts, I cast as casual a glance as I could over my shoulder to see if the hunk I'd spied might be my dream lover—or if, indeed, I had anybody even close to my fantasy behind me.

I hadn't really expected to discover the hunk following me. It, almost literally, rocked me back on my heels. Our gazes clashed. His intense blue eyes sent another shock wave through me.

I sent him a hunted look. I couldn't help it! Terror had seized me!

I tried combating it with a half-frozen, come hither smile.

Talk about mixed signals!

He lifted one finally arched, black eyebrow at me.

I had heart palpitations.

Swallowing convulsively, I glanced around the store.

Make a run for it and dash out the back way?

Stand my ground and enjoy the fantasy Rebecca had gone to so much trouble to put together for me?

The rush of air from the door as it opened got my feet to moving. My legs felt rubbery with nerves and it was all I could do to maintain my balance on the fucking heels from hell I'd been stupid enough to think increased my sex appeal!

Don't think, Chloe, I told myself fiercely! This could be your last chance!

It would be my *only* damned chance! If I blew it, I should just shoot myself and be done with it! When would I ever get the chance to meet, let alone have wild sex with, a handsome, sophisticated British man like those in the books I'd lusted over for years?

Never! Never! Never!

I could faint later—*afterwards*!

It was fortunate that I was too terrified by that time to worry about my appearance! It was also brilliant that I'd had the forethought to specify the expensive department store. Unlike the bargain stores, this one wasn't too crowded. I had some hope of actually managing the fantasy!

I was really starting to get anxious by the time I reached the men's department. Dressing room, dressing room! Where was the fucking thing?

A clerk was already making a beeline toward me when I finally spotted the sign. Glancing back to be sure I still had my playmate behind me, I managed a weak smile, eluded the clerk, and headed toward the dressing room.

I paused again when I reached the entrance and turned. The clerk had intercepted my tall, dark, and debonair, but he was looking over the man's head in my direction. Smiling more with relief than anticipation at that point, I headed inside.

I'd never been inside a men's dressing room, needless to say. It was a tremendous relief to discover that they had private dressing cubicles just like they did on the women's side—all empty—*not* like it would've been on the women's side, which was why I'd chosen it.

Alright, so being surrounded by a very masculine setting was a tiny part of the fantasy, but I'd mostly been thinking that while there was a certain thrill in the public rendezvous, I didn't actually *want* to be interrupted. I couldn't decide whether to chose one and duck inside to wait or wait for my dream lover.

He took the decision out of my hands.

He was way taller than I'd realized, and broader, too!

His smile made me melt—you know where!

"Hello."

I smiled up at him a little weakly. He had a delicious British accent! "Hello, yourself."

Emboldened, I reached for his hand and led him toward the back of the dressing area and into a room. Thankfully, the glaring light from the hallway didn't intrude and I stopped him when he reached to flip on the light inside the room. "There's plenty of light," I murmured.

He lifted both brows at that, but he was clearly intrigued when I lifted my hands and brushed them lightly along his broad chest, closing my eyes and trying to imagine what he would look like naked. It was a shame we didn't really have time and the circumstances were such that we couldn't both strip down—or I couldn't strip him down. He felt as delicious as he looked.

Something flickered in his eyes when I looked up at him—a touch of wariness? Confusion?—but he leaned down to meet my upturned face. His lips were perfect, I thought dizzily—hard like the rest of him, warm. I imagined he tasted like a different breed—not just male, but British male. It was absurd, of course, but I'd fantasized so long, I was convinced he had an exotic taste to go along with his exotic accent.

I didn't know if it was him that made me so wet or my own mind, my own imaginings, but it didn't matter. I drank in his taste, his scent, the feel of his body pressed against mine, and I was instantly intoxicated with the brew. I couldn't get enough. I wanted to explore his mouth and have him explore mine endlessly, but I wanted more and, despite my rising state of excitement, I was ever aware in the back of my mind that we were liable to be discovered.

No time for finesse! I managed to disentangle one of my arms and explore his belly, searching for the evidence that he was as aroused as I was. Thankfully, I wasn't disappointed.

A little disconcerted, actually!

I hadn't 'ordered' up a stallion!

Maybe I had the wrong spot? I checked. Right thigh, left thigh, middle leg, balls. I had the right spot, alright! *Good god!* How was I going to lever the damned thing in when he was a fucking foot taller than me and there was no bed for leverage? Floor? It was carpeted, but rug burn on my ass hadn't actually been part of the fantasy. There was a bench, but I didn't think it was nearly long enough.

We were both breathing like marathon runners when we finally broke the kiss.

"How much?" he murmured huskily.

"I'm going to go for broke and say 'all of it'. I guess we'll see if it fits," I muttered a little drunkenly, grabbing the waistband of his trousers and tugging at it with shaking hands. He neither helped nor hindered my efforts, but it wasn't until I'd finally succeeded in unveiling the anaconda that that struck me as the least bit odd. When it did, I glanced up at him a little anxiously.

His gaze flickered over my face, but before anxiety could get too much of a hold on me, he framed my jaw with the crook of his hand and dipped down to meet me in another kiss. I stroked the heated, turgid prize I'd collected as if it was a pet snake while he kissed me with a fervor that shot my libido through the roof.

Without warning, he dragged me around in a tight circle and pressed me against the door of the cubicle. It rattled a little at the impact, but I was beyond caring at that point.

Yes, I thought as he performed a minor miracle and managed to dip low enough to press his cock against my belly almost right where I wanted it!

Ok, so it was still a little high to massage my aching clit, but it was close enough to make it throb harder with anticipation! Daring fate, I lifted one leg and coiled it around his narrow hips. I couldn't go up on tiptoe. I was already there because of the heels!

A few inches, I thought woefully. If I only had a few more inches!

I sensed almost as much frustrated desperation in his movements as I felt myself. Abruptly, he grabbed two handfuls of my ass and hoisted me up the door.

*My god the man was strong!*

He was insane, but he was strong—or really desperate!

I discovered when he wedged the head of his cock between my thighs that he was wearing an 'overcoat'! Wonder filled me. He was Bond material, alright! He'd somehow managed to shove a condom over that anaconda without using both hands and his teeth!

Thank *god* it had extra lubrication! I uttered a choked grunt when he made the connection, distracted by my desperate search for something to hold on to to keep the idiot from getting a hernia from trying to lift me. Giving up when I discovered there wasn't anything to hold on to but his broad shoulders, I tried to transfer as much of my weight as I could to those, trying to banish the image that flickered through my mind of a horrendously embarrassing 'accident' that might require summoning an ambulance ... or a hearse.

He banished it by jogging me on the meaty column that was threatening to 'lift' my knees.

Apparently, he decided another kiss was what was needed to produce a sufficient amount of lubricant to sheathe himself. He planted his mouth over mine again.

The *Hoover dam* didn't have enough lubrication to solve the dilemma, I was sure! Reaching between us, I managed to dig my thong out of the way and yank enough of my nether lips out of the hole to open up the tunnel a little. No doubt inspired by my efforts, he grasped the side of my thong and snapped it as if it was tissue paper.

*The brute*, I thought fondly!

I have to suppose the thrill that went through me, or gravity, finally did the trick. He managed to wedge several inches inside. It was enough to deprive both of us of oxygen and inspire us to more frantic heaving that finally had the desired results. Wrenching my mouth from his, I sucked in a reviving breath, feeling my skin prickle all over with stinging sensation. My womb screamed and shrank back when he rammed it, but almost before the pain had begun to dissipate, my entire channel was fluttering madly. "Oh god!" I groaned in a hoarse whisper. "I'm going to come!"

He shuddered all over, withdrew, and began a pounding cadence that decimated my efforts to hold on just a few more moments to thoroughly enjoy the feel of him inside of me. It felt too good to end so quickly! It felt too good to savor it! I dropped my head to his shoulder and bit his neck lightly to try to contain the shrill gasps of release I couldn't contain despite my

fear of being overheard. I'd already reached a crescendo and began to drift back to mother Earth when I felt him come.

A mixture of satisfaction and disappointment filled me when I felt the culmination of his pleasure. It thrilled me that he'd apparently enjoyed it as much as I had and, at the same time, I felt disappointment that the condom had captured his seed and dismay that the encounter was to be so brief.

That had been the plan, though, I reminded myself when he carefully disengaged himself and slowly lowered me toward the floor.

The crash to Earthly reality after such a thrilling fantasy adventure deepened my depression. I struggled with it all the while we engaged in a little post coital nuzzling and petting, trying to stave it off a little while so that it wouldn't totally spoil the moment. I felt a little awkward saying it. Alright *a lot* awkward, but I'd been brought up to be polite and 'please' and 'thank you' were the magic words!

"Thank you! That was the best birthday present ever!"

He pulled away and flicked a startled look at me and I felt my face heat. I shrugged. "Becca's idea, and I wasn't sure I could go through with it, but I'm glad I did. You made it extra special."

I could see a faint flush rise in his cheeks and it made my face heat with discomfort. "Sorry! I babble when I'm nervous! Well! Have to go!"

I was suddenly desperate to put it behind me, not the least because I realized my nervous babble was shattering the last of the fantasy faster than I could cling to it. Wiggling away from him, I began adjusting my dress and trying to smooth the wrinkles a little frantically.

"This is bloody awkward," he muttered. "I didn't get your name."

I'd been looking around for my missing thong a little frantically. At that comment, however, I sent him a startled look of my own.

"But ... that wasn't part of the fantasy. I mean ... I don't suppose it's actually against the club rules, but I understood that .... Never mind! I have to go!"

I could see confusion in his eyes. "Club?"

A cold wave washed over me, but I refused to examine the reason for it. "Pandora's Box, you know ...?"

"Pandora's ...?" he echoed.

Total enlightenment hit me like an arctic tidal wave then and threw me into complete chaos.

He wasn't my rendezvous!



## Chapter Two

*"Oh my fucking god! You aren't ...? Oh shit!"*

I bent a nail backwards wrestling the door open, but my mind was in such a state that I hardly registered the pain that shot through me. Driven by the primal urge to retreat as fast as I could, I stumbled out of the dressing room and headed down the hall at the fastest clip I could manage in the absurdly high heels. The fates at least didn't complete the disaster by causing me to fall from the damned things and twist an ankle, but it wasn't until much later that I had time to consider that my flight might easily have brought me more humiliation and realize I had a few things I could actually be grateful for.

*"Wait!"*

*Oh hell no*, I thought frantically, racing toward the nearest exit without putting a lot of effort into trying to disguise the fact that I was in full retreat. Goaded by my full retreat instincts, I'm fairly certain I would've run, despite the unwelcome attention it would've drawn, if the heels hadn't prevented that possibility.

Fortunately for me, I managed to gain a substantial lead despite the fact that his legs were damned near a foot longer than mine. This was due in part to the fact that he had been in the process of searching for a waste basket to dispose of the condom when I dashed out and still hadn't adjusted his clothing. Fortune also favored me in that I managed to elude the clerk waiting disapprovingly just beyond the dressing area. He recovered enough after I dashed past to block my lover's attempt to catch up, giving me a few more moments and eliminating the necessity of ducking under a clothes rack to hide.

Kicking off my heels the moment I burst through the exit, I scooped them up in a rush and dashed along the sidewalk until I managed to flag down a cab.

I think the red dress helped ... and possibly the capricious winds, although, thankfully, I didn't realize that at the time. The cab driver braked so abruptly, he left rubber on the road and nearly stood the car on its nose. It was a minor miracle that someone didn't smash into his rear end. Diving into the backseat, I slammed the door and gave directions to the cabbie. When I cast a fearful glance back, I discovered my prince charming had made it to the curb just behind me. He was glaring balefully at the retreating cab.

Relieved at my narrow escape, I spent the cab ride home trying to convince myself that I'd imagined the whole thing.

Well, not the entire thing, but the part about him not being the one I was supposed to meet. What were the odds, after all, that I'd just happen to meet up with a man that so closely resembled my fantasy man who also just happened to be British?

Of course, the city was crawling with all sorts of foreigners, but I'd been living in the city for years! Surely to god I would've bumped into dozens in that length of time!

I shook that off. I hadn't actually been looking, I reminded myself, and most people on the streets were alone and intent on their destination. They didn't ordinarily talk to themselves, so that explained the accent. It wasn't as if British people looked any different than Americans! They just sounded different.

He'd probably been Canadian anyway.

And what the hell did that matter if he wasn't the man I was supposed to meet?

"Calm down, Chloe!" I muttered to myself and then sent the cabbie a glare when he glanced at me in the rearview mirror.

My cell was ringing when I got out of the cab. Since I had it set with a special ringtone just for Becca, I knew who was calling and why she was calling. I ignored it and dashed inside, trying to empty my mind of all thoughts as I rode the elevator up to my floor. My house phone was ringing as I entered my apartment and locked the door behind me. Insanely, the first possibility that popped into my mind was that it was my lover, proof positive that all sense of reason had abandoned me. It went silent before I could reach it and then my cell started ringing again—Becca—again!

I debated whether to answer or not, but I knew I couldn't avoid her for long. Since it also occurred to me that by avoiding her I was going to arouse her suspicions, I dug out the phone and reluctantly answered.

"Happy, happy birthday!" Becca sang in my ear.

I managed a shaky chuckle. "Thanks!"

"How was it?"

Thank god phones didn't have cameras—yet! I searched my mind for a description that would appease her and not arouse her curiosity. "It was ... uh ... like a dream, you know?" One of those that started out wonderful and turned into a nightmare!

"It was everything you hoped for?"

"Heh, heh ... and then some," I muttered, prefacing the comment with an unconvincing chuckle. "I'm ... uh .... Can I call you back? I really haven't had time to ... you know ...."

Becca giggled as if she was sixteen instead of thirty five going on ancient like me!

"You can tell me all about it tonight. Don't forget you're meeting me at Bennigan's for dinner!"

"Seven, right?"

"Right!"

I wilted on to my couch weakly when she cut the connection.

That was when it finally dawned on me that I was completely bare under the dress!

"Oh my god! I left my thong and I flashed the cabbie! Shit!"

\* \* \* \*

Basil, Lord Montbatten, was thoroughly rattled. It wasn't a state he was accustomed to and he was certain it wasn't anything he particularly cared for either.

He was not an impulsive person. He was fairly certain, in point of fact, that he'd never done anything on impulse before in his life.

Until twenty minutes ago, that was.

Searching absently for his PDA in his jacket pocket, he pulled it out and made a note of the name of the cab company and the cab number and license plate. After staring at it a little thoughtfully, if a little blankly, for several moments, he saved the data and returned the PDA to his jacket pocket, then looked around to get his bearings. A glance at his watch assured him that he was going to be late for his damned appointment and he finally turned and headed back the way he'd come at a brisk walk that brought him to the steps of the bank in a handful of minutes.

He checked his watch again as he swiftly mounted the steps to the entrance. Fifteen minutes! Well, it couldn't be helped now and he didn't particularly regret the impulse that had led to it.

Actually, to be completely honest, he mentally amended, the jury was still out on that. He didn't *think* he regretted it, but he had a bad feeling he might at some point.

At least he hadn't so far forgotten himself as to have ignored the need for safety!

Pushing the incident from his mind, he focused resolutely on the meeting ahead of him.

It was no tea party, but then again the state of the global economy was nothing to celebrate these days. All in all, however, he thought it went rather well. At least there didn't seem to be any fresh disasters looming and the bank's assets, after a great deal of scrambling on the part of the board, seemed to be stabilizing. He thought he could safely recommend to his own board that they leave their investments where they were—for the timing being, at any rate. As shaky as the market was, things were subject to change with staggering abruptness, but the American bank seemed their safest option at the moment.

Of course, he still had to go over the financial documents to be completely easy in his mind about the recommendation, but he was optimistic.

He was fairly certain, however, that that wasn't the reason for the spring in his step or what almost amounted to a sense of recklessness that suffused him as the meeting broke up and he lingered to speak with a few of the board members. Wryly, he admitted that, despite his lingering reservations over the affair, his encounter with his luscious mystery lady accounted for the majority of his cheerfulness. To say he'd never had an experience quite like it would've been an understatement.

He wasn't certain it was anything he would care to repeat. It would've been damned embarrassing if they'd been caught at it and tossed out on their arses! He shuddered at the thought of the headlines! *Basil Pembroke, Lord Montbatten caught in sordid sex scandal with mystery lady!*

And yet it wasn't the potential for disaster or embarrassment that lingered in his mind.

"I thought I'd invite you luncheon, Montbatten, if your schedule allows. I wasn't certain if you meant to head straight back or not," Phil Wilson said, effectively diverting him from his thoughts.

In point of fact, he *had* intended to head directly to the airport once he was done with the meeting, but his second impulse of the day struck him. Smiling, he found himself accepting the invitation.

Pre-luncheon conversation revolved around the recent meeting and Basil fielded a number of attempts by his host to draw him in to a discussion regarding his personal investments. He was struggling with the urge to check his time piece and wondering if there was still a possibility of catching his flight when Wilson, mellowed no doubt from a fine, outrageously expensive meal, turned the topic toward the city's attractions. Discovering it was Basil's first visit, he reeled off city's most famous tourist sites before moving to the night life.

Basil wrestled with the impulse to ask him the burning question uppermost in his mind and finally took the plunge. "Are you familiar with Pandora's Box?"

For several moments, Wilson looked as if he'd hit him in the face with a shovel. He blinked finally and glanced around. "I take it you aren't referring to anything mythological?"

He rather thought it might be described as an uplifting experience, perhaps even mystical in a sense, but it had been far too real—despite the bizarre aspects—to fit into the category of mythology. "I was under the impression that this was some sort of club?"

Wilson seemed to wrestle with himself. "Not in the physical sense."

Basil blinked at him. It had been one of the most 'physical' experiences in his life! "I beg your pardon?"

"It's an internet group—very exclusive." He shrugged. "Still a booty call, but they're in to acting out their sexual fantasies."

"I'm sorry ... booty call?"

Wilson chuckled, reddening. "Sex," he clarified bluntly.

Basil frowned. He hated to sound obtuse, but he was still a bit mystified. "So ... you're saying it isn't ... uh ... sex for hire?"

Wilson chuckled again. "A lot of them are professionals, but not that kind of profession. I imagine it draws the usual weirdoes, but they're dead serious about protecting the membership. They not only weed out the undesirables before they allow anyone to join, but they do regular background checks—safety guaranteed—so I hear."

"So you aren't a member?"

"No. I'm married. It's strictly singles."

From the look on his face, Basil deduced he'd at least checked it out—and possibly been denied membership on the grounds of being married. So, he could conclude from that that his mystery lady was single. That much was comforting, at least. It didn't tell him a great more than he already knew from his brief conversation with her, but it gave him a place to start.

He suffered a qualm or two at the thought. Until that moment, he hadn't consciously acknowledged that he was intrigued enough to pursue the mystery lady at all. It had been a rousing interlude but why pursue it? How likely was it that he would find her at all in a city of this size? And if he did, what then? It wasn't likely she would welcome another encounter and beyond that, it seemed highly unlikely that he would find it terribly satisfactory. He was certain the novelty, and the spontaneity of the encounter had had a great deal to do with the heights he'd attained. It was a one-of-a-kind, once-in-a-lifetime erotic encounter.

Upon consideration he realized he wasn't altogether certain his motivations were purely lust or curiosity. She'd swept into his life, knocked his socks off, and darted away so fast he felt like the victim of a hit and run and he didn't particularly care for it, however willingly he'd participated at the time.

He'd always thought Yanks were a bit flaky and she seemed a tad odder than most!

Granted, there was the club thing and he supposed that explained her peculiar behavior to an extent, but she must have been a bit strange to start with or she wouldn't have joined.

He was curious to know what fantasy he'd fulfilled for her, though.

It was only when he made a visit to the men's room that he recalled that his Cinderella had left a clue when she dashed off. Fishing the panties from the pocket of his trousers, he looked them over and discovered a laundry tag pinned to the waist.

Amusement flickered through him, but he wasn't inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth. It was another clue, a small one granted, but he was getting closer to the vixen's lair if he wasn't mistaken!

It was unfortunate that the urge to sniff them coincided with the arrival of another visitor to the loo, but he congratulated himself that he managed to carry it off rather well, casually dabbing at his nose and shoving them back into his pocket.

Of course, they were cherry red, but he could damned well carry a red handkerchief if he pleased! It wasn't as if the Yanks didn't have their own odd little quirks!

When he parted company with Wilson, he hailed a cab and settled into a hotel. Within an hour, with the help of some of the hotel staff, he'd identified the laundry from the tag and one hour and fifty dollars American later he had an address and a name. It wasn't until he'd stepped

out of the cab in front of her apartment building that it occurred to him that it was going to be damned awkward arriving at her door unannounced.

An image of the hunted look on her face when she fled materialized in his mind and it occurred to him, forcefully, that she was liable to think he was a ... stalker and have him arrested. He'd been loitering outside for nearly an hour, trying to decide the best approach, when the object of his own private fantasy breezed through the door and bounced down the stairs. He would've recognized those bountiful breasts anywhere! He was in fact so mesmerized by the jiggling pups trying to escape captivity that he almost missed the opportunity to get a good look at her face. Before he could recover sufficiently to consider whether to approach her or not, she hailed a cab, climbed inside, and sped off.

Irritation flickered through him, but luck was with him. A second cab barreled down the street almost directly behind the one she'd gotten in to and he surged toward it. The madman damned near ran him down and then had the gall to behave as if he had reason to be outraged, but he stopped and that was the important thing.

Basil climbed into the backseat. "Follow that cab."

\* \* \* \*

I was still so shook up about my run in with the stranger when I set to work trying to prepare myself, mentally and physically, for my birthday bash at Bennigans that I was a nervous wreck. Luckily, it dawned on me as I climbed out of the shower and towel dried my hair that Becca had invited nearly a dozen people and that, if only half of them actually showed up, it was still going to be impossible for her to pump me for a rundown. Heartened by the realization that I'd be spared the 'interrogation', at least for the night, I was able to focus enough on my preparations to actually begin to feel some anticipation. I was even able to dismiss my embarrassment enough to savor the highlights of my fantasy encounter a little, though I'd been too unsettled earlier to actually do so.

Flickering images of the handsome stranger danced through my mind as I rifled through the clothing in my closet to find something to wear. I should've known instantly that something wasn't quite right, I realized. He was way too good looking and way too young!

Of course, I wasn't an actual member of Pandora myself so I had no real idea what the demographics of the club was like, but I'd assumed it was made up of more mature clients who, like me, had been so focused on careers—and still were—that they'd missed out on wild youth and were a little desperate to make up for it before they were old enough to be just plain old.

Men rarely looked as old as they actually were, though, I reminded myself—or rather, a thirty year old man usually looked younger than a thirty year old woman, and so forth. So often, they continued to look like babies until their mid-twenties and then, slowly, began to mature. He could easily have been as old as I was, I assured myself, even if he had looked closer to thirty.

I realized I didn't really believe that. I'd gotten a really, really close up look of his face. Thirty was probably pushing it! Granted I'd been drunk with anticipation by that time, but not so far gone that I hadn't been able to assimilate the fact that he was even better looking, and younger looking, up close than that first impression I'd had at a distance.

*That* should've shaken me out of my fantasy world! Instead, it had plunged me deeper, aroused me to such a fever of excitement that I could've almost come without penetration.

And very nearly had!

Warming tingles rattled me. The muscles along my sex fluttered in remembered joy.

Trying to fight off the arousal jitters, I grabbed my favorite little black dress and tossed it onto the bed. The fog had disappeared from the bathroom mirror when I got to it to apply my

'war paint'. Ordinarily, I never wore much make up, but on the rare occasions when I went clubbing I indulged a little, adding shadows around my eyes.

I'd been laid, I reminded myself. I should look like somebody that had had a great time and was feeling buoyant because of it.

It would make it more convincing when I told Becca the pack of lies I was formulating.

There was still a fine tremor in my hands when I'd completed my toilet and stopped for one last critical examination in my mirror. Struggling to ignore it, I tightened my hold on my clutch and headed for the door.

I was in luck. When I got to the street, I saw a cab approaching. Relieved that I wouldn't have to stand on the sidewalk searching in vain for transportation, I rushed to the edge of the street and flagged him down.

Despite the early hour, there was already a crowd gathering. It boosted my anxiety and my anticipation in equal parts. Pausing just inside the entrance, I looked around for Becca and spotted her waving at me from the far side of the restaurant area of the bar slash restaurant. Smiling at her, I quickly made my way across the already crowded room.

Becca favored me with a conspiratorial grin when I reached her. To my relief, however, she didn't broach the subject I could see was uppermost in her mind. Instead, she introduced me to several friends she'd invited that I wasn't familiar with.

"And I believe you've already met this gentleman," Becca added with a flourish, "Roderick Smythe—my very good friend, Chloe Masterson."

I felt as if the floor had dropped from under my feet as the 'gentleman' stood up and grasped my limp hand. He fit the bill. He was tall and dark and indisputably British. He just wasn't the man I'd mounted in the men's dressing room!

He must have seen something in my expression. Instead of merely shaking my hand, he leaned close, as if to kiss my cheek. "I won't tell if you don't," he murmured next to my ear.

The blood that had drained to my toes surged back into my face in pulsating waves as he leaned away again. I stared at him wide-eyed, trying to produce some sound or even a sign of acknowledgement. Every fiber of my being seemed frozen, however, except for my mind which was tabulating thought at light speed, too fast for actual comprehension.

Becca laughed with delight.

Like a sleepwalker, I dropped weakly into the chair Roderick pulled out for me, trying to gather my scattered wits ... wondering if he'd seen me when I picked up the wrong rendezvous, wondering if he'd said anything to Becca.

He couldn't have, I realized immediately, despite my state of near catatonic shock. Becca clearly thought he was my fantasy man.

*Awkward!*

His eyes gleamed with amusement. "So ... Chloe, now that we've been properly introduced .... I hope you won't mind if I call you Chloe?"

Becca uttered a snicker and then cleared her throat. "I think we should order drinks. We're still waiting for a few people, but they should be here shortly."

"I'll have a double ... anything!" I said immediately, leaping at the suggestion as if she'd just tossed me a lifeline. In all honesty, I had very little clue what to order. I wasn't a drinker. Except for experimenting with a mixed drink now and then, I never touched alcoholic beverages, and I didn't know the names of any of those I'd tried—not that I could've summoned them in my current state!

Becca divided a glance between me and Roderick. Instead of treating me to another suggestive comment, however, she lifted a hand to summon a waitress. I sent Roderick several unnerved glances while we waited, trying to think of something to say. "You're British?" I asked finally.

Amusement gleamed in his eyes. "For now. I've been giving some thought to seeking U.S. citizenship. I spend far more time in the U.S. these days than in Great Britain."

It was an opening to ask him what he did for a living, I realized. "Oh?" I said absently, more focused on the waitress, who was moving around the table taking drink orders. Finally, she focused on me.

Before I could say anything, Becca interrupted. "Bring her a strawberry daiquiri—easy on the alcohol. She doesn't drink. We don't want her dancing on the table."

I sent her a glare, but I didn't argue. Roderick's look was speculative that time when I looked at him again. I couldn't help but wonder if he was waiting for the moment to ask me what the hell went wrong. "I'm sorry. Where were we?" I asked when he'd given the waitress his own drink order.

A wry smile curled his lips. "I've lost track."

A little calmer now that I knew 'help' was on the way, I actually looked at him for the first time and discovered with a touch of surprise that he was an attractive man. Not drop dead gorgeous by any stretch of the imagination, but he wasn't hard on the eyes.

He also looked to be a lot closer to my age group than the man I'd assaulted in the men's store. *Cringe!*

I relaxed a little more, realizing that he probably felt as awkward as I did under the circumstances. It I knew Becca—and I did—probably most of the people at the table believed we'd had an illicit rendezvous earlier and were just getting around to getting to know each other.

How considerate of Becca to arrange for a 'second' meeting, I thought irritably!

Of course, I *had* led her to believe it had been fireworks!

My drink finally arrived while he was explaining what he did for a living—something to do with banking. I took a deep drought and tried not to make a face when I swallowed the frozen, tart liquid. It hit my empty stomach like Greek fire, a cold rock that exploded into fire and spread through me in a dizzying wave.

Thank *god* Becca had insisted on a weak one!

"I suppose it's a dead bore."

I blinked at him. "What?" Realizing my mind had wandered during his discourse, I struggled to recall what he'd said. "I'm sorry! I just don't know anything about the banking business. I got lost," I said apologetically.

He chuckled. "Don't try to smooth over it now. I've seen that glazed look too many times to count. What do you do for a living?"

I took another fortifying draft of my daiquiri. "Sales. It's hideously boring, but it pays the bills."

Before he could follow up, someone settled a hand on his shoulder. "Smythe? Fancy meeting you here."

Roderick glanced up sharply at the man. I automatically followed. The jolt that went through me when I saw the man who'd approached him was like getting hit by a truck. My eyes widened with shock and horror and both my jaw and my fingers went slack. The glass hitting the table jarred me back to awareness and I made a grab for it. Fortunately, I managed to right it before it had done more than slosh a little of the contents down the front of my dress.

“Montbatten? What brings you here?”

I leapt to my feet, nearly turning my chair over in the process. “Excuse me!” I gasped, in a blind panic to escape. After looking around a little wildly, I headed toward the ladies room at a near run.



## Chapter Three

"This can't be happening!" I muttered under my breath, nearly knocking the woman exiting the ladies room down. "Excuse me! I'm so sorry!"

Absolute horror filled me when I glanced back at the woman I'd nearly run down and discovered my mystery man was hot on my heels. Dashing through the lounge area, I looked around a little wildly once I'd reached the facilities. Discovering the first two stalls were already occupied, I raced to the back. He caught up with me as I shoved the door open, pushing me inside and closing the door behind us.

I gaped up at him in disbelief, trying to wrap my mind around the fact that he'd *followed* me into the ladies room!

"We have got to stop meeting like this," he murmured, dragging me up against his length and covering my shock slackened lips with his mouth.

A fresh shockwave went through me as I registered the heat of his mouth, his taste, inhaled that delicious scent that had made me wild with desire before. It worked the same magic, pelting me with a deluge of pleasurable sensations that rocked me to my core. My higher intelligence had completely abandoned me due to the shock he'd given me. I was operating entirely on instinct and my instincts clapped for joy the moment his essence invaded me. My kegels, too.

Before I could assimilate what was happening, I found myself pressed firmly against the door of the stall. His hand skimmed up my thigh and beneath my dress. He stroked my ass, squeezed one buttock and then moved impatiently toward my belly. I was already wet and as wired as if I had an electric wire up my ass by the time he found my cleft and explored it. I searched him a little frantically for the plug I wanted in my outlet, rubbing that fine erection lovingly through the fabric of his pants. He left off teasing my clit long enough to lower his zipper and present me with his magic wand.

I was dimly aware of voices beyond the little bower we'd discovered, but it only made me more frantic to mount my prize before we could be interrupted. Grasping his cock firmly, I pushed it between my legs to give him a hint. He pulled away far enough to shove my thong down my hips to my knees. Fortunately, when he leaned close once more, grasping one leg and lifting it, the thong finished the descent, landing around one ankle as he hoisted me up the door.

"Oooh!" I gasped when I felt the head of his cock stretching the mouth of my sex, delving inside of me.

He covered my mouth, lifting me a little higher up the door as he pumped his hips. Talk about being hoisted on a flag pole! Fortunately, I was wet enough I began to slide down over the pole before it broke! He groaned into my mouth as my flesh sheathed his. It sent a shivery heat wave through me. My muscles clamped around his cock a little frenziedly.

Shuddering, he dragged his cock outward again and drove into me. By the third stroke I'd not only well lubricated him, I was well on my way to take off. It was a good thing, too. I didn't realize he was in trouble until I felt him tense all over. The discovery that he was on the verge of coming sent me over the edge. My muscles quivered and sent an explosive wave of ecstasy through me. I made a whimpering sound into his mouth as my climax crashed over me.

He broke from my lips, gasping hoarsely, shuddering as he climaxed with me. Sanity began to flow back as he lowered me shakily to the floor and my senses expanded to my surroundings.

The room around us was silent—too quiet. Still reeling with the aftermath, I lifted my head to look up at him, uneasiness beginning to creep into me to replace the warmth of bliss. He met my gaze with one of heavy lidded satisfaction. “I believe we ran everyone out.”

The comment brought me to earth with a jolt. My mind began to flood with images, memories, imaginary scenarios of what I was going to have to face leaving the ladies room.

A faint frown appeared between his brows. “I may have gotten a little carried away,” he said ruefully.

I blinked at him, struggling with the morass of thoughts running through my head and trying to figure out what had happened. “I’m ... confused,” I murmured finally, frowning back at him in puzzlement. “You’re the one I was supposed to meet?”

Something flickered in his eyes. He lifted a hand to my face after a fractional hesitation. “I think so,” he said slowly.

I was still completely at sea, felt a little flicker of relief to think I hadn’t made the horrendous mistake I’d thought, but still confused. “I guess we should get back to the party? They’ll be wondering ....”

He grimaced. “I rather doubt that. In fact, I’m convinced they’ll know exactly what we were doing when we disappeared.”

I felt my face turning red. With an effort, I shrugged. “Oh, well .... I guess we’ll have to face the music.”

He tilted his head. “We could always skip out on the public party and celebrate on our own?” he suggested tentatively.

A thrill went through me instantly but some discomfort, as well. I sighed. “I’d love to, but ....”

“But?”

“Becca went to a lot of effort.”

Something flickered in his eyes, but whatever reservations he had, he dismissed them. “Then we’ll join your friends—wait until they’ve got the party well underway and then slip out.”

I smiled up at him, tremendously relieved that he was interested enough he was willing to join the party.

“Alright,” he said decisively. “How do we play this? Shall I go first like the gentleman I am and draw the attention while you slip away?”

Pleasure wafted through me at the offer. I doubted it would work, but it was the thought that counted! “That’s so sweet!” I exclaimed.

He tapped the tip of my nose playfully. “It’s least I can do considering I got you into this in the first place. Hide here until I draw them off.”

I shuttled to one side of the narrow stall, admiring him while he adjusted his trousers and smoothed his dark hair. “Presentable?”

“Very.”

He leaned down and kissed me. “Fortunately, I don’t look like I’ve been thoroughly fucked. Be sure to check the mirror, sweetie,” he said with a mixture of male satisfaction and amusement.

I locked the door behind him when I heard him at the lavatory—which was when I discovered he’d made a deposit. A shockwave went through me. Trying to recall whether I

could remember anything about a condom, or if he'd ruptured the damned thing, I grabbed a wad of tissue to clean up as I heard him go out.

"Hello ladies! I do believe I've gotten that plumbing problem taken care of," he said cheerfully.

I heard a couple of snickers and then the tread of several people entering the bathroom. Waiting until I heard the stall doors close, I headed out to the lavatory to clean up. The daiquiri, not surprisingly, had pretty well soaked in, but it hadn't been a bad spill to start with. I dampened a towel and brushed at the stain and then checked my appearance in the mirror. A jolt went through me. No wonder he'd recommended checking the mirror! I looked like the wrath of god! My hair was wild and my makeup smeared.

And I hadn't brought my damned purse! I finger combed my hair to tame it down a little and used more tissue to clean up beneath my eyes. I couldn't do much—and couldn't do anything about the whisker burn around my mouth and along my throat!

He surprised me. I discovered although he'd gone out to distract the women waiting to get in to the lady's room, he'd waited for me. He walked me back to the table. I was grateful for it in a way. I would've felt a lot more self-conscious crossing the restaurant by myself, imagining that everyone in the place knew what I'd been doing in the restroom by now.

On the other hand, arriving with him at the table when I'd dashed off alone was a little disconcerting. I looked around at everyone who was eyeing me expectantly, realizing belatedly that I still didn't know my mystery man's name.

He rescued me again. Stepping forward, he held out his hand. "Basil."

Roderick seemed to have recovered himself. He stood, offering his hand as if Basil had just arrived. "Lord Montbatten! Good to see you! What brings you to Atlanta?"

I turned to look at my Brit in shock, confusion filling me all over again. Irritation flickered across his features, but he merely shrugged. "Business," he said coolly. "What brings you?"

Roderick's gaze flickered to me. "Business."

I focused on looking for a vacant seat. The late arrivals seemed to have appeared while I was occupied in the ladies room, but everyone immediately shuffled around and made room for an extra seat beside mine. I would've been more thrilled if I hadn't been seated between the two men, especially since it occurred to me that Roderick might have some inkling of what had happened—both to our rendezvous and in the ladies room.

Becca looked like she was going to burst when she caught my eye. I sent her a look. "Later," I mouthed.

I discovered Basil hadn't missed the exchange. I could feel heat creeping into my cheeks, but I pretended a nonchalance I didn't feel, introducing him to Becca.

Confusion flickered in Becca's eyes when he told her his name. "Basil Pembroke?" She glanced at Roderick. "I thought he said ...?"

Roderick flicked a speculative look at Basil. "He's from Montbatten," he said finally.

"Oh!" Becca nodded, although she still looked a little confused.

I know I was. I'd been certain I heard him call Basil Lord Montbatten. Maybe he'd said something else, though? There was a good bit of background noise in the place.

I discovered Basil had a calming influence on me. Even though it took no more than a glance at him to set my putter to fluttering, he seemed perfectly relaxed and that quieted my own discomfort. I could see he had a similar effect on the others at the table. Although, initially, they'd all been tittering like school children who'd discovered something naughty was going on,

they settled down and behaved like adults—somewhat. I discovered there wasn't a woman at the table that wasn't as alert as a bloodhound with the scent in his nostrils. I felt a prickling of disquiet, wishing I'd spent a little more time at the mirror. I wasn't the oldest woman at the table, but I also wasn't the best looking by any stretch of the imagination. Granted, the lighting was muted, but there was still enough to see!

Fortunately, the drinks kept coming and the food eventually arrived to distract everyone. I nursed my daiquiri until it was mostly water. Whereas before I'd been more focused on downing a little false courage, I now saw it would be best to try to keep what little wits I had about me.

Basil had all but promised to pick up where we'd left off as soon as we could gracefully leave the gathering. I didn't want to be too snookered to thoroughly enjoy it!

My engine was already revving. And yet ....

As soon as everyone had finished eating and expressed their interest in heading over to the lounge area for a little dancing, Basil excused the two of us. My belly instantly tied itself into a hard knot. Pasting a smile on for my friends, I waved and allowed him to walk me out.

He settled a hand along my waist, moving closer once we were outside. "My place? Or yours?"

I gulped, struggling to decide when I hadn't expected to have to make the decision. It occurred to me forcefully, though, that I didn't want to get booted out of the bed once we were done. "My place."

Ordinarily, I didn't take strange men to my place—because I rarely got the opportunity! All things considered, though, it seemed ridiculous to worry about taking him to my place. There was plenty of security if it transpired that I'd managed to hook up with a serial killer—which honestly wouldn't have surprised me given my luck. And I thought I might be a little more comfortable in my own setting.

Besides, there was that other thing. This way, I didn't run the risk of being asked to leave.

The cab ride to my place was a little awkward—for me anyway. If he was tense or uncomfortable, he was good about hiding it. I'd never been more self-conscious in my life! It was almost a relief to reach my apartment at last and have nothing more to worry about than trying to convince Basil that he hadn't made a mistake in coming home with me.

"Something to drink?" I asked, an automatic offer that I hadn't actually thought through.

He moved close, settling his hands at my waist. "I had something ... else in mind."

Alrighty then! No small talk! Actually, I wasn't in the mood for it either. Slipping away from him, I caught his hand and headed for the bedroom. He stopped me before we reached the bed, helping me slip out of the dress. I hadn't worn anything beneath it but my thong. His eyes narrowed, a faintly satisfied expression curling his lips slightly. "I didn't think you were wearing a bra," he murmured, cupping my breasts and massaging them.

I focused on watching him and feeling the warming currents eddying through me. He had nice hands, I thought a little vaguely. Very nice—big, strong, and with long tapered fingers. He could play me with them any old time!

He bent down to suck at each tip briefly once he'd stroked them into hard little pebbles. My eyes seemed to drift shut of their own volition as he did and I felt harder, warmer currents travel through me. I opened my eyes again when I sensed him straightening. He pulled me closer, slipping his hands around to cup my buttocks and massage them as he had my breasts. It brought me into contact with his arousal and put me in mind of things I wanted to see and touch.

I reached for his jacket to push it from his shoulders. He shrugged out of it and then looked around for a place to hang it.

Briefly disappointed when he moved away from me, I decided to climb in bed and wait for him to join me. Besides, it gave me a nice vantage point to watch. He sent me a look that was smoldering and at the same time a wry acknowledgement that I hadn't made any bones about watching him strip for me.

I found myself wondering about him as my attention flipped back and forth between scanning him as a whole and focusing on his hands as they worked his clothing off. Beyond being the most handsome man that had ever graced my bedroom, beyond being intelligent, thoughtful, and sophisticated—well mannered and as gracious about giving as a lover as receiving, what sort of man was he?

Besides amazing?

And as nicely built as I'd thought he must be—not muscular in the way of men who pumped iron, but as if blessed by nature.

And what in the world did he see in me?

I dismissed the doubts trying to take hold as he moved to the bed and climbed in, settling beside me. For several long moments, we simply stared at one another and then, as if by mutual consent, we shifted together. His lips brushed mine, molded to them briefly and then he tilted his head, as if seeking a better fit.

Without any of the blind panic that had driven me before as much as the lust, without the prickling fear of being caught, without the fantasy I'd firmly entrenched in my mind, I found the same magic I'd felt the first time he kissed me—except more pronounced. Without the myriad distractions, I focused totally and completely on him and discovered the wonder of his kiss all over again. His mouth was hot on mine, warming me from my core to the skin, making my flesh pebble all over in a supersensitive rash that pelted my mind with too many impressions to grasp at once. I could feel the hair on his legs as they tangled with mine, the smoothness of the soles of his feet as they stroked along my calves. I could feel the heaviness of his erection against my belly and the dampness of pre-cum on the tip. I could feel the muscles of his arms flexing as he gathered me closer and stroked his hands over me, stirring more currents of warmth. I could feel the prickle of the light sprinkling of hair on his chest against my tender breasts.

And his mouth. The heated, gentle suction against my own drew the heat in my belly to a small blaze, turning my insides molten, liquid, malleable. The rake of his tongue along mine filled me with his taste, made me drunk, dizzy, desperate for more.

I savored the slow awakening as I hadn't been able to delight in our frantic couplings before and yet I felt a budding anxiety, impatience for more.

He broke from my lips almost on the thought and slipped lower to suck at my throat. I stroked his head and shoulders and upper arms in appreciation, urging him to take my breasts into his mouth, certain that was his goal.

He teased me unmercifully, exploring my throat and neck and even my ear before he moved on to greener pastures. He was clearly in no hurry as he explored my collar bone and the upper part of my breasts and I was becoming more and more anxious. He circled the throbbing tips until I was near mindless with desperation before he finally caught one nipple between his lips.

I hadn't realized just how much blood had pooled in the tips until he closed his mouth around it. The jolt that went through me was almost more than I could take. Like an electric current, it sizzled along my nerve endings, frying them. My eyeballs rolled back in my head. I

sucked in a sharp breath and held it, dug my fingers into his shoulders. By the time the intense sensation had mellowed to something more manageable, my sex was clapping together and demanding attention.

It didn't get it, poor thing! He moved to my other breast. Darkness descended over me, briefly, when he caught that nipple and tortured it with his mouth. When I managed a modicum of lucidity again, I began to search a little frantically for his cock or his hand. At the moment, I was clear on which I wanted between my legs, but my coochie was screaming for attention.

I couldn't seem to reach either and before I could demand *something* to soothe the throbbing ache, he moved lower still and began to explore my belly.

I made a sound very like a whimper of distress—because it was!—gripping his shoulders in fingers curled like talons and trying to drag him back up. He ignored the demand for several moments and finally shifted upward again, staring down at my face.

I opened my eyes with an effort, staring up at him dizzily, trying to formulate words in my mind. I'd lost that ability, unfortunately.

*I'm ready, damn it*, I thought a little despairingly as he captured my mouth again.

A fresh wave of molten heat poured through me, but the motion of his tongue reminded me of what I wanted. Disentangling my legs from his, I threw one across his hips and tried to corral the cock with my cleft so that I could mount it.

He seemed to get the message. Breaking the kiss, he rolled into the cradle of my thighs and began poking me with the head of his cock. I struggled to counter his movements and help him ring the right spot.

Jesus Christ! Had he forgotten where the damned hole was? Or was he just hoping it could find the way all by itself? I felt around a little frantically with one hand—side, hip, belly—where was it?

Burrowing his face against the bed beside me, he arched his hips, grasped it and drove it home. It forced an inelegant grunt from me as it punched the air from my lungs. Sucking in a reviving breath, I curled both legs around him, trying to encompass it while he shoved. It was like trying to get your foot in a boot that had no zipper. Straining every muscle between us, we fought a round with uncooperative flesh and finally managed a deeply satisfying connection.

I groaned appreciatively. I might have babbled in tongues. It felt so good deeply embedded inside of me that I almost didn't want to move. I almost thought I could die happy just that way—attached.

Basil had other ideas. As soon as he'd caught his breath and shifted into a good fighting stance, he began pumping in and out. That was great, too. I dropped my feet to the bed and mirrored his movements the best I could considering ninety nine percent of my focus was on the tiny bundle of nerves that made up my g-spot and I was really far more interested in making every stroke count. Anticipation began to take hold when I felt the tingling rising to a crescendo, felt imminent release. I curled my hips so he could reach just the right spot and went off like a Roman candle.

I completely lost touch with everything but the cock, then. He changed his own tempo and depth of penetration when I began to convulse and began driving into me harder and faster. It jacked my climax up several notches on the Richter scale so that my gasps got hoarser and shriller. A sublime sense of satisfaction filled me as the waves of glory moved off. Thoroughly wrung out, I went limp, panting for breath.

Basil was still shuddering from the aftershocks of his own climax when I touched down. The desire moved through me to cuddle him in appreciation, but I discovered I couldn't find the

energy at the moment. Fortunately, he gathered me tightly against his length and rolled. I ended up on top draped limply over him—which was sort of a cuddle. “Mmm,” I managed in a weak attempt to vocalize my appreciation.

For a while, the only sound in the room was heavy breathing. My heart and lungs finally returned to their normal rhythm, however, as I drifted lazily in a happy fog.

“You asleep?”

I jerked awake—not that I’d actually been asleep—just sort of drowsing. “Did I snore?”

He burst out laughing. Rolling, he dumped me on the bed and looked down at me, still grinning. “Do you snore?”

Irritation flickered through me, but I couldn’t help but smile back at him. “I don’t know. You’ll have to stay the night to find out.”

Something flickered in his eyes. He settled back against one of my pillows, staring at the ceiling while I mentally kicked myself. I traced the hair in the center of his chest with one finger. “It’s ok if you don’t want to. I was just offering.”

He didn’t say anything for several moments. “I have an early flight tomorrow.”

My belly took a nosedive. “Oh.”

## Chapter Four

A million questions rattled around in my brain, but I resolutely ignored them. Men hated being pushed—and they hated being cornered worse. They liked to make up their own mind. The only thing pelting him with questions and whining was liable to earn me was my bed to myself a whole lot quicker.

In any case, I didn't really need to ask him. He had a flight and he was British. He was going home.

It hadn't occurred to me, even once, to wonder if he was married! It occurred to me so forcefully at that moment that I felt cold all over—mostly because I realized no man as wonderful as he was could've escaped captivity so long.

I wanted, desperately, to ask him if he would be coming back—soon or ever. I hadn't exactly put myself in a position to ask, though.

"I'm curious ...," he said after a few moments.

I stiffened, waiting. When he didn't say anything else, I finally lifted my head to look at him. "About what?"

His gaze flickered over my face. "What *was* your fantasy?"

My heart skipped several beats. I don't know why, but when he'd shown up at my party at Bennigans, I'd decided that I must have been wrong. I should've known just from the way everyone had reacted that I'd guessed right the first time! The question did more than throw me for a loop, though. It brought a surge of embarrassment.

I dropped my head to the bed, hiding my face against his shoulder. "You couldn't guess?"

"Having wild sex in a dressing room with a stranger?"

I didn't know whether to laugh or punch him. "No!" I said a little testily.

He shifted around to look at me. "Then what?"

I studied his face, but I wasn't at all comfortable discussing it. "You should know that I only confessed it to my very best friend in the world when I was ... three sheets to the wind."

He frowned. "But you didn't know who you were meeting. Why pick me?"

I looked away from his piercing gaze, shrugging. "Tall, dark, debonair Brit. You looked exactly the way I'd imagined."

To my delight, I saw color creep into his cheeks. "You could all that just from looking at me across the way?"

I chuckled. "Not that you were British! You just looked the part."

He studied that over. "So ... you fancied meeting up with a tall, dark, debonair Brit and having wild sex in a men's dressing room?"

I sighed. "Something like that. It was more than I imagined discovering an instant, wild attraction that neither of us could resist. I threw in the wild sex because that's supposed to figure into the fantasy." I frowned. "If you weren't the one I was supposed to meet, why were you looking straight at me when I turned around?"



He grinned. "I didn't realize I was, to be honest. The wind caught your frock and gave me a shocking display of buns and I completely forgot where I was or where I was headed. Then you turned around and I saw the two pups fighting to break loose and ...." He shrugged.

I gaped at him as it suddenly connected in my mind. "You thought I was a hooker!"

He grimaced. "I was hoping you were, actually, because it did occur to me when I followed you in that I might be leaving in handcuffs otherwise. Imagine my surprise and delight when you were not only *very* friendly, but thanked me very nicely afterwards!"

I was only slightly mollified, but I couldn't help but laugh at the image he'd conjured. "But you followed me anyway."

"My dick was leading the way. My mind was on holiday."

It was hard to be insulted by that, actually. Ruefully, I admitted that the dress had been specifically selected to tempt. I could hardly quibble over the fact that it had had just the effect I'd hoped!

That still didn't explain how he'd shown up at my birthday party, though.

I discovered when I met his gaze again that he was waiting for the question. "You left your thong, Cinderella. It had a laundry ticket in it. I tracked you to your lair, only to see you dash off again—so I followed."

I didn't know what to think of all the effort he'd put into tracking me down. Was it a good thing? Or a bad thing?

And should I shoot my launderer or thank him?

"I don't know why I was so determined to track you down," he said as if I'd voiced the question. "I'm not in the habit of doing that sort of thing. Honestly!" He frowned. "I did sort of feel a bit like the victim of a hit and run, frankly, when you dashed off without even giving me your name, but I'm not at all sure that was entirely the reason."

I didn't consider it very long. "Well, whatever, I'm glad you did. The ... encounter in the ladies room was a little wilder than I'd expected, but we didn't get arrested so ...."

"Yes, that was a bit much, wasn't it? Enjoyable! No doubt about that, but more reckless than I'm inclined to in a general way. But we can always put it down as one of wild things to be tried before you die and mark it off the list," he murmured with amusement. "Something to tell the grandchildren and all that!"

I knew he was joking and yet it sent a pang through me—and directly behind that a jolt as I became aware of the stickiness between my thighs. I gaped at him in dawning dismay. "We didn't use a condom!"

Something flickered in his eyes. "You aren't worried about getting pregnant?" he asked uneasily.

The question sent another jolt through me since that hadn't occurred to me at all! It was only a momentary shock, however. I was thirty five! If that was something that was going to happen for me it would've happened a long, long time ago—not that I had any intention of worrying him by telling I wasn't using that kind of protection! "I ... uh ... I wasn't talking about that."

Basil stared at her a long moment, wrestling with the irritation the suggestion had aroused. It wasn't reasonable to be insulted at the implication. He knew it wasn't when she had no clue of who he was. *He*, on the other hand, knew exactly who he was with. He might have behaved impulsively, recklessly, and completely out of character since he'd met her, but he wasn't crazy and he was no fool! He'd taken the time to do a thorough background check on her

once he had her name and address. "I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you that you were perfectly safe with me?"

I studied his face searchingly for several moments and discovered I believed every word of it. Relaxing, I settled again. "You're safe with me, too."

"I know."

I glanced at him questioningly but he didn't elaborate, and I decided to try not to be insulted by the suspicion that he thought I was safe because I hadn't been laid in forever—which I hadn't!

It was a little late to worry about any of it, I reminded myself.

He surprised me by staying most of the night. I dozed off at one point only to be awakened some time later by his inquisitive, very talented hands. I groaned at being dragged from sleep, but really it felt too good to complain too much. I was glad I hadn't when he kissed me afterwards and told me he had to leave to catch his flight.

My eyes felt like sandpaper as I watched him dress. My throat was tight with a burgeoning sense of loss, but I managed to stave it off until he kissed me goodbye at the door and strode away from me. Trying not to feel as if all the magic had gone out of the world, I crawled into my cold, lonely bed and closed my mind to the misery trying to take hold of me, and after a while, I slept.

I wasn't prepared for the assault Becca launched the following day.

"That was the dreamiest man I've ever seen in my life! Tell me! Tell me!"

I struggled with my depression. I'd been fighting it since the party ended, trying to convince myself that that was all it was and every party had to end, but I hadn't managed it yet. I shrugged, forcing a half-hearted smile. "I thought he was my rendezvous."

Becca's eyes widened like saucers. "Oh god! You didn't?"

I couldn't help but chuckle. "I did. He followed me in. How was I supposed to know?"

Becca let out a squeal like a sixteen year old that drew the attention of most of the people in the office. She clapped a hand over her mouth. "Tell me! Wait! We can't really talk here. Swear to me you'll tell me everything at lunch!"

I didn't really want to share, damn it! I realized she wasn't going to let me off unless I gave her something, though. "We'll talk at lunch."

By lunch I'd managed to convince myself that I was being ridiculous to hold on to it as if it was real—because it wasn't. He might not have been the man I was supposed to act out my fantasy with, but it had still been a fantasy trip.

"You did it?" she asked excitedly.

I chuckled. "I did—It was the scariest thing I've ever done in my life, but I did it."

"How was it?"

I thought about for about two seconds and sighed. "Wonderful."

Becca looked envious. "With a man like that, how could be anything else?"

I considered that. "It could've been god awful, actually."

"But it wasn't?"

"No. It was ...." I sighed. "The best birthday present ever."

Becca looked a little disconcerted. "Except that wasn't the present I arranged."

"No, but if you hadn't and I hadn't been expecting it I wouldn't have been there," I pointed out.

She beamed at me. "Rod liked you. I could tell he was miffed when Basil showed up. Now I know why!"

"I liked Rod, too," I said.

"But he doesn't really stack up against Basil."

The problem was, he didn't have to. Basil was gone and I knew better than to let myself think anything else. If he'd had any intention of ever seeing me again, he would've said something.

He hadn't even asked for my phone number. Not that I could picture him calling me from Great Britain. The charges would be staggering, I was sure.

Almost the worst thing about it was the fact that everyone thought I'd had a wonderfully exciting adventure and they were thrilled for me, envious, and curious about the details. I hadn't even shared those with my best buddy, though. I certainly wasn't open to sharing with anyone else, which they considered poor sportsmanship.

I felt compelled by their attitude to pretend that was exactly what it was and that I was perfectly content to file it under fond memories and move on to another adventure. It was almost worse having to pretend I was happy when I wasn't.

Becca knew me best and, despite my best efforts, I think she realized fairly quickly that I was smitten with my fantasy man. She began pressuring me to join Pandora's Box. There were other exciting adventures just waiting to happen—hair of the dog and all that! I told her I'd think about it just to fob her off, but it held far less appeal to me than it had before.

I really wasn't the adventurous sort. I was pretty sure that if anyone else had shown up besides Basil that day, I would've dashed out the back door of the store instead of leading him to the men's dressing room. It hadn't been a case of wanting that particular experience so much as it had been a reluctance to miss my chance to be with him.

Roderick surprised me by giving me a call and asking me out to dinner the following weekend. I'd liked him. I thought he was an attractive man, but I wasn't sure I was up to listening to that particular accent yet. It did occur to me that what I probably really needed was a distraction to keep me from dwelling on my misery constantly, but in the end I fobbed him off with an excuse about catching up on paperwork and took a rain check.

I hadn't honestly given it another thought, but when he called again later in the following week, I realized that I was either going to have to be honest with him and tell I wasn't interested or I should go out with him to discover if either of us were interested in pursuing it further. I couldn't work up much enthusiasm, but I reminded myself that I had found him attractive and he had a certain charm all his own. Besides, Basil wasn't coming back. There was no sense in wallowing in my self-pity.

The big problem was that even if I was ready to try to 'get back up on that horse', I wasn't ready for intimacy and Roderick knew enough about me, I was afraid, to have expectations I didn't want him to have. I finally decided to take a chance and agreed to go anyway, figuring I had enough experience to fend him off if he got too amorous.

It went surprisingly well. There were a few awkward moments, but Roderick was gentlemanly enough, and smart enough, to get the 'signals' without me having to beat him over the head with it. I wasn't open to sex—yet. I might be, but he was going to have to convince me.

I discovered it did brighten my outlook a little to go out and enjoy a non-threatening flirtation. I thought if I'd never met Basil that Roderick would've swept me right off my feet. Unfortunately for both of us, I had and because I had, I was too hurt and too cautious about getting stung again to let my guard down much.

Luckily, I had a good excuse for putting him off the following week. I had a sales trip on my schedule and didn't know if I could make it back for the weekend ... or rather exactly when I would make it back. I told him I'd call him if I did get in by Friday but that I didn't really expect to. I could see that he suspected that wasn't true, but he didn't push and I was grateful for it. I wasn't currently in any state to appreciate forcefulness or aggressive pursuit. I needed time and space.

As it happened, I did make it home on Friday—late and exhausted, and completely disinterested in talking to anyone—which was why it annoyed the hell out of me when my neighbor popped out the door the moment I stuck my key in my lock.

"Hi Mrs. Moyer," I said tiredly.

"I thought that was you I heard. A young man came by looking for you a little earlier."

Surprised, I paused and turned to look at her as I shoved my door open with my hip and pushed my bags inside. Mrs. Moyer was an elderly woman and tended to consider anybody under fifty as 'young'. "Oh?"

She smiled. "A good looking young man—Had a foreign accent."

My heart skipped several beats, but I told myself I was getting worked up about nothing. She was probably talking about Roderick, although I couldn't imagine why he would have come by when I'd told him I'd call.

"He seemed very put out that you weren't here. He left me his card."

"His card?" I echoed, immediately dismissing Roderick and beginning to wonder if it had been a salesman. I waited impatiently while she fished around in her pockets for it.

"Ah!" she said triumphantly, producing the card. "I thought I'd lost it."

I nearly snatched it from her hand. My heart was beating so fast with hopefulness by that time that I felt almost ill. It seemed to stop dead in my chest the moment I saw the name on the card. "Did he say anything?" I asked faintly.

She frowned, clearly searching her memory. "Said he was sorry he'd missed you."

My nose and eyes immediately stung with tears of disappointment. It took all I could do to maintain any semblance of calm. "Well ... thanks!"

I managed to shut the door and lock it without slamming it, but I was more than a little upset. Angry in my disappointment, I kicked my luggage. Pain instantly shot through my toes at the immature outburst, breaking the dam of emotion clogging my throat. I burst into noisy sobs. Bending down, I grabbed my suitcase and hobbled into my bedroom with it. I left my samples case in the hallway, flounced onto my bed and gave free rein to the emotions I'd been battling for weeks. I didn't feel one bit better when I'd cried myself out. In fact, I felt a great deal worse. My head ached. My nose was stopped up and I could hardly see for the tears that had scalded my eyeballs. Sitting up on the edge of the bed, I stared morosely at the floor for a time and finally got up and headed into the bathroom to blow my nose and search for something for my headache.

I'd just finished splashing cool water on my face in an attempt to take the swelling out of my eyelids when I heard a knock on my door. I jerked upright, listening intently. When it came again, I was certain it was my door. My heart leapt, but caution leapt right behind it. I'd missed Basil. It couldn't be him and I wasn't in the mood for company.

The temptation to ignore the summons at the door warred with an impossible to dismiss hope that I was wrong and Basil had returned.

"Coming!" I yelled, abruptly racing from the bathroom to the front of the apartment. He'd already turned away when I reached the door, but I knew that back! I nearly broke all my

nails fighting the locks. Finally, I got the door open, though. Evidently he'd heard me, because he'd turned back to the door by the time I yanked it open, ready to yell for him to stop. I gaped up at him for a moment and then launched myself at him, throwing my arms around his waist. It flickered through my mind that I might regret showing him just how desperate I was to see him, but I was too thrilled to consider caution or self-preservation.

"I thought I'd missed you!" I mumbled against his chest, fighting the urge to burst into tears all over again.

He waltzed me inside and closed the door behind us. I almost tripped over the damned sample bag I'd left in the hall, but he managed to keep us both upright. Threading his fingers through my hair, he tugged my head back. I surged upward even as I obeyed the silent demand, grazing his chin before he dipped his head to meet my lips.

His mouth tasted like heaven. I'd spent hours and hours trying to convince myself that my imagination had blown his kisses all out of proportion. Nobody kissed that good. It only took him two seconds to annihilate that conviction and convince me I'd lied to myself.

It was sheer perfection. His mouth was a perfect fit for mine, his kiss just wet enough to thrill me right down to my toes and make my kegels flutter wildly and not enough to make me feel like I was drowning. His tongue danced along mine seductively, stirring warmth that quickly became heat, and his taste and scent intoxicated me as they poured through me, enervating me and at the same time electrifying my senses.

I staggered a little drunkenly when he broke the kiss and lifted his head, wondering what he seemed to be searching for, but I didn't object when he dragged me from the foyer and into the living room. He paused there. I took it as an invitation to reassure myself that he was really there and I wasn't dreaming, patting and stroking him and trying to undress him at the same time. He shrugged out of his jacket, tossed it in the general direction of one of my easy chairs and dragged me down on the couch, burrowing his face against my neck and nibbling at my throat while he tugged at my clothing.

I heard an ominous popping sound as he leaned away, struggling with the buttons along the front of my blouse. The missile pinged me on the forehead, momentarily jolting me from the fog.

"Sorry," he muttered absently, still fighting the buttons.

I lifted my head just as he managed to get my blouse unbuttoned to my bra line. He frowned at the bra and then shoved a hand into one cup, popping my breast free. He dove for it immediately, catching the turgid tip in his mouth. I released a choked breath as he clamped down on it and jolt of pleasure sizzled through me, frying what was left of my brain. Dropping my head back, I struggled for air, gasping like a fish out of water while I stroked his head and shoulders as if I was strumming a harp, mindlessly.

Feeling a tug on my skirt, I struggled to lift my hips enough to accommodate him. He shoved the hem up to my hips and delved beneath the front of my thong, stroking one long finger along my cleft to part the petals of flesh. What felt like a bolt of electricity traveled through me when he found my clit and teased it, culminating in my womb and causing it and my channel to palpitate so frenziedly I thought for several moments that I was coming. I gritted my teeth at the intensity of the sensation. My back bowed in involuntary reflex.

Apparently he decided I was ready enough. His hand disappeared from my clit and I felt him fumbling with his trousers. Releasing the nipple he'd been torturing, he wedged his nose into the other cup, trying to coax the nipple into his mouth with his tongue while he used one

hand to shove my thong out of the way and the other to guide his cock. I couldn't decide whether to help him with the nipple or focus on trying to mount the knob poking me.

I decided on both, oblivious to the fact that I'd lost what little coordination I'd had pre-arousal. I poked him in the eye with my finger trying to dig my breast free, but I did manage to ring the dick with the hole. He grunted with satisfaction as if he'd managed it all by himself, planted a hand on my hair where it lay on the couch as he struggled for leverage and tried to feed the 'hose' into the hole when he discovered my kegels had stopped clapping and clenched.

Both of us were bathed in perspiration by that time, as if we'd fought a battle, and panting like asthmatic horses. I began to think I might hyperventilate and pass out before I reached my goal. Dizzy, disoriented, I focused on my coochie and commanded it to relax. He managed to make enough headway he decided to let go of the hand brace he'd clamped around his cock to keep it from doing anything painful—to him.

Planting both feet on the arm of the couch and both hands on my shoulders, he ground his teeth together and heaved, straining every muscle—as if he was trying to shove a grand piano through a keyhole. Panic flickered through me that he might succeed in shoving my womb up into my chest if he abruptly broke deadlock. Fortunately, he paused for breath at just the moment my coochie unclenched and started clapping for joy again. His next effort drove him home ... and then some. Pain and pleasure warred within me. My womb spasmed with pain and my channel with pleasure. Pleasure rapidly overtook the momentary pain, however, as he began pumping furiously, pounding me right in the g-spot due to the fact that my ass had become wedged between two of the seat cushions, pitching my hips into just the right angle to receive the blessing.

I started praying fervently. "Oh God! Oh God! Oh my god!"

He slammed into me and went still just about the time I went into seizure and let out a shrill yodel of praise. I was too far gone to figure out why he'd stopped until he started again, thrusting faster and deeper, shaking all over as badly as I was—maybe worse. He uttered several deep, hoarse grunts of satisfaction that blended in perfect harmony with my shrill cries, and then planted his mouth firmly over mine to silence me.

It was a wasted effort. I was through screaming by then and, worse, I needed air as badly as he did. We huffed each other's air for several moments, which was a stroke of genius on his part because I'd over oxygenated and was near to black out, and then we just sort of melted together like hot wax as strength went the way of coordination and all higher intelligence. He turned his face after a few moments, settling his cheek against mine as if he was too weak to lift his head to clear his mouth from mine to take in fresh air. I managed to drag in one deep draft of cool air as I sank into the cushions beneath his dead weight.

*Poor* baby, I thought dimly! He as so tried from the fight! Struggling, I managed to lift one arm high enough to drop it across his back and pat him. "That was so nice, baby," I muttered drunkenly.

He uttered a choked laugh that I felt all the way to my spine because he was crushing my chest. Planting his palms on my hair again, he levered himself upward far enough to check to see if I was still breathing. Dipping his head, he nuzzled his face against mine. "Hello to you, too," he murmured, laughter lacing his voice.

## Chapter Five

My lips curled automatically in response to the amusement in his voice.

After a brief struggle, he managed to climb off of me. "Come on, sweetie. I think I can make it to the bedroom now," he said, grabbing one of my limp arms and giving it a tug that brought me upright.

Discomfort drew my gaze downward as I stood and dismay instantly filled me at the view. I had one breast half in and half out of a cup. The other was a misshapen blob squeezed between the cup that had held it and the other breast. My skirt was still up around my hips, one side tucked into my thong and I was wearing one shoe.

Basil drew my gaze as he casually tucked his cock back into his pants and zipped them. He was still fully clothed down to his socks and minus the jacket he'd discarded before we got going, which I saw was lying beside my coffee table. He bent to retrieve it as I glanced at it.

"I think I'll take a shower," I said abruptly, feeling Basil's recent deposit soaking my panties. Either I wreaked of sex or the room did and I wasn't taking any chances it was me.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, following me to my room.

Pausing in the act of removing what was left of my blouse, I threw a glance of surprise at him, debated briefly, and shook my head. "No."

He looked at me quizzically. "Was that 'no' you don't mind, or just no?"

I smiled. "I don't mind." I just thought it was a little odd that he wanted to. Then again, maybe he was in a hurry to bathe and he hadn't thought it would be polite to race me to the shower?

The image that greeted me in the bathroom mirror gave me a jolt. My hair was sticking up in every direction and my eyes were still so swollen from my recent crying jag that I looked like someone had punched me in both eyes. I was abruptly sorry I'd invited him to join me. The light in the bathroom was way too bright.

Raking my fingers through my hair self-consciously, I headed to the shower to adjust the water, peeling off the rest of my clothes while I waited for the water to reach the right temperature. Basil strode into the bathroom stark naked just as I stepped into the shower.

I felt a little resentful that he was so cute with his hair standing on end when I looked like the wrath of god. I supposed I shouldn't have been surprised. He looked better than I remembered, which was saying something considering the pedestal I'd built for him in my imagination.

I was sure I hadn't made a similar impression.

Ducking beneath the showerhead as he stepped in behind me, I pivoted to make sure I was thoroughly wet down and then sloughed the water from my face to see so that I can give him room. I discovered when I'd blinked the water out of my eyes that he was closer than I'd thought he was. He was studying my face, frowning faintly. I blinked at him warily. "What?"

"Your eyes look swollen."

"Really?" I asked, dismayed that he'd noticed.

"Is something wrong?"

No way was I going to admit I'd flopped down and wept like a baby denied a treat when I discovered I'd missed his visit! "No," I said quickly. "Not a thing. I guess it's probably just that I've been on the road. I don't sleep well in hotels."

He didn't look convinced but he moved beneath the shower. Relieved, I scooted past him and grabbed the soap and my bathing scrungy. "You were on holiday?"

I stared at him blankly, trying to remember if there were any holidays that month. I couldn't think of any. "I was working."

"Oh."

I noticed he didn't ask what I did when I was working. I was mildly piqued until I remembered we'd discussed work at my birthday party since nearly half of the attendees worked with Becca and me. "Did you just get here today?" I asked as I handed over the soap and bath scrub and changed places with him under the water.

He frowned. "Yesterday, actually."

My heart sank. I hadn't wanted to ask him when he was leaving because I didn't want to seem pushy, but I figured the time of arrival would probably give me an idea of how long I could expect him to be around. I'd been hoping he'd just arrived today, though. "Oh," I responded, struggling with the urge to ask him how long he would be staying.

"I was a bit outdone to discover you were out," he muttered. That was actually a bit of understatement. He'd been *extremely* peeved when he'd arrived and discovered she was nowhere to be found. He was aware that his anger was completely out proportion and unreasonable besides when he hadn't called her to let her know he was coming or ask if she would welcome a visit. It was the latter that had settled it, though.

He'd just spent three of the most hellish weeks he could recall trying to convince himself that, while it had been an extremely gratifying fling, that was all it was and better behind him and forgotten. By the time he'd finally arrived at the conclusion that he hadn't managed to get her out of his system he'd also realized that he hadn't exactly paved the way for a return engagement. He'd left without offering even a token promise of 'I'll look you up when next I'm town' and hadn't contacted her since. He'd rather thought taking her by storm by arriving on her doorstep might work better than warning her he was coming with a phone call.

Under the circumstances, he had no one to blame but himself that he'd flown across the ocean to see her only to discover she was gone off—god alone knew where with god only knew who.

He didn't think he would've taken it quite so badly if *that* hadn't occurred to him—that he hadn't given her any reason to suppose he would ever come back at all and that she might well have moved on.

It was no great surprise to discover Roderick Smythe had been sniffing around since he'd left. He'd seemed damned territorial about her the night of the party for someone he'd just met! It hadn't taken a great deal of mental exercise to deduce that Roderick had been the designated fantasy playmate Chloe had been supposed to meet! The thing was, he hadn't met her, and it wasn't as if Chloe had chosen him!

Of course he couldn't claim a great deal longer acquaintance, but he could certainly claim a far more *intimate* acquaintance!

"I was a little upset to discover I'd missed you," I admitted when it didn't seem he meant to say more.



He sent me a quick look and reached for me, dragging me against his length. "Well, all's well that ends well. I don't mind telling you I would've been very put out if I'd ended kicking my heels around here for the duration."

I shifted against him, enjoying the feel of the water cascading over us and his slick skin rubbing against mine. "Duration of what?"

His brows rose. "My holiday."

I blinked up at him, feeling the beginnings of hopefulness. "You're on a holiday? It isn't a business trip?"

He shrugged. "More or less. I've a few things that need attending, but otherwise I'm all yours. I don't suppose I could crash on your sofa for a few days?"

I was thrilled speechless for several moments. "Wouldn't you rather crash in my bed?"

He grinned at me. "Far rather, but I didn't want to be too pushy."

I chuckled dutifully instead of saying anything *really* stupid. "Have you eaten yet?" I asked, exploring his chest with interest.

He caught my hand and directed it downward over his flat belly to the erection standing between us. "Food ... hmm. My stomach's still on Big Bend time. I had something else entirely in mind. For instance ... I thought you might check this to see if I'd washed it properly."

I bit his pec playfully, smiling against his chest. "It feels squeaky clean to me. You want to check me?"

He grinned, bending over and slipping his hand between my legs. "I thought you'd never ask. This is interesting," he murmured huskily.

"What?"

"There's a hole here. I think I need to plug it with something."

I pulled away and shut off the cooling water. "Food first!" I said firmly. "My stomach's on Eastern Standard Time and I'm starving! Hold that thought!"

"Oh, I will," he assured me agreeably, stepping from the shower and looking around for a towel. I got one for each of us and led the way from the bathroom once I'd dried off, using the towel to squeeze the water from my hair.

He caught me in a flying tackle and carried me on to the bed as I reached it, landing on top of me. I gaped up at his grinning face in stunned surprise. He chuckled. "You make the most adorable faces when you're startled."

I didn't how to take that. "I do?"

"I like that one, too. Shall we eat out or dine in?"

I stared him, trying to switch gears. "I thought I'd just have a sandwich."

"Ah! Good choice. You can nibble on a sandwich while I nibble on you."

I was sure he was teasing. I thought he was, anyway. "I think I'd have trouble focusing."

"On the sandwich or me?"

"Both."

"In that case, I'll nibble a little and then we can go to the kitchen."

I doubted there would be a 'little' involved in it, but he didn't wait for me to agree to the game plan, he dipped down to cover my mouth with his own. By the time he broke the kiss I was less interested in the sandwich and far more interested in what he planned to nibble on.

Everything! He wove a leisurely path from my mouth to my breasts, suckled each until I was dizzy and then moved lower, nipping a row of love bites all the way down to the tops of my thighs. I squeezed my legs tightly together and he sent me a smoldering, chastising look.

Grasping the lips of my sex with his thumbs, he pushed them apart and sucked my clit despite my efforts to thwart him, lingering just long enough to convince me ... then he moved down my legs, captured one foot and sucked my toes. My belly danced a jig. I couldn't decide whether I found it more sensual or ticklish.

Then he hopped off the bed, grasped my hand, and dragged me upright. "Alright. Sustenance!"

I gaped at him in disbelief.

He sent me a look of innocence, though his eyes were gleaming with mischief. "What?"

Pursing my lips, I slipped off the bed. "You ass!" I said without heat, marching toward my closet to grab a robe.

He chuckled at that as if I'd given him a compliment. By the time I'd slipped into my robe, he'd disappeared. I found him with his head in the refrigerator—still stark naked. Shrugging, I sidled up behind him and slipped my hand along his cleft to tickle his balls. He jumped so high he nearly rammed his head into the freezer door.

I gasped, covering my mouth to keep from laughing when he whirled to look at me in shock, but it was an exercise in futility. I couldn't hold back the tide. The look on his face was priceless. He grinned sheepishly. "I'll get you for that, you saucy wench!"

I couldn't stop laughing. "Oh no! Please don't!" I gasped dramatically.

He planted one hand on his hip, grasped his cock with the other and pointed it at me like a sword, narrowing his eyes. "By god! I don't believe you've taken me seriously, wench!"

I scanned his 'sword', biting my lip to keep from laughing, and shook my head at him. He surged toward me abruptly. Uttering a shriek of laughter, I dashed through the kitchen and into the living room, raced around the couch with him hot on my heels, and headed for the bedroom. He caught me before I could get to the bathroom and slam the door. Lugging me across the room, he tossed me onto the bed and sprawled on top of me.

I stared up at him, struggling to catch my breath.

He studied me for a long moment and finally lifted his head and looked around. "Egads, woman! We're in the bedroom again! I'll never get you fed at this rate!"

I'd lost all interest in food by that time. "Later," murmured, lifting my arms to drape them around his neck and pull him down to me.

He gave me a peck on the lips and disentangled himself from my arms. "No. Food first. I'll have to take you out. The cupboard's bare and I can't trust you this close to a bed, you insatiable tart!"

\* \* \* \*

I couldn't stop smiling when I went in to work Monday morning despite the fact that I was extremely disappointed that the necessity of existing required that I keep a job! It was inevitable that Becca would notice.

"What have you been up to, I wonder?" she purred at the first opportunity.

I glanced at her, trying to feign confusion. "I don't know what you mean."

"Right! It might be a while since I've seen that look, but I haven't forgotten what madly in love looks like! Does Roderick feel the same way?"

I gaped at her in shocked dismay, partly because I was horrified that I'd given so much away and partly because Roderick hadn't so much as crossed my mind from the moment Basil had shown up. "Oh my god! Roderick! I didn't call him!"

Becca blinked at me. "You didn't call ...?" Her eyes widened. "He came back?"

"Who?" I hedged.

"Don't who me! Basil. The guy you've been moping about for weeks!"

I struggled. It wasn't that I didn't want to tell Becca—precisely. I just didn't want to take a chance on jinxing my party when it seemed to be going so well. "He came back," I admitted finally. "He's on holiday."

"Vacation?"

I frowned at her. "He said holiday."

She waved a hand. "That's what they call vacations over there."

"Oh ... well, I guess it's sort of a working vacation, but he's staying with me a few days."

Becca studied me speculatively. "At your place?"

"Mmmhmm," I murmured, nodding.

She chewed her lip. "Do you really think that's such a good idea?"

Anger flickered through me, not the least because I was afraid she was right. "Why not? We're both adults."

"He's a *foreign* adult, Chloe," Becca said.

"So what?"

"He'll go home, that's what! And you'll be miserable all over again if you let yourself get too caught up in this—more miserable than the last time, which was bad enough!"

I glared at her. I knew she spoke nothing but the truth and, moreover, that she was trying to spare me from the pain looming on the horizon, but I didn't want to be spared, damn it! If I couldn't have my cake and eat it, too, then I wanted the damned cake! "My god, Becca! I'm thirty five years old! It isn't as if I don't what I'm doing!"

"That's what worries me! You know exactly what to expect. He's going to break your heart."

I swallowed with an effort and shrugged. "Maybe."

"It's too late, isn't it?"

I met her gaze, struggling to keep my composure. Dragging in a deep, calming breath, I released it slowly. "It was always too late," I admitted. "Right from the first."

\* \* \* \*

I knew the moment I saw his suitcase parked in the foyer near the door that my party was over. If I was honest with myself, and I'd been trying really hard not to be, I'd known it that morning when I left for work. I was actually surprised that I hadn't come home to an empty apartment.

After spending nearly three joyous weeks with him, I'd learned his moods. He'd made love to me that morning before I left, but he'd been distant afterward, introspective. Trying to convince myself it didn't mean what I thought it did, even though I'd been expecting it almost daily for weeks, I'd promised to bring supper home when I came in and left quickly, fearful that he'd feel compelled to tell me goodbye. Thinking somehow if I could just prevent him from saying it then it wouldn't *be* goodbye.

I studied the bag unhappily as I set my purse and briefcase down, struggling with the knot that had risen in my throat. When I glanced toward the living room, I saw he'd come to the end of the hallway. I forced a smile. "I brought pizza."

"We need to talk."

"Uh oh," I responded, trying to keep things light. "That sounds ominous."

He made a sound of impatience as I headed into the kitchen and plunked the box down. He moved up behind me, settling his hands on my arms. "I have to get back."

I swallowed convulsively several times and then nodded. Heaving a heavy breath, I turned in his arms, but I discovered I couldn't meet his gaze with the best will in the world. "The holiday's over, I guess?"

"Yes. I was supposed to leave this morning, but I changed my flight time."

I almost wished he hadn't. If he'd left while I was at work then I could've just cried my eyes out without worrying about trying to pretend I wasn't dying inside. I nodded. I couldn't think of anything to say and I wasn't sure I could speak anyway.

"This won't work, Chloe. There are a thousand reasons why it was never going to work. You know that, don't you?"

I nodded, still refusing to meet his gaze. "Yes."

He shifted uncomfortably. "I feel like the worse sort of cad," he growled. "I took advantage of you. At least tell me what a low down scoundrel I am!"

I swallowed convulsively several times and made myself look up at him. I discovered I couldn't maintain eye contact, though. "Don't be silly! I'm a grown woman. We had fun, right?"

I could feel his gaze moving over my face. "That's all it was to you, then? A lark?"

My eyes filled with tears in spite of all I could do. I struggled for breath, feeling as if my heart was breaking and crushing my chest with it. I made several attempts to speak and finally nodded.

He studied me for a long moment and then turned, striding from the kitchen. I didn't want to watch him leave, but I couldn't seem to help myself. I followed him, pausing in the doorway and watching as he picked up his bag. He lifted his head and looked at me.

"Kiss me goodbye?" I asked before I could stop myself, rushing to him for fear he'd be out the door and gone before I could stop him.

To my relief, he dropped his bag and gathered me into his arms. I clutched him tightly, trying to imprint everything on my mind, the feel of his arms, the feel of his mouth on mine. I didn't want it to end, but of course it did. It seemed woefully brief.

"Goodbye, Chloe," he said huskily.

I opened my eyes with an effort, struggled to summon a smile. "Have a good flight."

\* \* \* \*

I was sure it was some sort of law of nature that the greatest happiness was always countered, eventually, with the depths of despair. I was so miserable the first week after Basil left that I hardly knew where I was or what day it was. I spent most of my nights crying into the pillow that still smelled like him and most of the day in a fog.

Becca commiserated the first week. She showed up at my apartment the following Friday, however, bristling and determined to bully me until I went out with her. I wanted to kill her stone dead when we got to Bennigans and I discovered she'd arranged for Roderick and another man to meet us there. A date was the last thing I wanted and I resented the fact that good manners compelled me to behave like a civilized human being.

I discovered, however, that going through the motions was therapeutic. By the end of the evening I could smile and mean it.

Becca managed to avoid a showdown by skipping out with her date and leaving me with Roderick as escort. Wise man that he was, he didn't try for a goodnight kiss ... or anything else.

He asked me if I'd go out with him to dinner and a movie the following weekend. I told him I'd have to think about it.

The second week was a little better. I only cried myself to sleep four days out of seven and I managed to focus enough to keep from losing my job. The discovery that my boss was well aware that I was functioning below par was sufficient to knock some sense into me. I couldn't afford to go job hunting when they were so hard to find and I was no spring chicken! Opportunities still abounded for young people, but I couldn't live on what they made even I'd been cute enough to snag a job out from under a teenager.

I made a discovery the third week that completely jolted me out of the doldrums.

Basil had left me a consolation prize!

I was pregnant!

## Chapter Six

My doctor had to be out of his mind! I stared at him when he broke the news, trying to figure out if it was his idea of a practical joke. "I can't get pregnant," I managed finally.

He lifted his bushy brows at me. "But you did. You're nearly six weeks along. There's no mistake."

"It isn't early menopause?"

"Nope. You're pregnant, but since you brought it up, these late life pregnancies can be risky. I'll have to keep a close watch on you and you'll have to behave yourself—watch your weight, stay on your meds, and contact me if you have any problems you think we need to check."

He gave me a longer lecture after he got me in office, explaining things I didn't want to know and scaring the pure shit out of me. It left me with a lot of food for thought, and I thought about it and little else for a solid week.

And then I realized I didn't care how risky it was. I was going to do it. It was a miracle baby, the child I was never meant to have, had given up all hope of having long years ago after my second miscarriage.

As soon as I'd made up my mind, I was almost as scared as I was thrilled.

Naturally, I couldn't keep that information to myself. Becca nearly had a heart attack.

"Pregnant?" she practically screamed, as if she'd never heard the word.

I shushed her. "If I'd wanted to make a damned announcement, Becca, I would've done it myself!"

She stared at me. "You're not going to go through with it, are you?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. "I certainly am."

"But ... you're thirty five years old, Chloe!"

"I know how damned old I am! I know there's risks, both for me and the baby, but I want this baby and I going to have this baby, by damn!"

She studied me in silence for several minutes. "Does Basil know?"

I felt my stomach go weightless. "No."

"But you're going to tell him, right?"

I stared at her, wondering if she'd always been this dense or if it was something new. "For god's sake, Becca! He doesn't want to know! Wouldn't! It doesn't matter. It's my baby."

"Yes, but ... you're not even married!"

I rolled my eyes. "That hasn't stopped conception yet! And it didn't this time! I didn't know you were so old fashioned!"

"I'm not!" Becca snapped indignantly. "I'm just pointing out the fact that it'll be harder than you probably realize—going it alone."

I sighed. "Actually, that's the point, Becca. I won't be alone anymore. I'll have Basil's baby. It's sort of like a consolation prize, you know?"

"Yes, but ... think how it'll cramp your style!"

I couldn't help but chuckle. "I was getting tired of the dating thing anyway. It's been a long run and there isn't really much point in it when it never seems to go anywhere."

Becca looked troubled. "I still think you should think about this."

I nodded. "I haven't been doing much else lately, but I'm not going to change my mind."

\* \* \* \*

Basil was standing at the window of his office, staring morosely at the Thames when the phone rang. It startled him since everyone else had long since left for the day. He swiveled around and stared at the phone on his desk for several moments, trying to decide if he actually wanted to answer it or not and finally strode toward it and picked it up.

"Basil Pembroke speaking."

"You low down bastard!" the woman on the other end growled in his ear.

Basil pulled the phone from his ear and stared at it blankly for a moment. "I beg your pardon?"

"I just called to tell you I think you're the sorriest excuse for a man I've ever seen in my life! You son-of-a-bitch! It was bad enough when I thought you'd just dumped Chloe and totally broke her heart! But to get her pregnant and waltz out the door and leave her to handle it on her own takes the cake!"

Anger flickered through Basil. "Excuse me?"

"She's pregnant!"

"Who's pregnant?"

"Chloe, damn it! Didn't I just tell you?"

A shockwave rolled over him. Reeling slightly, Basil glanced around for a place to sit and managed to ring his chair before his knees gave out. "Chloe's pregnant? *My* Chloe?"

"As if you didn't know!"

Anger pierced his shock. "How the hell was I supposed to know, damn it? She didn't tell me."

"No. She told me you wouldn't want to know and wouldn't care if you did!"

He felt a little nauseated actually. "She said that?"

The woman released an indignant huff. "She said that."

"You're certain she's pregnant?"

"Six weeks. I tried to talk her out of it, but she's hell bent and determined to have it!"

"She is? Why?"

"Because it's yours, you moron! And she loves you and she thinks it's her consolation prize!"

Basil was beginning to seriously dislike the termagant on the other end of the line. "I didn't catch your name."

"Becca—Rebecca Joiner. I've got to go. I just thought you ought to know what you did. I don't see why you should get to go guilt free when Chloe's in such a horrible mess!"

"Wait! What's your number?"

"Why?"

"Just give me the damned number!" Basil snapped.

She was silent for several moments and he was beginning to think he was going to have to track her down. Finally, she gave him her number, however. "You want Chloe's number?"

"I have Chloe's number," he said tightly.

"And you haven't called her one damned time?"

He hung up.

He more than half expected her to ring right back and give him another ear full. He didn't know whether to relieved or not when she didn't. He decided after a moment that he was relieved. He was in no condition at the moment to defend himself from the woman!

A little thought convinced him that he actually didn't have a defense.

After staring blankly at the darkened window of his office for a while, trying to digest what he'd been told and decide how he felt about it, he finally picked up the phone and ordered his car brought around. He needed to sleep on it, he decided—if he *could* sleep.

\* \* \* \*

I immediately felt deep distrust at the look on Becca's face when I opened the door.  
“Becca! What brings you over?”

“Are you going to invite me in?”

“Of course!” I said, stepping back.

She danced inside, heading for my living room. Closing the door, I followed her, beginning to be curious despite my wariness. The last time Becca had looked that delighted with herself I'd ended up ... with Basil.

Grinning from ear to ear, Becca fanned some sort of pamphlets when I caught up to her in the living room. “What is it?”

Becca wagged her eyebrows. “A cruise for two to Europe!”

I gaped at her, flicked a look at the paper in her hand and met her gaze again. “You're kidding, right?”

“No, I'm n-ot!” she sang, dancing toward my couch and flopping down on it.

“You're going to Europe ... on a cruise ship!” I exclaimed, squealing with excitement.  
“Oh my god! Becca! That's wonderful!”

“We're going.”

I stared at her blankly. “We?”

“You and me.”

The wariness was back. “Me and you?”

“Yep!”

I moved to an easy chair and dropped into weakly. “You're joking!”

“I'm as serious as a heart attack.”

I struggled to digest it. “How?”

She grinned. “I *won* them!”

“You didn't!” I gasped. “A trip for two to Europe?”

She nodded.

A mixture of emotions flickered through me that I had trouble identifying. “I can't go.”

“Of course you can!”

“I'm pregnant,” I reminded her.

“That doesn't mean you're crippled! You're not even showing yet! We'll be back long before you have to worry about ... anything. It's only a three week cruise.”

“I don't know,” I said slowly, feeling disappointment begin to waft through me at the idea of having to pass up the trip of a lifetime. “You think the boss would let us both go on vacation at the same time?”

“Sure he would. I already discussed it with him. It's arranged.”

I couldn't seem to grasp it. “You should take Bob.”

She shrugged. “He couldn't get the time off.”



"Well that just sucks!" I exclaimed, dismayed for her even though I felt excitement begin to take hold of me again. "You're sure you want to take me?"

"Absolutely! My last present didn't turn out too well for you."

"That's not true!" I assured her, patting my belly proudly. "I got this! It's the best present in the world."

Becca's smile wavered. "Well, I know you're thrilled about it, but you were miserable about the actual gift."

"No, I wasn't—well, some of it was pretty miserable, but I wouldn't change it for the world!"

"So ... you'll go?"

I grinned at her, already considering what to pack. "When do we leave?"

Becca bounded up from the couch. "You should start packing. We leave for Jacksonville tomorrow."

I scrambled to my feet, wide eyed. "You're not serious!"

"Don't start that again! You won't have time to pack. I'll pick you up at 7:00 in the morning."

The trip down to Florida to catch the cruise ship was exhausting, but we were both way too excited to feel it as we might have otherwise. We spent most of the trip discussing what we planned to see at each port of call, beginning with the Statue of Liberty since the ship would be sailing up the coast to New York City before it cut across the Atlantic.

I was a little disturbed to discover the first stop on the other side of the Atlantic would be Great Britain. "Do you think ...? Never mind."

Becca sighed. "It's a pretty big place, Chloe. I don't think there's much chance you would run into *him* by accident."

I smiled with an effort. "No, you're right. It was crazy."

We spent the night in a hotel near the docks and rose before the sun was even up to head for the ship. My eyes felt like someone had rubbed them with sandpaper, but I was buoyant despite the few hours sleep I'd gotten. Awe filled me when I saw the ship—and little fear, too, although I wouldn't have admitted it for anything. I'd never been outside the U.S. except for a couple of short trips to Canada and the Bahamas and that hardly counted as far as I was concerned. Except for the fact that I'd had to get a passport it was too close to home to really feel like I was on foreign soil.

The loading was tedious enough to subdue my excitement a tad but eventually we made it on board and were directed to our cabin.

"Wow!" I gasped in amazement when we'd gone inside to leave our luggage. "This is *amazing*!"

Becca looked a little strange when she looked around, almost envious. "It is, isn't it? Why don't you go ahead and head up to the deck while I get everything put away?"

I looked at her blankly. "I'll wait for you."

"No, no! You go ahead. I have to ... uh ... I have an urgent nature call. You know traveling never agrees with me. You don't want to miss the launch!"

"If you're sure?" I said a little doubtfully.

"I'm sure," she said firmly. Surging toward me abruptly, she hugged me tightly. "You're going to have a great time!"

Confused, I hugged her back. "We both will. I'll see you on the upper deck."

She nodded, looking almost misty eyed. Boy her stomach must be killing her, I thought sympathetically. The poor thing! I just hoped she didn't miss the chance to wave at everybody as we sailed away.

Not that either of us had anybody to wave to, but I had to suppose we probably wouldn't be the only ones waving to complete strangers on the dock.

The rails were already crowded when I gained the deck. I walked along until I finally found a break at the rails and moved closer, enjoying the feel of the breeze in my hair, the smell of the sea, and the screech of seagulls overhead. Below, I could see just a tiny wedge of water between the ship and the dock. As I watched, the sliver began to widen. My stomach went weightless. We were moving! Becca was going to miss it if she didn't hurry!

I debated whether to rush back to the cabin to try to hurry her while I stared down at the crowd and watched a few stragglers heading quickly down the gangplank toward the dock. Oddly enough, one of the visitors leaving the ship looked an awful lot like Becca. Frowning, I lifted a hand to shield my eyes from the sun and strained to see the woman more clearly. She stopped when she reached the dock, turning toward the ship and staring at the people lined up at the rails as if she was searching for someone.

I recognized her at the same time she spotted me. She started waving frantically, jumping up and down.

My heart hit my toes. "Oh my god! Becca!"

I slammed into him face first when I whirled away from the railing. He caught me as I staggered back from the impact. "I'm so sorry!" I gasped, throwing an apologetic look up at the man and then freezing. "Basil?"

His expression was hard. "Hello Chloe."

I blinked several times, but he didn't vanish. I couldn't help it. Everything inside of me just lit up at the sight of him. "Basil!" I breathed joyfully.

The tension went out of him. He swallowed convulsively and slowly wrapped his arms around me, drawing me close. I sighed, dragging in his scent as I settled my cheek against his chest, listening to the comforting beat of his heart. He stroked my hair. "There are a thousand reasons why this could never work," he said a little hoarsely.

I felt my chest tighten. I swallowed with an effort. "I know," I whispered.

He slipped a hand beneath my chin, forcing me to look up at him. "But there's one that will make it work."

Surprise flickered through me. "There is?"

His lips curled. "I love you, Chloe. Marry me?"

I felt my jaw drop. I blinked at him several times. "Really?"

He chuckled. "It's going to be damned awkward sharing the honeymoon suite all the way to England if you say no."

I struggled to catch my breath. "N ... now?" I stammered.

"Well, we'll have to wait until we're out to sea before the captain can perform the ceremony."

I hugged him tightly, trying to take it in ... which was when it clicked in my mind. Becca! The conniving rat! Disappointment filled me. "It's because of the baby, isn't it?"

His arms tightened around me. "You think I came all this way just to make an honest woman out of you? I'm mad about you."

I pulled away to search his face. "Really?"

"Truly, deeply."

Warmth filled me. "I'm crazy in love with you, too. Do you think we could start the honeymoon now and have the ceremony later?"

He studied my face hungrily. "Absolutely not! I'm a gentleman, I'll have you know! Ring first or no deal!"

I batted my eyelashes at him. "Pretty please?"

"Stop it! You're undermining my morals, woman! Now, wave goodbye like a good girl to the nasty woman who screamed in my ear and called me names that can't be repeated in polite company."

"She didn't!"

"She did ... called me every low down thing she lay tongue to. I felt like kissing her! I'd been trying to figure out for weeks how I could've made such a damned mess of everything and how I was going to go about fixing it."

Smiling, I leaned against the rail and blew Becca a kiss.

The End