



# Southern Exposure

By

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## Chapter One

Heath paused when he exited the building and scanned the parking lot for any sign of the woman who'd spoken to him earlier and expressed an interest in hiring him. Unfortunately, in his line of work, he saw so many over the course of a night that they tended to blend together and blur in his mind. He'd gotten the impression that she had money. He wasn't certain why unless it was because he'd noticed expensive clothing or jewelry—or possibly it had only been a superior air about her—but he'd definitely gotten the sense that she hailed from the mid to upper middle class income bracket or possibly even higher. She'd been fortyish, he thought, slender to medium build and he'd gotten the impression that she was fairly tall for a woman.

As he struggled to disentangle the specific memory from the jumble of others he'd collected that night, he saw a woman get out of a car several rows over that vaguely fit that description. She stared in his direction for a moment, as if trying to pierce the shadows and identify him, and finally waved.

Hoping it was the woman he'd agreed to meet and not just a groupie intent on enticing him home to decorate her bed for the night, he shouldered his small duffle and struck off across the parking lot. Despite the lighting, he became more confident the nearer he got that it was the woman he was supposed to meet and some of the tension eased from him.

He didn't realize until he reached her that he couldn't recall her name. Frowning, he struggled to jog it from his memory. "Mary?"

She smiled. "Marcy Parks." She cast a glance around at the people flowing in and out of the club. "Do you mind if we sit in my car and talk?"

He flicked a glance around the parking lot himself. There was a fair amount of foot traffic, but no one close enough to overhear their conversation.

She didn't want to be seen talking to him—which meant she was either married or she was worried it would tarnish her reputation to be seen talking to an exotic dancer. Anger flickered through him at the thought, but he dismissed it. Exotic dancing was a lucrative job but not a well respected one. He'd figured it was worth it when it would help him reach his goal so much faster than anything else he could've tried—anything legal. He could become a pillar of the community when he could afford it, when he had enough money put back to start his own practice.

"No problem," he responded, turning and making his way around to the other side of the car—which he noticed was a luxury vehicle and a definite mark of money. When he heard the click of the door lock, he opened the door and climbed in, settling his duffle on his lap and closing the door.

Marcy twisted in her seat to face him, her expression rife with excitement. He felt his heart sink and his irritation mount as it occurred to him that he might have been right all along—that the job she was offering might not be one that was particularly lucrative or to his taste.

"I'm throwing a party for my little sister," she began, her eyes alight with animation, "and I thought I might hire you as the entertainment."

Heath relaxed fractionally. "To dance?"

Something flickered in her eyes. "Well ... yes."

The hesitancy before the affirmation suggested she had more than that in mind, but he let it slide for the moment. She hadn't suggested any other kind of 'performance'. There was no sense in getting ahead of himself and possibly blowing what could be a good gig by making assumptions that might inadvertently insult her. "A bachelorette party?"

She frowned, as if she was trying to decide whether to claim that as the occasion or not, and finally grimaced. "I wish. Actually, I'm calling it an early birthday party, but the truth is I just want to try to cheer her up. She went through a really nasty divorce about six months ago. Considering what her marriage to that son-of-a-bitch was like, I would've thought she would perk right up as soon she got loose from the bastard ...." She waved her hand. "You don't want to hear all that, though. Let's just say it's a hen party."

Heath studied her warily. "How many hens?"

She looked startled. "Well ...."

"I mean is this going to be a private, private party with just me, you, and your sister?"

She gaped at him. Color crept into her cheeks. "It isn't *that* kind of party!" she said testily and then looked a little conscience-stricken. "Although .... Well it did occur to me .... What I mean to say is there might be a bonus in it ...."

He stared at her. He knew where she was going, but he wasn't about to help her out. "Sex for hire is illegal. It doesn't matter which gender is soliciting."

She blinked at him, turning redder. "I was just talking about dancing," she said firmly. "There'll probably be somewhere between a half dozen to a dozen guests—well, me and my sister plus six to ten others. What I meant was that I thought you might give my sister a private lap dance ... uh ... later."

Heath studied her speculatively. "Your sister all right with this?"

She bit her lip. "It's a surprise I was planning. Look, her ex just ... annihilated her self-confidence. She used to be such fun. I figured it couldn't hurt to remind her that there are plenty of men around that could appreciate her."

Heath wrestled with himself. "Not that I'm not interested in the job, mind you, but I'm not sure hiring me to 'appreciate' her would send the message you want."

She frowned but finally shrugged fatalistically. "I've tried everything else—introduced her to every single man in my circle—not that I know that many. I just want to ... liven her up a little, maybe remind her that all men aren't skunks and spice things up for her a little to give her a brighter outlook. She's pretty and she's still young enough to enjoy life. She just needs a little reminder."

Heath still wasn't completely comfortable about the gig, but he settled to discussing business. She didn't haggle over the price he quoted her—either because he'd underestimated the depth of her wallet or she was just that dedicated to her sister. He felt downright cheerful when they'd settled everything and he got out of her car again. The gig might just top off his tanks—finish fleshing out that nest egg he'd been building for longer than he cared to think about. At the very least, he would be cutting months off his dancing days.

He was ready to hang up his g-string, he thought wryly as he reached his car and fished his keys from his jeans pocket. It had turned out to be a lot longer run than he'd originally intended.

Actually, he amended as he got in and tossed his duffle into the back seat, he hadn't really *had* any intentions when he'd started. He hadn't even tried it for the money ... because he hadn't realized he *could* make money gyrating in front of a room full of screaming women! In those days, he'd been a lot more focused on the possibility of getting laid. Like most boys in

their teens, he never got enough and he was always on the prowl. The money had been a pleasant, unanticipated bonus and for somebody who'd grown up dirt poor, well ... it was almost like a drug having that kind of money to throw around—especially at that young age.

Which of course had led almost inevitably to a stint in the military, mandated by the court, to straighten him out.

Well, as much as he'd resented it at the time, it *had* helped him get his head on straight. Not that he'd been interested in making a career out of it. One tour was enough! But he'd gotten into the medical corps and decided he'd found his niche.

It hadn't taken more than a year on the outside to discover he hadn't quite made it—close, but he needed more school to get where he wanted to go.

So he'd gone back to dancing to help pay the bills and fill the gaps between living and college expenses and grants. And he'd decided to shoot for the top. Having Dr. in front of his name, he decided, what was what he really wanted—money and respect.

And now that he did, he realized that the only way he was going to have any time to enjoy his status and his income was to set up a private practice where he wasn't on call 24/7.

He was close now, though. By his calculations, he should soon have enough to give it a good run to see if he could make it in private practice.

The private party might just do the trick. Even if it didn't, it would put him a hell of a lot closer. It was definitely worth it even if he wasn't completely comfortable with everything Marcy Parks had told him.

It wasn't as if he was against the concept of getting laid and getting paid to do it, but he sure as hell had no intention of taking a chance on getting slapped with solicitation charges when he was so close to success now that he could taste it.

\* \* \* \*

Shiloh paused in her attempt to apply her makeup and studied the tremor in her hand that was making the task nearly impossible. She didn't think she would've minded it so much if she'd known the shakes were from excitement rather than plain old fashioned dread. Unfortunately, there was no convincing herself that she felt an ounce of anticipation and her frustration mounted at having to work so hard to prepare for something she didn't want to do at all.

She'd been so *angry* with Marcy when her sister had announced that she was throwing her an early birthday bash! She didn't know *why* Marcy couldn't get it through her head that she just needed time to lick her wounds! She didn't *feel* like partying! Maybe sometime in the not too distant future she'd begin to feel alive again, start feeling as if there was actually something to look forward to, but not yet. She wasn't ready yet!

She was still trying to come to terms with the fact that her son—her only child!—had brushed her off just like his father had, had *chosen* to live with his father! She didn't think it would've crushed her nearly as much if it had been a matter of the money, of being practical. She knew she couldn't provide for Kenny like his father could. It would've hurt that he hadn't loved her enough to be willing to live with a little hardship to be with her, but it wouldn't have hurt nearly as much to see him look at her like his father did—like she was some kind of ... lower life form like an ... amoeba!

She was as angry with herself as she was with Kenneth Sr.! She'd known he was waging a psychological war with her, had been almost from the time they'd gotten married. Of course she hadn't really understood what obsessive compulsive disorder was in those days. She'd

thought Kenneth's ruthless determination to control everything around him was just a manifestation of his machismo! If she had, she might have had enough sense to cut and run.

And maybe that was all it really was, at first? Maybe the problem had grown with time and *become* OCD?

Or maybe she was just looking for excuses for herself for allowing him to crush her when she should've refused to allow him to control every aspect of her life? She'd known he was working to turn Kenny against her almost from birth, certainly from the time he was old enough to begin brainwashing him! She'd at least suspected it. She didn't suppose she'd actually acknowledged it until she'd seen that it was working.

She should've left the bastard sooner, before he'd had time to convince her son that she was as worthless as *he* thought she was!

That train of thought brought her close to tears as it usually did, part grief and part anger. Sniffing, she struggled to grasp another thought to divert herself to keep from breaking down again, and focused on her reflection. Who was this woman, she wondered abruptly? She hardly recognized herself—maybe because, bit by bit, she'd allowed Kenneth to erase the person she was?

Or maybe simply because she'd stopped really looking at the person she was, or had been, and begun only to look at herself as a canvas where Kenneth sought perfection? He didn't particularly like her nose. It was a bit too long for his tastes and what was up with that little hump on the bridge? Had she broken it sometime? He actually preferred something a little more pert, more elegant.

Of course he didn't want to shell out his hard earned money to fix the damned thing! Just because he'd made her self-conscious about it didn't mean she should 'mess' with nature. He preferred natural beauty. Her lips were too thin, too—looked like somebody had slashed her face when she wore lipstick. She should avoid the red lipstick he'd told her he liked.

It was a shame she didn't have bigger boobs when he liked big boobs on a woman but they wouldn't be real if she got a boob job, so what was the point?

Her hair didn't look nearly as blond as it had when she was younger. It had started to look like dirty dishwater. Did she should used to bleach it? Or was she putting something on it to make herself look like white trash?

Squeezing her eyes closed as if she could crush the thoughts by doing so, she focused on the image in the mirror when she opened them again rather than the image Kenneth had built in her mind. What she saw jolted her—hollow eyes and hollow cheeks. It was a damned shame, she thought wryly, that the 'waif' look wasn't 'in' for women her age! She'd struggled for years to attain the weight Kenneth had thought ideal and never managed it ... until the divorce. Now she was starting to look like an escapee from some starving third world country!

It wasn't just the fine lines that made her look every year of her age! It was the dullness in her eyes and her skin and hair! She looked beaten down! Even *she* thought so. She probably looked worse to everyone that looked at her. Her hair wasn't just unfashionably long—because Kenneth had turned wrong side out any time she mentioned cutting it—she looked like a throw back from centuries earlier with hair down her waist! Or maybe like somebody trying to pretend they were still a kid? Or trying to fool people into thinking she was?

The thought brought the first surge of rebellion she'd felt in years. She wasn't *old* just because her ex-bastard had hooked up with a girl barely old enough to be considered an adult!

Well—ten years younger than her, which made Kenneth fifteen years older!

She probably just wanted his money—not that Kenneth didn't look good for his age! He kept fit, but he still looked enough older than his girlfriend people thought she was his daughter! It would serve the bastard right if she took him to the cleaners!

She resented the fact that the woman would get what she'd put into the marriage, but, hateful or not, she thought she would almost rather that than knowing Kenneth was enjoying it!

Pushing the thoughts aside when she flicked a look at her watch and saw she was running late, she rifled through the beauty products Marcy had been piling on her in an effort to build an interest in 'fixing herself up' when she didn't have one. She thought it would make her feel better to at least put some effort into her appearance and it was bound to make Marcy happy.

And she might cut her a little slack.

She didn't really want to arrive late, though. She was so uncomfortable in big gatherings! She hated doing anything that might attract attention!

Shrugging it off with the reflection that she wouldn't be very late if she hurried, she grabbed the shampoo and rinse that was supposed to 'brighten and repair tired or damaged hair' and leapt into the shower before the temperature had even adjusted. It occurred to her as she was scrubbing frantically with her loufa that she hadn't bothered to shave. She debated and finally grabbed the razor. It wasn't like she had to worry about a man discovering she had hairy legs, she thought wryly, but she needed to feel like she was preparing for something special, she decided. She needed to work on trying to feel attractive—starting from the skin up!

Neither the attitude adjustment nor the hot shower had served to banish the bruised look around her eyes. Fortunately, there were cosmetics for that! She used them sparingly anyway. Kenneth had never liked for her to use a lot—not that she gave a damn what Kenneth liked or didn't like anymore!—but she wasn't use to wearing much. It wasn't as if anything was going to hide the fine lines anyway! Makeup only seemed to emphasis them.

Her hair was still wet when she'd finished making up her face. She debated whether to try the blow dryer and dismissed it. The heat would just make it frizz. She could just leave it loose until it dried and capture it in a scrungy once it had.

Marcy had said it was a hen party and she should just dress comfortably. She debated over those instructions for a few moments and finally decided to grab a newish pair of jeans anyway. Comfortable to her might mean the well worn and roomy, but it meant designer casual to Marcy.

Not that she had designer anything! She had several pairs of jeans she hadn't worn before because they were a little tight, though, and an outrageously skimpy top Marcy had given her for Christmas that she hadn't had the nerve to wear—because there was no way to wear a bra with it!

She felt the next thing to naked when she'd put it on but, really, her hair was long enough she could've made like Lady Godiva and nobody would've known if she was completely naked! If she felt uncomfortable, she reasoned, she could just leave her hair down and hide behind it. The jeans weren't tight anymore—at least not too tight to breathe or sit down. They created a slight 'muffin' top around the waist, but she decided the shirt hid that well enough.

It was just 'hens' at this party anyway, she reminded herself, promising herself she'd choke her sister to death if she discovered she'd slipped in another eligible bachelor. Grabbing something to tie her hair back if she decided to once it dried, she stuffed it in her purse, slipped her feet into a pair of thong sandals and dashed out of her apartment.

The damned car wouldn't start!

After banging her forehead on the steering wheel a couple of times, Shiloh debated whether she even wanted to *try* to make the damned party! Finally, deciding Marcy was going to be pissed off if she didn't, she got out and opened the hood and the trunk. Grabbing a screw driver from the trunk, she went around and lifted the hood to stare blankly at the engine.

If it was the engine, she was just screwed! Focusing on the battery, she hammered at the connections with the handle end of the screw driver and went back to try the starter. The starter groaned, sending a flash of excitement through her, but the engine didn't catch. Deciding, maybe, it was just the corrosion, she went back inside her apartment and mixed up a pot full of water and soda.

A spark flew off the battery when she hit it with the screw driver again, scaring the shit out of her. Shaken, she went back and tried to start the car again. Thankfully, it started.

She was still jittery over the near mishap and the problem starting the car when she arrived, but it at least distracted her from her anxiety about the party itself!

Marcy looked her over and frowned when she arrived and Shiloh's self-confidence took a nosedive. "What in the world have you been doing?"

Shiloh shrugged. "The car wouldn't start."

Shaking her head, Marcy grabbed her and marched her through the living room and into her spare bedroom. "Clean up and change. It's a damned good thing I told you to get here by 6:30! I knew you'd be late!"



## Chapter Two

Wondering what she was supposed to change in to, Shiloh headed into the adjoining bath to see what the problem was.

“Shit!” she exclaimed the moment she saw her reflection. How the hell had she managed to get black grease on herself?

Her hands told the story! The damned screwdriver must have had grease all over it! Releasing an irritated huff, she scrubbed her hands and then cleaned the smears off of her nose and forehead. She’d also spattered her clothes when she’d poured the soda over the battery, she discovered. Using a damp cloth, she brushed at the spots in the hope of removing them and finally gave up.

Fortunately, she discovered she’d left a few things when she moved out of her sister’s house and into her apartment—probably in the laundry.

Actually, she hadn’t ‘forgotten’ them or overlooked them, she recalled when she’d picked them up to examine them. It was some of the things Marcy had bought to ‘cheer’ her up—way too risqué to her mind and too young for a woman her age if it came to that. She was a teacher, for god’s sake! She couldn’t be seen in public in this sort of thing!

Marcy brought her a mixed drink. “I was thinking about that one,” she said, pointing at it as Shiloh took the drink.

It was a halter top similar to the one she was wearing ... except it had a looped cutout in the front that exposed most of her boobs. “I didn’t put on a bra.”

“You shouldn’t wear a bra with sort of thing anyway,” Marcy said dryly.

“My boobs will fall out!”

Marcy shrugged. “So? Shove them back in. There isn’t anybody coming except a few of the girls.”

“Don?” Shiloh said pointedly, reminding Marcy she had a husband and two boys that were way too old to see auntie’s boobies if it came to that!

“Hell! I didn’t want him in the way! I convinced him to take the boys camping for the weekend.”

Shiloh took a gulp of the drink and made a face. “My god, Marcy! Did you put any mixer in this?”

Marcy rolled her eyes. “You’re supposed to sip it!” She turned away. “Hurry up! The girls should be arriving any time and I don’t want the snacks to get cold and soggy!”

The ‘snacks’ were fancy *hors d’oeuvres* Marcy had had catered for the party that were as delicious, and fattening Shiloh didn’t doubt, as they were beautiful to look at.

The ‘girls’ ranged in age from thirty to fifty. Roughly half of them were single like Shiloh—meaning divorced. Arriving by ones and twos, Marcy’s friends were as giddy as school girls. “Ooooh! Marcy always throws the best parties! I can’t believe ... uh ...,” Beverly Saxs broke off when Marcy threw an *hors d’oeuvre* at her.

“Catch!” Marcy exclaimed gaily, and then narrowed her eyes at Beverly when she gaped at her instead of trying to catch the *hors d’oeuvre* that hit her on the chest and then landed on the

floor. She blinked a couple of times and then her eyes rounded. “Ohhh! We weren’t .... God I’m starving! Let’s eat!”

Instantly suspicious, Shiloh would’ve pursued it if she hadn’t noticed the women were arriving with ‘birthday’ presents. Since her birthday was almost a month away, and they were Marcy’s friends, not hers, she was uncomfortable enough to be completely distracted.

“Marcy!” she hissed when her sister had directed everyone into the great room to help themselves while she broke out the wine. “You told them it was my *birthday*?”

Marcy stared at her. “Early birthday. I didn’t tell them to bring presents! They did it because they wanted to. Relax, will you? It’s probably just little fun things, you know? Gag gifts?”

Feeling a little relieved, she didn’t argue when Marcy sent her into the great room to entertain their guests while she got the wine. She didn’t see that they actually needed entertaining. Most of them were down on their knees around the huge coffee table, a plate in one hand and their gazes fixed on the dishes. Cynthia Dixon was going through the videos in the cabinet beside the enormous wall mounted TV and Barb Smith was looking through the music collection.

“Where did you put the pornos?” Cynthia yelled at the ceiling after a moment.

Shiloh shot her a surprised look.

“They’re in that box by your foot,” Marcy responded as she joined them. “We don’t keep them in here!”

“Eew! We aren’t going to be watching pornos while we try to eat?” Milly Overton complained.

Cynthia had knelt by the box. Without looking up, she shot a bird at Milly. “You don’t have to watch.”

Barb apparently found something that appealed to her. The stereo blared to life, drowning out any response Milly might have made. Barb adjusted the sound slightly lower. “Sorry! I didn’t realize I had it all the way up.”

“I was about to put on a porn!” Cynthia said indignantly.

Barb rolled her eyes. “Like we need to listen to the dialogue!”

Cynthia thought it over and shrugged. Shoving her choices into the machine designed to play multiples, she grabbed the remotes and headed for the L shaped sectional sofa where everyone was gathered. Marcy poured wine for everyone, set the bottle down, and focused on grabbing her own snacks. “Oh! This is one of my favorites!” she exclaimed, settling on the couch with her plate.

Shiloh wasn’t certain whether she was talking about the food or the video, but when she followed Marcy’s gaze she did a double take. “Oh my god! Is that ...? Is that what it looks like?”

“Those can’t be real!” Milly gasped. “They look like ... elephant trunks!”

Barb snorted her wine and then coughed for ten minutes while Beverly pounded her on the back—until Barb finally caught her breath and managed to fight her off. “Of course they’re real! The name of it is ‘Giant Cocks and the Ladies Who Love Them’,” she said snickering. “Where in the world did you get this, Marcy?”

“Oh! Now that *can’t* be real!” Beverly objected a few moments later when one of the guys who looked like he had a two foot dong began pumping it into first one and then another of the impossibly large breasted women in the video. “It must be ... retractable or something!”

Shiloh was so mesmerized she forgot about the food on her plate until a piece slid off and landed in her lap. Cynthia put the player on fast forward and they all watched the pair fuck in high speed for several moments, then she put it in reverse, which was even funnier.

As an ice breaker, Shiloh thought ruefully, it worked great. By the time they'd watched the video with everyone vying with witty commentary, drinking wine, and munching on the catered food, everyone was totally relaxed and completely in a party mood. They got louder and more raunchy in their comments as the wine sank lower in the bottles. They got up and danced wildly around the room whenever any of their favorite songs played, and then collapsed breathlessly on the couch and complained about not being able to dance like they used to.

In spite of the rough start to her night, Shiloh found herself relaxing and having more fun than she could remember having since she'd been a kid. Ruefully, she admitted part of it was undoubtedly the wine, but she thought she would've felt like she was in the midst of a wild college sorority party even without the wine as uninhibited as everyone was behaving. Of course, the wild college boys were conspicuous by their absence, but the stallions prancing across the big screen like randy satyrs gave the party the right 'atmosphere'.

They'd graduated from the wine to mixed drinks when Marcy announced it was time for the 'special' entertainment she'd lined up for them. Everyone began to whoop and clap enthusiastically. Shiloh had no idea what the entertainment was, but she laughed and joined the others clamoring for the show.

Marcy and Cynthia pushed the large coffee table with the remains of their refreshments out of the way and then Marcy headed over to the light switch to dim the lights while Cynthia turned the TV off and changed the music on the stereo. Barb moved to the floor lamps around the room and switched them on, adjusting the lights until they focused on a single spot in the center of the great room.

The women ranged along the couch began to clap in sync, chanting, "Diablo! Diablo!"

Laughing, Shiloh clapped and chanted with them without having the first clue of what they were chanting about.

Barb, Marcy, and Cynthia scurried to the couch and flopped on to the cushions just as the music Cynthia had put on to play started. The door that led down the hall to the bedrooms opened dramatically and smoke billowed out of it.

Shiloh gasped in momentary alarm as the smoke poured from the hall. A dark figure seemed to flow outward with the smoke, emerging from the shadows created by the lighting almost like a dark shadow among the others. The masked figure swept to the center of the spotlight, flipped his cloak back to reveal a bright white dress shirt and black dress pants, and began to gyrate in time to the music.

Shiloh sucked in a breath of surprise as he flipped the cloak off and twirled it around himself as he danced, almost like a matador. Around her, the other women began to squeal with delight and bounce up and down on the couch, calling out lewd praise and invitations as he tossed the cloak aside and whipped the mask off, tossing it as he had the cape. A flicker of recognition swept through Shiloh, but before she could pursue the errant memory, he grasped his shirt, 'tearing' it off so that all that was left was the collar around his throat and the cuffs at his wrists.

The motion instantly drew her attention from his face to his chest. The beautifully sculpted torso he revealed was either already damp with the sweat of his efforts or oiled. The light gleamed on his flawless skin, emphasizing the mesmerizing play of muscles along his belly, chest, and arms as he danced. Leaping into the air, he came down and did a split and then up

again as if he was on pulleys. When he was on his feet again, he reached down and grasped the sides of his trousers and tore them off as he had the shirt, tossing them in the direction of the screaming ladies on the couch.

Shiloh's attention was instantly riveted to the bulge that filled the soft red knit thong he was wearing beneath. Imagination or not, it seemed that the fabric molded to his genitals in a way that made it clear it was primarily a monster cock that created the bulge. He turned, displaying firm, rounded buttocks and a back that was as beautifully sculpted as his chest.

Turning to face them again, he glanced at the women lined up along the couch and then headed directly toward her. Her eyes rounded the moment she realized he was heading toward her. She tensed all over in an instinctive urge to retreat. Before she could surge to her feet, however, he leaned over her.

For a split second they were nearly to nose.

Heath stared into her eyes and instantly abandoned the well rehearsed routine that had been guiding him on autopilot from the moment he'd recognized Shiloh among the women he'd been hired to entertain. He supposed, more accurately, it abandoned him, leaving him with no guidance at all beyond his instincts and those were honed entirely upon the hunt. Lifting his hands to her bare shoulders, he ran them lightly over the smooth skin and down her arms, clasping her hands. "Come on. I'm giving you a private lap dance," he murmured hoarsely, tugging on her gently as he straightened, coaxing when everything inside him was screaming to simply haul her to her feet and carry her off to a place where he'd have her to himself.

He felt a moment of resistance and then she yielded, coming to her feet. Some of the tension eased from him, the anxiety that she would refuse, but it merely gave way to the savage need pounding through him. Mostly oblivious to the other women now, though he was vaguely aware of the clapping and the chant they'd begun—"Go Shiloh! Go Shiloh!"—he turned and headed across the Great Room toward the hall where he'd emerged, his mind in too much turmoil to have any clear goal in mind.

As he reached the hallway, however, his mind leapt to the room where he'd prepared for his performance and he strode quickly toward it, pushing the door open and pulling her inside. Her eyes were wide as he pulled her around in a circle. She had the kind of eyes a man could drown in, filled with the kind of uncertainty and vulnerability that gave rise to a rush of testosterone—the urge to conquer and, at the same time, made a man want to rescue her, to protect. He felt all of that and more as he stared into her eyes, but he didn't think anything short of screaming terror could've turned him from his purpose at that point and he didn't see that.

He saw confusion, but also desire and that fed his own, threatening to send it spinning completely out of control when he was hanging on by a thread now. He had been since he'd spotted her and all the things he'd felt for this woman for what seemed like forever had descended over him like a thunderclap.

He waltzed her backwards toward the backless bench that stood at the foot of the bed, not because he was in any mood to delay and savor the victory he'd been fantasizing about for years, but because he could see the fear skating just beneath the surface of her desire. She wanted him and that was all that really mattered. Finally, she'd looked at him with the desire he'd longed to see in her eyes.

All he had to do was control the need ravaging him, gentle her, and she was his. Her eyes widened with a touch of panic when she felt the bench behind her knees. He slipped his hands upward to her upper arms and guided her onto it, following her, maintaining the illusion that he intended nothing more than the lap dance he'd promised. Once he'd climbed onto the bench

astride her lap, however, could feel the heat radiating from her and hear her rapid, panting breaths, he discovered he was as near a total loss of control as he'd ever been in his life. He caught one of her hands as he undulated over her, lifting it. "Touch me," he demanded hoarsely, guiding the hand he held to his chest and clasping it to one pec, just above his pounding heart.

He thought for a moment that she would snatch her hand back the moment he released it. Instead, after hesitating for an endless moment while he held his breath, she curled her fingers. A dizzying rush went through him as she hesitantly explored his upper chest, and then her gaze drifted downward. His heart slammed against his chest wall in triumph. He felt his cock, semi-erect already, fill to aching fullness.

Her head snapped up, her eyes widening. He swallowed convulsively, cupped her hand and guided it downward to cup his erection, guiding it along his length. Her gaze drifted down again, but once more when he tentatively released her hand it stayed, poised, and then gripped him. His eyes slammed shut at the excruciating sensations that poured through him.

When he opened them again, he saw that she was looking up at him as she had before. He stared back at her indecisively for a moment and then threw caution to the wind. Threading his fingers through her hair, he curled them around her skull to prevent her retreat and lowered his head to cover her soft mouth with his own, capturing her soft gasp of surprise and then surrender as he breached the barrier and lay claim to the tender inner recesses with his tongue.

As if she'd lost all will, become enchanted, Shiloh allowed him to guide her, yielding to each demand he made of her with a sense of being swept away by a force too powerful to resist, feeling her body react with heated wonder as if that, too, was his to command. The tremors she felt racing through his big, muscular body were almost as unnerving as they were enthralling, however, and she wavered moment to moment between her sense of self-preservation and complete capitulation.

Self-preservation lost the battle the moment she felt his mouth close over hers, though, crumbling in the face of determined conquest. Drunk already from his scent that had enveloped her in a cloud of euphoric abandon, the moment she felt his tongue stroke along hers, felt his taste fill her mouth and awaken seemingly every nerve ending in her body, she completely lost her moorings. Her hand curled more tightly along his cock, more a mindless reaction of the abrupt increase of tension than deliberation.

She felt the jolt that ran through him. His kiss became wilder, more abandoned. He reached between them, capturing her hand and guiding it back and forth along his length as he had before and yet, when she caught the rhythm and tried to stroke him as he seemed to want her to, he caught her hand and stilled it. Breaking the kiss, he stared at her for a long moment, panting hoarsely. Abruptly, he shifted his hold on her. Encircling her with one arm, he lifted her, dragging her backwards onto the mattress. She'd barely registered the fact that he'd carried her onto the bed when she felt his hand settle on her belly and skate upward beneath her top.

He captured her gasp of surprise with his mouth when he cupped one breast and kneaded it, distracting her with the rhythmic stroke of his tongue along hers while he massaged her breasts and plucked at her nipples with his fingers until they were tautly erect. When he abruptly broke from her lips again and shifted downward, shoving her top up to expose her breasts, discomfort wafted through her despite the dizzying disorientation that gripped her. She caught his hands anxiously, trying to protect herself from his perusal.

He met her gaze. Something flickered through the wildfire in his eyes. He swallowed convulsively and transferred his attention to her hands as if willing her to release her frantic grip. As if his gaze alone was enough to control her, she found her fingers uncurling almost with a

will of their own. He curled his hands around her wrists, manacled them as he pushed her top up. For several, long moments, he merely stared at her breasts. Finally, swallowing convulsively, he flicked a look at her face. "Shiloh—baby—you're so beautiful," he murmured hoarsely, leaning down to pluck at first one and then the other with no more than his lips.

Shiloh felt her breath catch in her throat as she watched him. Her eyes slid closed as warmth wafted through her and heat when he ceased to pluck at them and took one nipple into his mouth, sucking it. Currents like electricity jolted through her, arrowing downward to her lower belly. Her womb contracted and she felt heated moisture flood her channel as he alternately sucked and teased her nipple with the tip of his tongue.

A mindless sort of fever enveloped her. Before many moments passed, she began to feel a restlessness take hold. It eased its grip on her slightly when he released the nipple he'd been teasing and then seized her in a tighter grip when he transferred his attention to the other. The jolt that went through her that time was harder, seemed to knock the air from her lungs. She twisted, wrestled for possession of her hands, but when he released them, she couldn't think what to do with them beyond gripping him tightly and trying to keep from floating away.

He shifted upward again abruptly, covering her mouth with his as he reached between them and began tugging at the waistband of her jeans. For a moment, she thought it would defeat his determination and then she heard the snap pop, felt the release of the zipper. He shoved his hand into the opening with an eagerness she didn't doubt, cupping her mound briefly with his fingers and then parting her nether lips with one and stroking her cleft.

A shudder ran through him when he found the moisture dampening her panties. He withdrew his hand abruptly, grasping her jeans and virtually tearing them and her panties from her in a series of hard jerks. He broke the kiss when the fabric resisted. Going up on his knees, he caught both sides and dragged her jeans and panties off, throwing them to one side and diving over her again. She flinched instinctively, but he caught his weight with his hands, shifted to one shoulder and lifted one of her legs to make room for himself between them.

Through a heated, disorienting fog, she heard him murmuring his need.

"Jesus, baby! You're so wet for me. I can't wait. God! I need to be inside you."

She felt the muscles along her channel clench in response, felt the rise of her own need in the moisture that wept from the walls of her sex for his possession. He lunged against her and she felt his cock, still encased in his briefs, press bruisingly against her nether lips. He lifted away, shoved his briefs down and caught his cock, dragging it along her cleft until it met the mouth of her sex. When he lunged again, she felt her flesh straining to engulf him. He penetrated her by agonizing degrees, surging a little deeper, allowing the muscles to repel him as they tried to grip his flesh, and then surging again until her moisture had so thoroughly coated his cock that his next lunge succeeded in slipping past the resisting muscles by virtue of being too slick to resist. She moaned as he buried himself deeply, arching instinctively to receive. He released a harsh, pent up breath.

"Jesus, baby. Oh Jesus!" he panted, shuddering with the effort to regain control, and then growled, "I can't hold it. Fuck! I can't hold it!"

Shiloh felt her heart surge and the muscles along her channel flutter in response. She squeezed her eyes tightly as he withdrew and slowly entered her again, sawing slowly for several moments while he fought for control and then lost it as he burrowed deeply and held himself perfectly still for a handful of moments. When he withdrew again, there was barely a pause before he thrust, and then he set a rhythm that drove her before him so rapidly toward her peak that it caught her almost completely unaware. Her entire body tensed like a bow drawn tight for

a handful of thundering heartbeats and then convulsed as waves of ecstasy pounded through her. She tightened her grip on his shoulders as the spasms wracked her, uttering mindless sounds of rapture, completely oblivious to the agonized grunts forced from him as he found his own release until she began to drift lazily in the aftermath. Shuddering all over, he ground his pelvis against hers a final time, jerking as his body expelled the last of his seed.

Far more drunk from the rapture that had exploded inside her than she was from the liquor she'd been nursing for hours, Shiloh floated in a blissful haze, aware of little else beyond his welcome weight on top of her. Slowly, the euphoria abandoned her, dissipating by degrees until she became aware of her flesh cooling, discomfort, the strangeness of her surroundings ... the unfamiliar male form pressing her into the bed.

He seemed to sense the tension as it mounted inside her. He tensed, as well, and still he made no attempt to relieve her of his weight, no move to pull his flaccid member from her. She was relieved for a handful of moments when he finally arched his hips and withdrew—until she felt warm fluids trickle along her cleft.

Her heart spasmed in sudden dread. She'd had unprotected sex—with an exotic dancer! Her mind instantly flooded with the potential for disaster and the absolute certainty that no man that looked like he did, particularly in his line of work, would have a shortage of bed partners.

"You didn't use a condom?" she gasped.

He stiffened, lifted his head slowly to look at her. His expression tightened at the look on her face. "I didn't hear any objections," he said tightly after staring at her speculatively for a long moment.

Shiloh swallowed a little sickly, struggling with the urge to claim innocence by virtue of having had way too much to drink. She found she couldn't voice it because she knew she hadn't been nearly drunk enough for that to be a reasonable excuse, but she might as well have. He seemed to read it in her expression.

"A little too much to drink, teacher?" he drawled, rolling off of her abruptly.

Shiloh stared at him in dismay for a moment, almost more unnerved that he knew she was a teacher than she had been about her discovery. "I have to go," she said abruptly, rolling away from him and looking around a little frantically for her clothes.

"You should hurry," he said tightly. "We've been gone long enough they're bound to be speculating that you've been fucking the hired entertainment."

Shiloh felt the blood leave her face. It wasn't entirely in reaction to his insight, however. There was something about the accusing note in his voice that made her feel guilty, as if she should apologize for behaving as if he'd soiled her. She realized she had ... because she abruptly felt soiled when it hadn't felt like that at all moments before. In point of fact, she'd felt ... almost worshipped by his touch. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just ...."

He dropped to his back, staring at the ceiling angrily. "Don't let me hold you up," he said tightly. "I'm done. Nice ride, teacher."

Shiloh abruptly felt the urge to cry. Sniffing at the sting of tears, ignoring the stickiness the best she could, she dove into her clothing and straightened them with shaking hands.

"You should do something with the hair," he said coldly. "You look like a woman that's been well fucked."

She threw him a hurt look, meeting his gaze for a split second, and then hurried toward the door, smoothing her hair with her hands.

"Shiloh!" he said harshly as she reached the door.

She glanced at him blindly.

“I made love to you. God damn it, baby!” he growled just as she darted out the door and slammed it behind her.

He stared at the door, struggling with the urge to leap from the bed and chase her down and finally dismissed it angrily. “Shit! God damn it to hell!”



## Chapter Three

It wasn't until Heath reached his apartment and slung his bag against the wall furiously that it dawned on him just how badly he'd fucked up. Scrubbing a hand over his face, he glanced around the tiny studio apartment he called home with the eyes of a stranger and saw how it must look to anyone else—like the slum den it was, the sort of place nobody but a street person could consider a step up in the world.

It served its purpose. It was as cheap as it looked and easy on his wallet—which was the only thing that mattered to him when he was saving every dime to get out from under the poverty that had haunted him his entire life once and for all and never look back. It was a place to sleep and keep his few belongings and he was rarely in it for more than that.

It was also a grim reminder of where he came from and where he could end up again if he slipped or he didn't keep his nose to the grindstone and his eyes on the prize.

He swallowed a little sickly.

Shiloh *was* the prize, he realized abruptly.

She didn't just represent everything he'd always wanted and knew to be out of his reach. She *was* what he wanted, what he'd always wanted with an intensity that bordered desperation from the time he'd reached manhood, before he was old enough for anybody else, including her, to consider him a man.

Striding toward the small refrigerator under the short counter that passed as a kitchen, he bent down to examine the contents, hesitated, and grabbed a beer. Popping the cap off, he took a long drought from the bottle and turned, propping his hip against the counter and staring at nothing in particular while he let thoughts wander at will.

She'd changed. That wasn't surprising when it had been damned near ten years, he didn't suppose, but the changes weren't physical. She looked every bit as beautiful as he remembered, maybe more so, because as hard as he'd tried to hang on to her image in his mind, time and distance had dimmed it.

He shook his head, dismissing that as the source of his sense of anxiety. He'd spent a lot of time fantasizing about Shiloh, but he didn't believe he'd ever deluded himself into falling for a woman who didn't actually exist. He'd spent enough time watching her interact with the people around her that he knew her. She was different ... more vulnerable ... wounded.

Anger surged through him as he abruptly recalled what her sister had told him and he realized the bastard that had married her had dulled the light in her eyes, killed the playfulness he remembered and the openness. He should hunt the son-of-a-bitch down and beat the fatal shit out of him, he thought furiously.

He considered it with some relish for a time and finally, reluctantly, dismissed it. It wouldn't do Shiloh any good—not now—maybe if he could've gotten his hands on the bastard before—but the damage was done now. Besides, what good would he be to her sitting in jail?

The thought redirected his mind to his total fuck up, unfortunately. Tipping the bottle up, he tried to chase the tightness from his chest with a bubble of false tranquility. His chest was still tight with churning emotions when he'd swallowed the drought, though, and he doubted the rest of the six pack in his fridge would do the trick—even if he could afford it.

Which he couldn't. It wasn't likely he'd be called in since it was his night off, but there was never any certainty. If the emergency room filled up, he wasn't far enough down the list to dismiss the possibility.

Finishing off his beer, he dropped the empty bottle in the recycle bin and headed toward his bunk, stripping off his clothes as he went. He needed a shower, but he was dead tired and beyond that, he could smell her scent on his skin. Dropping naked on the bunk flat of his back, he dropped an arm across his eyes, sucking in a deep breath to capture her lingering scent and enjoying the way it stirred his blood.

"Stupid, mindless fuck," he muttered as the images he'd been relishing faded and far less pleasant memories filled his mind. "No control. None!"

Everything, it seemed, had conspired against him, leaving him wide open and helpless to grasp any semblance of control to start with. If he'd been prepared, known beforehand that he would run into her after so many years, he might have had some hope of not making a complete fucking ass out of himself, but he hadn't been. It had come as a complete and total, stunning surprise to discover it was Shiloh he'd been hired to entertain and his mind had turned to pure mush. The hope/fantasy had instantly gripped his mind that she'd asked for him. He didn't think he'd really believed it any of the time. He hadn't seen so much as a flicker of recognition in her eyes, but he'd fucking wanted to believe it. And if that hadn't been enough to focus his mind completely on getting his hands on her at long last and doing all the things he'd wanted to, the realization that she was drinking and vulnerable because of that had certainly fired his blood.

He wasn't proud of it, but he also hadn't been in any frame of mind to look a gift horse in the mouth—not when he'd wanted her so bad he could taste it for years. Not even his pride had protected him one iota.

She'd wanted him, though. She might not have known who he was, but he'd damned well been with enough women to know desire when he saw it, to feel it in a woman's touch and recognize the breathless little sounds of pleasure they made when they enjoyed his touch.

It rankled that she hadn't known him. It made him vaguely ill to realize that he hadn't cared, still didn't, had in fact been relieved that she hadn't—because she sure as hell wouldn't have let him touch her if she had!

No doubt, in her mind, he would always be the troubled, 'problem' kid who used to sit through her class imagining what it would be like to fuck her until she screamed his name. He'd never doubted she knew exactly what was going through his mind either, because although she never said anything, she would blush when she noticed him looking at her. It had amused him to watch the effect he had on her, given him a sense of power when he saw how flustered she was.

It almost made up for the way she'd made him feel when she'd tried to convince him to go to counseling for the abuse. She'd told him he was too smart to throw his life away and end up like his old man—a useless drunk that spent as much time in jail as out of it. Not that she'd said that, but she'd said enough that he wasn't in any doubt she knew about his circumstances and that had been a painful pill to swallow, the shame of discovering the woman he worshipped like a goddess only saw him as a dirt poor, white trash boy destined for prison.

He'd been so furious after that lecture, he'd gone out of his way to prove that she was right about him—which was probably the stupidest thing he'd ever done.

Or maybe not. He might've just ended up in juvy, but he hadn't. Instead, he'd been given the option of juvy or the service and, for once, he'd made the right decision.

It had been hellish, though. For a while he hadn't been able to get past the fact that he'd screwed around and deprived himself of the possibility of even worshipping from afar. It

might've been sheer torment to watch her and know she was so far above him that he was never going to come close to having her, but he'd wanted to look, to continue to covet and feed his fantasies.

After a while, he'd managed to convince himself he was well away from temptation and he'd focused on proving she was wrong about him. Not that he'd ever expected her to know, but he'd needed to prove to himself that he could aspire to any damned thing he wanted.

Any delusion he'd allowed himself that he'd completely forgotten her, completely and totally buried his youthful infatuation had vanished the moment he saw her, though. Everything he'd worked so hard to convince himself of had fallen by the wayside. He'd felt as hungry, and as unworthy, as he had when he was a stupid kid ... and he'd behaved as badly.

His stomach churned as he recalled what he'd said to her, the way he'd said it, and the look in her eyes. His throat closed. "Jesus, baby! I didn't mean it!"

But he had, he realized. He'd felt like dirt when she'd looked him afterwards and made the damned comment about the fucking condom! As if he was some fucking disease ridden piece of trash! Granted, it had been dumb luck that had kept him free of disease in his teens when he'd been wild and reckless, but he wasn't a fucking man whore—at least not anymore—not since he *was* a wild, reckless kid! He used protection on the rare occasions when he indulged!

He just hadn't seen any need to protect himself from her and he'd been too stupid to realize she would be upset by it.

And he hadn't taken anything with him and there was no fucking way he could stop himself once he saw the possibility! He hadn't even thought about a damned condom until she'd brought it up!

Hell! He hadn't even gotten her damned number!

He'd screwed things up about as badly as he possibly could! She wasn't going to give him the time of day even if he could wrangle the number from her sister!

He should've written her off a long time ago, he realized angrily. He'd thought he had. He'd damned sure worked hard enough to get her out of his system that he shouldn't be lying awake now trying to think of some way to figure out how to get a second chance when he hadn't even expected to get a first chance.

He shouldn't have allowed her to get under his skin like he had! He wasn't a damned kid anymore! He was a full grown man and he was worth something! Maybe he wasn't rich—yet—but he had a lot to offer a woman—even a woman like Shiloh.

All he needed was a chance to convince her.

\* \* \* \*

Shiloh didn't know how she'd made it through the rest of the party. She didn't know whether to be glad everything that came after having sex with Heath was just a blur or worry about how much she'd given away because she was too distracted to focus on anything. She was so relieved to get back to her apartment, though, she felt like crying.

Well, not just with relief. She *was* relieved. It was the realization that she finally had a little privacy to fall apart, though, that made her feel like giving in to it.

Heath! She couldn't *believe* she'd had sex with a former student—with *Heath Sinclair* of all people—the 'bad boy' that had haunted her first years of teaching. The 'pretty boy' that had so tempted her with his 'I could eat you alive' looks that she'd been terrified he was going to be the death of her career before she even got started good!

Or ruin her marriage, which had already been rocky barely two years into it.

Dropping onto her couch the moment she'd locked the door behind her, she covered her face with her hands, struggling with the images that had played over and over in her mind all night.

She hadn't recognized him immediately. It had been nearly ten years, after all, and he wasn't a pretty boy anymore. He was a man—a drop dead gorgeous man!

And she'd been too busy staring at his body and that stunning cock to look at his face—until he'd walked right up to her and leaned down over her until they were practically nose to nose. Recognition had hit her with the force of a sledge hammer then, bowling her over and completing her descent into total madness!

Because it *was* insane! It was probably the most insane thing she'd ever done in her life—yielding to that devil's wiles—when she knew, *knew* that he'd painted crosshairs on her almost from the day he'd first entered her classroom.

She was probably the only female Heath Sinclair had ever met in his life that he hadn't gotten into his bed within five minutes—until tonight.

How absolutely stupid was it to succumb when she knew the only reason he had any interest in her was because she was the 'one that got away'? Especially now! She'd just *thought* she was in a precarious position before when she'd known him! It had been her very first year teaching and she was under heavy scrutiny and knew it, but her situation was so much worse now it didn't bear thinking on!

She hadn't taught in years and it had taken all she could do to get accredited again and find a job when she'd let Kenneth manipulate her in to quitting to be a full time mother and wife—and it hadn't looked good that her son didn't want anything to do with her. The very fact that Kenneth had gotten custody had made everyone look at her as if she was some sort of monster, unfit to be around children.

Kenneth would have a field day when ... *if* he discovered she'd slept with an exotic dancer! As if that wasn't bad enough, she knew the probability was high, given the boy he'd been back then, that Heath probably had a record, as well. She wouldn't even get visitation rights!

Not that she did very often anyway, regardless of the court orders. There was always some reason why it wasn't convenient for Kenny to spend the weekend with her like he was supposed to. But she couldn't lose her son completely! She wasn't going to give up without a fight! She loved him too much and she was sure if she just hung in there sooner or later he'd see that none of the lies his father had told were true and he'd come around.

Unless she got involved with a man like Heath!

She dropped her hands and scrubbed them along the legs of her jeans in agitation.

Who was she kidding? She wasn't involved! He wasn't interested in getting involved. She'd let him count coup and fuck her!

No! *It was worse than that.* She'd been all over him! The only thing that had prevented her from begging him was the fact that she'd been too mindless to think in English! She'd been babbling in tongues!

A shiver skated through her as the memory instantly flooded her mind. Heath Sinclair was a man who knew how to please a woman! He'd set her on fire, turned her mind to sludge. If ever she'd needed proof that it wasn't pure imagination that women fell all over themselves to spread their legs for him, she certainly had it! She'd gloried in her downfall!

She almost thought the worst part of it was that no man had ever made her feel like that before, because she knew now what it was supposed to feel like and she was never going to get to experience anything like that again—ever!

She could still smell him on her skin and it was driving her nuts! She felt like a junky in need of a fix!

Surging to her feet abruptly, she headed into her bathroom to bathe. She needed to try to put it out of her mind, needed to get him out of her head. She wasn't going to see him again. There was no reason in the world for him to have any interest in it now that he'd finally scored with 'teach'.

Even if he was interested in toying with her, she couldn't allow it!

*God, she wanted to!* She almost thought it would be worth it to be left in ruins when he dumped her and moved on just to experience what it felt like for a little while!

He wasn't a kid anymore. It wasn't wrong to think of him as a desirable man—because he was! Truthfully, she'd never been able to see him any other way, though god knew she'd tried! He hadn't behaved like a kid and he sure as hell hadn't looked like one. Fresh out of college with the ink barely dry on her teaching certificate, she'd still been too close to her own school years to consider him as forbidden fruit—at first—not until her curiosity had led her to look up his records and she'd discovered he wasn't even eighteen.

Not that she thought he'd ever really been a kid in the truest sense of the word—innocent. He hadn't gotten the chance. He'd grown up in the school of hard knocks and he'd been light years more experienced in the ways of the world than she was even back then, regardless of his chronological age or hers.

She'd deeply regretted, even then, that he was completely forbidden to her—because of her marriage, because of her career, and because of his age. There was just something about him beyond his good looks that had tempted her to ignore her conscience, throw everything away, and give in to the promise in his eyes.

It wasn't worth it, though. It really wasn't! She couldn't let the hunger he'd planted in her to flourish, to make her start rethinking things—like she'd lost her son and she was never going to get him back no matter how hard she tried. There was still hope. She had to believe that. She couldn't move on with her life. She didn't want to give up even there was just a slim chance she might yet salvage some kind of relationship with her son.

Because there sure as hell wasn't any future with Heath!

\* \* \* \*

"Hi. This is Heath Sinclair ...."

"Who?"

Heath's lips tightened. "Diablo?"

"Oh!"

"I'm trying to reach Marcy Parks."

There was hesitation on the line. "Was there a mistake in the payment?"

This time Heath hesitated. "Actually, there was, but that isn't what I was calling about. You overpaid me by a hundred."

"Oh! No! That was a tip."

Heath wrestled with his temper for a moment. "If that was for the private lap dance—it wasn't necessary."

"Oh? Why is that?"

“Look ... forget it. The reason I called is because I lost your sister’s phone number and I was wondering if I could get it from you.”

There was a long pause and he’d begun to think she’d hung up. “She gave you her phone number?”

Heath felt his face heating, but only part of it was due to his rise in temper. “You’ve got a problem with that?”

“Not if she actually gave it to you.”

Which she didn’t fucking believe for a minute! He could tell that just by her voice. If he hadn’t wanted it so badly he would’ve hung up himself. A check of the phone book had turned up empty, though. Unless she’d changed her name .... “She gave it to me,” he replied tightly, maintaining his lie with grim determination.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll check with her and if she’s ok with it, I’ll call you back and give it to you. What’s your number?”

Heath ground his teeth. “Forget it!” he snapped and hung up. He slammed his fist into the wall next to the payphone in frustration. Disconcerted when the wood panel cracked, he glanced around to see if anybody had observed him and strode away from the phone.

“You’re up next, Diablo! You need to hump it!”

Lifting a hand in acknowledgement, Heath kept going until he reached the dressing room. It took longer to oil up and apply the grease paint they used to keep their faces from looking like a blank white mask in the harsh glare of the spotlights than it did to change into his costume. Carrying the mask since the son-of-a-bitch was hot and made him sweat profusely, he took his place just off stage to wait for the performer before him to finish.

He was still royally pissed off, though, and he didn’t make any attempt to peer through the curtains to check the crowd to see if they had a good showing for the night like he usually did. He’d been kicking himself ever since the disaster with Shiloh—It was hard to look at it any other way despite the fact that he’d gotten exactly what he wanted when it seemed like it had ended up costing him way more than he’d wanted or expected.

He’d tried to convince himself it wasn’t a total disaster. He’d just give her a few days to stew over it and patch things up, but it didn’t look like that was going to fucking happen when he didn’t know where she lived and he couldn’t get his hands on her phone number.

He was so deep in thought that he almost missed his cue. Pushing his thoughts to back of his mind, he snapped the mask in place and double timed it onto the stage to catch his next cue. The glaring spotlights made it impossible to catch more than a glimpse of the audience from time to time, but he’d ceased to either worry about the crowd or play to them long ago—before he took it up again.

He’d had mixed feelings about it when he’d begun. He’d never really suffered from stage fright, but there was no getting around the fact that it was unnerving as hell to be up on a stage by himself, staring out at a sea of faces. The spotlights that had prevented him from seeing just how big the crowd was had helped in that respect. Since he’d been looking to get lucky back then, it wasn’t altogether a good thing either since it also prevented him from seeing well enough to pick out a target for the night’s hunt.

He’d performed so long now that the only time he was the least bit nervous was when he was trying out a new routine, though, and getting laid wasn’t a top priority—not something he had to devote a lot of time to, anyway. The lap dances he performed after the main performance when he worked the crowd gave him all the opportunities he needed.

Just as he was finishing up his grand finale, however, he caught a glimpse of a woman near the back of the club that damned near made him trip over his own feet. He caught himself with an effort and, he thought, carried it off well enough, but he was rattled enough he hesitated longer to clear the stage than he should have. The dancer poised to go on behind him glared at him when he'd finally collected his clothes and exited.

"You made me miss my cue, damn it!"

"Sorry, man," Heath muttered, striding to his locker to shove his clothes in without a backward glance.

It was a hell of a lot harder to see over the tables filled with screaming women from the ground level than it had been from the stage, Heath discovered. Trying to decide whether he really had seen Shiloh or if it was pure imagination, he hesitated, craning to see if he could spot her again.

He was just on the point of giving up when he saw her. She wasn't sitting at the table where he'd spotted her before. She was heading for the door. Almost as if she felt his gaze, she turned and looked straight at him. Her eyes widened. Whirling, she took off, battering her way through the crowd.

Fuck! And he wasn't wearing anything but his fucking thong!

Whirling around abruptly himself, he charged backstage to his locker, grabbed his jeans and pulled them on and then took off toward the exit barefoot and shirtless. Whipping his head around in search of her, he finally spied her rushing directly toward him.

Smiling grimly to himself, he stepped back in the shadows. He'd thought she'd hidden in the back of the club to avoid him, but if she'd parked in the back it was most likely because she'd only just arrived.

Of course, that didn't explain why she'd took off when she saw him, but he was about to find out.

## Chapter Four

Shiloh didn't know *what* she'd been thinking! She supposed she wasn't thinking at all! Because what she'd been thinking with didn't have a brain!

From the moment she'd thought about going to the club to see Heath perform, though, she hadn't been able to let go of the idea.

She'd told herself she *needed* to go to get him out of her head! She needed to see him for what he really was—a womanizer of the worst kind. She needed to see it with her own eyes so she couldn't lie to herself.

Because that was what she'd been doing. She'd gone over and over their night together, remembered everything he'd said, every touch, and she'd almost managed to convince herself that she'd been wrong about him. He hadn't seduced her just to add her scalp lock to his bedpost. He'd remembered her and he'd still been attracted to her.

He'd said those hurtful things because she'd hurt him. It had always been his way, to strike out with the most cutting remarks he could think of whenever anyone wounded him. It was his defense mechanism against a cruel world.

She'd wanted to believe that because it kept her from feeling so crushed, but could she allow it?

She'd always refused to see him for what he really was, she finally realized. Even when everyone around her had been convinced he was trouble with a capital T and destined for a life of crime she'd insisted that he was too smart and had too much goodness in him to end up living the life of a common criminal. He had potential. He just needed someone to believe in him, someone to appeal to the good in him.

She'd tried. She was just a school teacher. She hadn't been trained in dealing with problem kids. Needless to say the attempt to reach him had been an abysmal failure, because she hadn't known how to break through the stone wall he'd built between him and the rest of the world.

Or she'd been wrong about him all along. She'd never accepted that. It was easier to accept her failings in counseling than to accept the possibility that so charming a young man, with so much potential could've just plain been bad.

She was still making excuses for him, but she'd finally admitted that it wasn't just for him. It was for herself.

Well! It certainly hadn't been a total loss! It had been an eye opening experience, alright! She'd listened to women of all ages screaming 'Diablo' until she was nearly deaf and watched the way he played to the crowd.

She was just surprised the man still had a dick and hadn't worn it down to a nub!

It totally sucked that she hadn't been able to get in, see what she'd gone to see, and get out without being spotted! She'd been convinced she could and it was really unsettling that he'd spotted her, but irrelevant, she was sure.

She nearly had heart failure when she rounded the corner of the club and a man stepped out of the shadows. She'd already sucked in a breath to scream when she recognized him.

"Did you see what you came to see?" he asked grimly.



Shiloh stared at Heath, trying to wrap her mind around the fact that he'd caught up to her when she'd been sure there was no way in hell he could even if he'd wanted to. The urge to pretend she not only didn't have a clue of what he was talking about but she'd had no idea he would be in the club was so strong she didn't even examine it. "Uh ... you work here?"

He grabbed her arm, glanced around the parking lot, and then dragged her through a door she hadn't even seen. She saw a narrow hallway and then he dragged her through another door and into what was clearly a storage room. Without pausing, he led her down a narrow aisle to the back side of the room before he released her. "You want to tell me why you came if you were only going to dash out the door the minute I saw you?"

Resentment flickered through her. "You saw me?"

His expression hardened. "You bet your ass I did," he growled, shifting closer, "or we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we? What's going on, Shiloh?"

She blinked at him, swallowing convulsively a few times. "I'm not one of your ... groupies, if that's what you're thinking!" she said tightly. "I didn't even know you worked here! I just came with some friends to watch the show."

"Male or female?"

She gaped at him. "What?"

"Your imaginary friends."

She felt her face heat. "Female!" she said tightly.

"Names?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why don't you tell me why you think I'm here?"

He tilted his head, studying her. She stepped back when he crowded her again and discovered she'd run out of retreating room and hit the wall. He planted a hand on either side of her. "Let me guess—you figured you ought to do a little research to see just how much trouble you might be in for letting me stick my dick in you without protection. And now you've seen me at work you figure they don't make enough antiseptic to decontaminate you. Am I warm or cold?"

Shiloh gaped at him, feeling the blood drain from her face and then rush back with a vengeance. "I wasn't ... thinking about that."

He lifted his dark brows. "No? Just checking out the trash your sister brought in, then?"

She stared at him, realizing abruptly that he wasn't just angry. He was defensive, and he was never defensive unless he felt threatened in some way. "That's not fair! I never thought that about you, Heath. Never."

Surprise flickered through his eyes. "So ... you finally remembered who I am. Tell me, did you remember that before or after I fucked you? Or did it just sort of click in place later?"

Shiloh flinched. "I guess ... I guess that answers that question. Does it matter?"

"It does to me," he growled.

"Why?" Shiloh asked bitterly, looking away.

He cupped her cheek, forcing her to look at him again. "Why do you think, baby?" he asked harshly, dipping down to cover her mouth in a kiss that was rough with the anger still pumping through him.

Shiloh stiffened, struggling with the twin desires to yield instantly to temptation and sooth whatever distress she'd caused him. At the same time, she realized she couldn't afford to yield to either urge. She was too vulnerable to him, too susceptible to his charms, but no amount of trying to reason with her libido served her. Despite the roughness, maybe because something

inside of her recognized the hurt that prompted it even while she didn't completely understand it, everything inside of her seemed to melt at the possessive stroke of his tongue along hers.

A shudder traveled through him when she gave up the battle and sucked his tongue, drinking in the essence that was like a magical elixir, relishing the drunken euphoria that swept through her as she absorbed it. He moved closer, pressing her tightly between his body and the wall behind her until she could feel him against every inch of her length. He slipped his hands behind her after a moment, cupping her buttocks and bringing her pelvis up tightly against his, rubbing his hard erection maddeningly against her cleft.

Her nipples tightened with the excitement that rushed through her. Her clit throbbed in complaint at being teased as he rocked against her. Her mind flitted in search of a possibility of appeasing the heat he was generating inside of her.

The sound of a door opening close by was like having a bucket of icy water thrown over her. Shiloh jerked away from Heath, feeling a second jolt when she discovered the door wasn't just close. The door she'd heard was the door to the storage room.

"That you, Sinclair? You need to take it outside. You know how the boss feels about fucking in the backrooms."

"Go fuck yourself!" Heath snarled.

Shiloh pushed away from him, so embarrassed she hardly knew where to look. "I can't do this," she gasped in a suffocated voice. "I can't."

Heath caught her when she tried to slip by him. "Why? Just tell me why!"

She stared at him a little helplessly. She didn't think of him as a disreputable person but she knew she was probably a majority of one. Beyond that, even if she was willing to throw her life away just to be with him, she knew it would be for nothing. She didn't mean a thing to him. "Don't you have enough women? I can't. I've got too much to lose."

He didn't try to stop her that time when she tried to pass him, but he followed her all the way out and to her car. "What the hell do you mean by that?" he growled, planting his hand on the car door to keep her from opening it.

Shiloh swallowed convulsively. "Don't ... play with my feelings, Heath. I can't just be your ... fuck buddy!" Lord knew she wanted to! If she hadn't wanted to so badly, she might've thought it was safe to play with fire.

He caught her jaw in the crook of one hand, glaring at her ferociously. "Where the hell did you get the idea that that was all I was after? I'm not playing, woman! I've never been more deadly serious in my life."

She searched his face. "I want to believe you, but I just don't, Heath."

He studied her a long moment and finally released her. "I guess I'll have to convince you, then."

\* \* \* \*

Shiloh was such a nervous wreck from their encounter that she could hardly sleep. Alright, so it wasn't entirely nervousness. She was also on edge from being lit up and let down—not that she blamed Heath for that! She was fairly certain that he would've been glad to appease her if he'd gotten the chance. He nearly had anyway. If that bastard hadn't stuck his head in the room when he had she thought she could've come with no more stimulation than she'd gotten. She'd been on the very verge. She didn't think she would've felt so let down if she hadn't been so close!

Regardless of what he'd said to the contrary, though, she didn't think he was serious about anything except getting laid—deadly serious about that, maybe, perhaps even deadly

serious in his pursuit of her as the flavor of the week—but nothing else. Even if it had given her heart palpitations, she wasn't going to let herself get hooked on that line!

In any case, she'd told him the absolute truth. She couldn't afford it.

It had been a serious mistake to go to see his show even if she'd been right in her reasoning—and she thought she had been. Not that she'd really been in any doubts that Heath was woman-bait, but it never hurt to get a good dose of reality when it was needed.

The mistake was in getting caught at it. She thought Heath had probably already put her out of his mind and that stupid stunt she'd pulled had just put her back in his line sight!

She dismissed the niggling suspicion that she'd hoped for just that reaction. Maybe subconsciously she had, but it certainly hadn't been planned, regardless of what he thought!

Very likely, though, he'd forgotten about it the moment she left, headed back into the club and found another willing partner for the night.

She nearly passed out when he showed up the following day just as she dismissed her last class. She'd thought it was the last student to leave who'd shut the door, but it was so unusual for any of the students to actually close a door that she'd glanced toward it and did a double take when she saw Heath. Abruptly weak kneed, she'd flopped down on the edge of her desk. He sauntered toward her, leaning over her when he reached her. She tilted backwards, bracing her hands behind her. His eyes gleamed as he moved in closer, planting a palm against her desk on either side of her. "What are you doing here?" she asked faintly.

His lips curled wryly. "Well, your sister won't give me your number and you make me so crazy I keep forgetting to ask. I figured this was the only way to solve the problem. What are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing," she said a little blankly.

"There's where you're wrong. I was figuring on taking you out to dinner."

Her heart leapt and then crashed as it occurred to her that she couldn't go with him. "I can't. Really, I can't. I've got so much work to do ...."

He shook his head. "You'll have to do better than that," he said grimly. "You worried about being seen in public with me?"

Shiloh felt her face heat. The look in his eyes made her chest tighten. She caught his arm when he straightened abruptly and turned away. "Please! It isn't what you think!"

He turned to study her speculatively. "No?"

She bit her lip. "My ex has me watched."

She could tell from the look on his face that it was the last thing he'd expected. "Come again?"

"I know how paranoid it sounds, but he always knows ... things about me that he couldn't possibly know if he didn't! And he'll use it against me. That's why my phone is unlisted and why nobody but Marcy knows where I'm living."

"He'll use what against you?" Heath asked grimly.

She stared at him in dismay. "Don't look at me like that! I have a son! I hardly ever get to see him as it is! That's why I said I couldn't afford .... One of the reasons, anyway. Please don't be angry with me. Try to understand."

He studied her for a long moment and finally moved closer, gathering her into his arms. "I'd rather beat the son-of-a-bitch into a coma. Say the word and I'll have one of my underworld connections bump the bastard off."

Shiloh blinked at him. Her jaw slid to half mast. "Oh my god! You've got underworld connections?" she gasped, horrified.

His lips curled. "Nope. Just checking."

Shiloh felt faint. "To see if you can give me a heart attack?"

He studied her pale face. "Shit, baby! I didn't mean to scare you," he said in disgust. "I'm just trying to figure out how bad you think I am."

"I don't think you're bad at all. I never did."

"I guess if you did you wouldn't have looked so surprised," he said ruefully and then shook his head. "You ain't giving me much to work with here, baby."

Shiloh swallowed against the knot that rose in her throat. "I can't, Heath."

"You can't? Or you just don't want to take a chance on me?" he asked tightly.

She studied his face and finally looked away, realizing it was way too late to try to guard her heart from him—probably years too late. If there hadn't been something there all along would she have fallen for him so quickly?

"Look at me, Shiloh."

She glanced up at him, but she couldn't maintain eye contact.

"You think I can't tell the way you light up every time I hold you?"

She felt her face heat, but she didn't try to deny it.

He caught her chin, lifting her face. "Alright, baby. We'll do this your way ... for now. I got past security to get in here. I figure I can outsmart your ex. Give me your address. I'll meet you there—and don't eat before I get there! I'm cooking."

She gaped at him. "You aren't serious, are you?"

He made a derisive sound. "Baby, I already told you I was. We're in the convincing phase now."

\* \* \* \*

Despite what he'd said, Shiloh had been convinced he was just teasing. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard a tap on her patio door. Dropping the papers she'd been grading, she got up and went to peer out the curtains. Heath was standing on her balcony, she discovered, with a bag on his arm. He strode inside the moment she opened the door and looked around.

"You climbed my balcony?" she gasped in disbelief. "I'm on the second floor!"

"Thank god it wasn't the third or fourth!" Heath muttered, heading for the kitchen. "I had a hell of a time getting up here with this fucking bag! Good thing I was in the rangers, huh?"

Shiloh stared at him. "You were in the rangers?"

He grinned. "Nope. Just a corpsman."

"Heath!"

"What?"

Smiling, she followed him into the kitchen, peering around him at the food he was dragging out of the bag. Without surprise, she saw it was steaks, potatoes, and salad fixings—precut in a bag. "I didn't realize you were such a tease."

He cocked a dark brow at her. "I didn't think you'd noticed much about me."

It was a leading question if she'd ever heard one. "I think I noticed more than I should have ... under the circumstances," she said ruefully. She discovered he was watching her when she turned from the cabinet that held her seasonings with a bottle of tenderizer.

"What circumstances?" he prompted, grabbing the bottle from her and coating both steaks liberally.

"You know!"

Setting the bottle down, he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her onto the counter. “The student thing?” he asked absently, unbuttoning her blouse. “It didn’t bother me. I never figured out why it worried you so much.”

“What are you doing?”

He flicked a look at her. “What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re undressing me.”

“Smart woman! I always loved that about you,” he murmured, pushing her legs apart and wedging his hips between them as he finished with her blouse and pushed it off her shoulders.

Shiloh felt her heart skip several beats. “I thought you were going to cook.”

“Well, we have to do *something* while we’re waiting for it to tenderize,” he murmured teasingly, “and we have unfinished business.”

“We do?”

“Oh, yes, we do. My dick was hard enough when you dashed off last night to drive nails with it.”

Shiloh felt her kegels clap, a reminder that she’d had a ‘hard on’ when she left the night before, too. It wasn’t that she wasn’t willing, but the kitchen counter seemed like the wrong place for this sort of thing ... unless he was thinking about warming up in the kitchen and finishing up in the bedroom?

He pushed his hands under her skirt, grasped her panties, and pulled. She struggled with her sense of propriety versus sexual interest and leaned back, bracing her hands to lift up. He dropped her panties on the floor, caught her buttocks and dragged her toward the edge of the counter. She allowed her legs to dangle for a moment and then lifted them and curled them around his waist.

His eyes glittered with both heat and triumph as he tilted his head and leaned in to fit his mouth to hers. She lifted her arms to drape them around his neck as he did, closing her eyes and lifting her lips to him in offering.

Heath stared at her face for a moment from beneath his lashes, feeling a heady rush of victory collide with his building desire. This was for him. He realized he’d never really thought he would have a chance with her. He’d fantasized about it. He’d been determined to try, but he hadn’t believed.

He discovered he was still having trouble accepting, but he dismissed the doubts when her lashes fluttered and she peered at him from beneath them, covering her mouth and thrusting his tongue between her lips as she parted them for him. The feel of the soft, hot, moist cavern of her mouth closing around his tongue made his mind leap instantly to the feel of her nether mouth closing around his cock and sent another dizzying rush through him. He wrestled with the urge to penetrate her immediately, to feel the soft walls of her channel closing around his cock the way her mouth was his tongue. It had been too long since he’d felt that, though, and he hadn’t gotten his fill then, only slaked his hunger for it briefly.

No, his curiosity. Knowing was nothing like fantasizing, though. Knowing had only taught him that his imagination didn’t begin to compare to actuality. It had sparked a voracious hunger for more and he’d had too many days to consider the possibility that she would never let him touch her again.

He was supposed to be trying to convince her he wasn’t just after her sweet little pussy, he reminded himself, wrestling between one need and the other.

To hell with it, he decided abruptly. He could convince her later. He was going to come all over the place if he didn’t get inside of her.

Slipping a hand between them, he tested his welcome to see if she was wet enough he had some chance of wedging himself inside. The moisture that coated his finger set his cock to pounding painfully. When the walls of her sex closed on his finger, though, his balls drew up and he almost lost it.

He withdrew his finger, grasped his cock a little frantically, lined the head up with the mouth of her sex by feel and pushed. He felt her flesh yield. He was so mindless with need by that time it took him a moment to realize he wasn't getting any deeper and several moments more to figure out why. Realizing finally that he'd succeeded in pushing her way rather than penetrating any deeper, he curled an arm around her hips and tried pulling her onto his shaft with his arm while he thrust with his hips.

Sweat broke from his pores when he began to feel the strain in his cock. Easing off, he withdrew slightly to test the depth he'd gained and pushed again. It took him three tries before he finally sank home and he was shaking all over and bathed in sweat with the effort—mostly the effort to keep from coming. He didn't think he would've made it all the way inside if he hadn't been so focused on achieving full penetration. A sneeze could've set him off like an atom bomb and considering the backup load he was carrying around, he might put her in orbit.

The moment he managed to burrow completely inside of her, though, his focus switched from his goal to the tight band of flesh gripping him from the head of his cock to the root and he lost his mind and most of his muscle coordination. Breaking from her lips, he sucked in a deep breath to keep from passing out as he cautiously withdrew, struggling to hold his seed and enjoy the feel of her flesh pulling on his at the same time.

He let out the breath he'd been holding explosively when he managed it, sucking in another as he thrust again and could feel her flesh peeling the outer skin of cock back. Holding his seed began to feel like sheer torture. Somewhere in the darkness of his mind, though, he knew there was a reason to hold on beyond his absolute determination to enjoy the sensations that rocked him with each thrust and retreat he managed almost solely by counting them in his mind.

He realized what that something was when she stiffened, uttering a long, drawn out moan near his ear and he felt the walls of her sex close around him like a vice. She was coming—for him. Triumph surged through him—briefly. She gasped again as the walls of her sex fluttered and gripped him tightly once more. The milking motion of her muscles broke his last thread of control. The muscles in his belly heaved mightily, forcing hot seed through the microscopic channel like a jet stream and knocking the breath from him. He grunted at the force of it, trying to brace himself for the next contraction. It hit him before he could, hammering at him so relentlessly that all he could do was try to hang on and keep from blacking out at the rapturous waves that flowed through him each time the hard contractions eased.

He was panting hoarsely from trying to catch his breath when the spasms finally stopped and he could drag in a decent breath of air. His legs felt like rubber. He braced his pelvis against the counter to ease some of the strain of holding himself up and settled his head heavily on her shoulder. "Baby, that felt so good," he muttered a little drunkenly, wishing he felt up to more of the same.

She shivered. It took an effort to lift his head but he felt the sudden need to look at her, to make sure he'd pleased her, to make sure they were alright. Her flushed cheeks and slumberous eyes reassured him ... on one count anyway. "You ok, baby?" he murmured, his voice husky with the strain of speech when he was still so weak he felt like he was in danger of falling out. "I made it good for you?"

She lifted her eyelids and stared back at him, nodding a little shyly, but he saw her eyes were troubled. She barely met his gaze before she looked away again. He searched his mind a little frantically, but all he could come up with was the fact that he'd been focused on convincing her that sex wasn't all he was after.

Good thing he'd thought to fuck her senseless to convince her!

"I need to get cleaned up," she murmured after a moment, clearly embarrassed.

Fuck, he thought with sudden vehemence, glancing down between them! Dismissing the odd sense of satisfaction it gave him to see he'd pumped her so full of his seed that she was overflowing, he caught her face in the crook of his hand and made her look at him. "What's going through your head?" he demanded when he gave up trying to figure it out.

"Nothing!" she said quickly. Too quickly. With a woman that meant 'everything'.

It clicked in his mind abruptly. He hadn't used a condom, again, and she was disturbed by it. Well, it sure as fuck wasn't going to reassure her to point out that they'd already done it without one and there wasn't much point in worrying about it now! "Do you think I'd hurt you?" he demanded, abruptly angry.

She sent him a startled look, searching his eyes. "No."

Relief flickered through him that she sounded convinced. "Just because I don't want nothing between you and me but skin doesn't mean I'm too stupid to consider the consequences or give a shit, baby! I wouldn't have touched you at all if I hadn't known, positively, that I was safe—not even *with* a condom."

She studied him solemnly for a moment and finally smiled tentatively.

A heady sense of triumph flooded him. He'd made it over another hurdle! He grinned at her. Leaning down, he gave her a smacking kiss on the lips and then helped her down from the counter. "I gotta take care of the future mother of my children," he added teasingly. "Go get cleaned up. I'm going to have the steaks done in about five minutes." He studied the startled look she sent him and shrugged. "Ok, so maybe ten. Just make it quick. I'm starving."

## Chapter Five

Shiloh was in a daze as she headed into her bathroom on autopilot in response to the order to clean up, running on instinct while her mind scurried around in a confused jumble. Several moments passed when she reached the bathroom before she realized she was merely standing in the middle of the room, staring into space. Prompted by the feel of a slime trail traveling down one thigh, she looked down and discovered she was still wearing her skirt—and her bra. No blouse and no panties.

She hiked her skirt, staring at the semen snaking its way down her thigh, imagining thousands, maybe millions of squiggles swimming around in frantic circles, searching for the egg. Straightening abruptly, she let go of her skirt.

How long, she wondered, since she'd used birth control?

Years. She discovered she couldn't actually remember. She'd never *had* to remember! Kenneth had gotten a vasectomy as soon he'd discovered she was pregnant. He'd been furious that she'd 'gotten herself pregnant' to start with without consulting him. Having a baby at that point in time wasn't on his agenda. He'd begun pestering her to get an abortion the moment he found out, but she'd still had spine then. She'd flatly refused, told him to take a hike if he couldn't deal with it.

She didn't know what had made him more furious, the fact that she'd refused a direct order or that she'd made it clear she thought she could get along without him. He'd stopped pestering her to get an abortion. In fact, he'd made a complete about face and begun to brag to everybody they knew as if it had been his idea to start with.

He'd gotten the vasectomy, though, to make sure her ovaries didn't interfere with his plans again. She was actually surprised he hadn't insisted that she get her tubes tied, but maybe he'd figured that was the way to keep her on the straight and narrow—He'd been fixed so she didn't need birth control and if she got it he'd know why.

She'd grown so comfortable with the thought that she couldn't get pregnant it hadn't occurred to her once since the divorce that she was only safe if Kenneth fucked her. Actually, truthfully, she hadn't even thought that much ... because she hadn't been considering having sex with anybody because she hadn't considered any kind of relationship with a man at all.

Heath was teasing, of course. She knew that. It had just come as such a shock to realize she was at risk for that even if she didn't have to worry about catching anything horrible.

She was too *old* to get pregnant!

Well, not too old to get that way but too old to want to, especially when Kenny had turned against her!

She needed to get her hands on some kind of contraceptive. Clearly Heath had no intention of using anything and she was too mindless once he got her juices flowing to think.

Shaking her head, she shimmied out of her skirt and moved to the lavatory to wash up. Was there really any point in dashing down to get something, she wondered? Wasn't it a case, at this point, of slamming the barn door when the cows—sperm—had already escaped?

Unless he actually was serious about hanging around a while?



She considered that, but as much as she would've liked to believe it, she realized she really didn't. There were too many reasons for it not to work and too few that it might.

In all honesty, she couldn't think of but one, single, solitary reason for him to hang around even a little while. He'd had a crush on her when he was a kid. She hadn't thought so at the time. She hadn't even taken his lustful glances too seriously. True, they'd made her think all sorts of things she shouldn't have, but she'd found it hard to believe even then that he actually thought she was hot. She'd suspected, in fact, that it was just a game to him to see if he could break down her defenses.

She thought it was that fear, as shameful as it was to admit, that had kept her on the straight and narrow. If she'd thought he was serious and not just trying to make a fool out of her, she might well have thrown every other consideration out the window. The consequences would've been horrendous if she'd been caught, but she hadn't spent nearly as much time worrying about getting caught as she had wishing he was a little older or she was a lot younger and not married.

The smell of cooking steaks finally penetrated her preoccupation and she finished cleaning up and headed into her room to find something to put on. She discovered Heath had brought her panties and blouse from the kitchen and laid them out on her bed, but decided to ignore them in favor of comfort.

If he was going to hang around for any length of time, she reasoned, he might as well get used to the unglamorous, *real* Shiloh! Taking out a pair of worn jeans and a t-shirt nearly as old and stretched out, she considered the bra and finally discarded it. She rarely wore one around her house since there was no such thing as a bra that was actually comfortable. They ranged from torture devices to mild discomfort, but she hadn't found one yet that she considered more comfortable than braless.

Heath noticed immediately. He paused with the pan of sizzling steaks in one hand as if he'd been shut down. Abruptly, the heat penetrated the pot holder he'd gripped the pan with and he looked around a little frantically for a place to put it, dropping it on the top of the range with a clatter. Despite her amusement, Shiloh surged forward with concern when he blew on his fingers and slung them. "Cold water," she said, grabbing his hand and tugging him toward the sink.

He coiled around her as she held his burned hand under the faucet, cupping her breast with his free hand and bumping the cleft of her ass with his cock—which was as hard as it had been only a few minutes earlier. "I guess you didn't burn yourself too badly," she said wryly, examining his fingers for blisters when she shut the water off.

He nuzzled her hair out of the way with his nose and covered one ear with his mouth. The heat sent a rush through her, making her skin pebble all over. His fingers tightened on the nipple that hardened, poking between them. Shiloh felt her belly flutter.

The microwave timer went off with a ding neither of them paid a lot of attention to. "Saved by the bell," Heath murmured, sucking a patch of skin along the side of her neck. "I think I'd rather chew on you, though."

The suggestive images that gave rise to brought Shiloh to dew point and she lost interest in the food, as well. "I doubt that would appease your hunger," she pointed out.

"There's hunger and then there's hunger," he murmured huskily, but he pulled away. Leering at her when she turned to face him, he grabbed her hand and rubbed her palm along his erection. "Want to sit in my lap, little girl? I know a game called sit and spin."

Shiloh chuckled. "Pervert!"

His eyes gleamed with devilish amusement. “Good thing you can’t read my mind,” he murmured. “You *would* think I was a pervert.”

“Don’t tease me! I’m hungry even if you aren’t.”

Chuckling he grabbed the plates he’d found, scooped the steaks out and placed one on each and then grabbed the potatoes from the microwave with his bare hands, juggling them until he reached the plate. Shaking her head, Shiloh went to the fridge to collect the bag of salad and a selection of dressings when he lifted the plates, looked around for her table and headed toward it. Setting them down on the table, she headed back into the kitchen for ‘fighting’ utensils, napkins, butter, sour cream and salt. He grabbed her around the waist when she got back, pulling her down on his lap for a lingering kiss.

Her head swam. She tried to put her arms around his neck and stuck the container of cold sour cream to his neck. He jumped and released her. “I think you just poured that down my back,” he said ruefully.

Embarrassed, Shiloh got off his lap, dropped her load on the table and checked. “Just a little dribble,” she murmured, licking it off on impulse.

A shudder ran through him. “If you don’t quit, you’re going to be eating cold steak,” he growled.

She was tempted, but she thought he was probably hungry. She settled in the chair opposite him and opened the bag of salad. It felt strange to share a meal with him, but she discovered she liked it. It felt oddly comfortable considering they were virtually strangers. She hardly thought the teacher/student relationship they’d had years before counted and she hadn’t seen him in years.

She wondered abruptly where he’d been all that time and what he’d been doing. Performing, no doubt—He was too good not to be a complete professional—possibly moving from town to town? She didn’t believe he’d been in the city. She felt certain that she would’ve run into him at some point if he had been.

Despite the fact that she felt comfortably relaxed on one level, though, he managed to keep her pulse racing with the promises he made every time he flicked his smoldering gaze over her. She certainly remembered that! If possible, it was more potent now than it had been in the old days, either because he’d perfected it over the years or because she now knew it wasn’t just an empty promise.

“TV? Or straight to bed?” he murmured when he’d helped her clean up.

Shiloh felt her engines rev immediately, despite the fact that she wasn’t sure if he was asking to stay and join in her bed or not. She bit her lip. “I really need to finish grading those papers.”

He nodded. “You always were a stickler for work before play,” he said with a grin. “I’ll take half.”

Shiloh glanced at him in surprise.

“What? You think I ain’t got no education, woman?” he demanded, just enough tightness in his voice that she realized he was defensive about it even though he’d made a pretense of teasing.

She shook her head. “I was thinking how boring you’ll find it.”

He relaxed fractionally. “Not nearly as boring as diddling myself while you finish.”

Shiloh clapped a hand to her mouth but uttered a snort of shocked amusement anyway. “You are so bad!”

He waggled his brows at her. “Yeah, but I’m really good when I’m really bad.”

She chuckled, moving to the couch where she'd left the papers. "And so modest!"

He shrugged. "Yeah, well, if I don't toot my own horn, who's gonna?"

"I wouldn't mind tooting your horn," Shiloh murmured, reddening when she flicked him a smoldering glance and saw the shock on his face.

He laughed abruptly, swooping down on her and snatching her into a tight embrace.

"Baby, you can play any tune on my horn you like," he murmured, laughter threading his voice.

"Work first!" she reminded him.

"Yes, ma'am!"

They settled on opposite ends of the couch, each with a stack of papers and a red pen. After watching Heath's frown of concentration for a moment, Shiloh shrugged inwardly. She could always glance back over them to be sure he'd marked them right, but he'd been remarkably good in English, she recalled—remarkable because the girls usually got the highest marks and the boys the lowest and he'd been one of her best students despite the fact that he seemed far more preoccupied with trying to look up her skirt or down the neck of her blouse every time she bent over.

He pinched her toe, dragging her from her concentration on the papers after a few minutes. When she looked down, she discovered he'd extended one long leg and caught her toes with his. Smiling, she returned her attention to the papers, pretending to oblivious to the toe wrestling. She finally managed to get the upper hand, though, and pinch his toe.

"Ow! Woman! Don't you see I'm working here?"

"You're distracting me," Shiloh said a little testily.

"Well, if you'd quit staring at my cock you might be able to concentrate," he retorted, laughter threading his voice.

"I wasn't staring at ...!" She glanced at the part under discussion, though, when he brought it to mind and discovered he'd dragged it out of his pants and was waving it at her. She laughed. "You are *such* a pervert! Quit waving it at me! I'm trying to focus here."

"I'm down to three papers. I'm warming up."

Mildly irritated when she'd counted her own and discovered she still had ten left, she wrestled with her conscience for a moment and finally surged upward, dropping the papers and pen on the floor. Settling between his legs, she curled her fingers around his cock and leaned down to suck the head and swirl her tongue around the ridge below it. "What are you doing?" he asked a little breathlessly, threading his fingers through her hair as he cupped the back of her skull.

"Tooting your horn," she said when she released it. "Let's see if I can play Dixie on this ...."

The heat that had been simmering inside her from his nearly constant teasing and banter caught flame as she worked his cock in and out of her mouth, stroking it with her hands to stimulate everything she couldn't get into her mouth. The catches in his breath, the faint grunts he didn't even seem aware of, the lift of his hips as if he couldn't hold still thrilled her, adding to the building pleasure inside her and the heat.

He allowed her to carry him almost to the point of coming and then abruptly grabbed her beneath her arms, hauling her up his length. She lifted her head to stare at him dizzily, accusingly, for depriving her of the satisfaction of bringing him off with her mouth. He released her, spearing his fingers in her hair as she collapsed against his chest, dragging her face close enough to his to fasten his mouth hungrily over hers. He sucked at her lips, thrust his tongue into

her mouth and raked it restlessly along hers and then sucked at her tongue a little frantically when she lifted it to twine it with his.

Reaching down, he grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it up and over her head, breaking from her lips only long enough to rid her of it completely. Discovering his own shirt was still between them, he lifted up and broke the kiss long enough to drag it off and then coiled his arms around her to bring her tightly against his chest, nuzzling his face against her neck and exploring it with his lips. He plucked at her earlobe when he discovered it and then sucked it, strumming his hands along her back restlessly, kneading the flesh and then pressing her closer to feel the brush of her nipples against his bare chest as she moved feverishly within his arms.

He made his way to her buttocks after a few moments, cupping them and pressing her tightly against his erection. Releasing her after a moment, he tried to shove his hands down inside her pants. When he couldn't, he transferred his attention to the front snap and zipper, tugging at them until he'd loosened her jeans. He shoved one hand down the front and one down the back, trying to cup a buttock and explore her cleft at the same time. Realizing he didn't have much maneuvering room, he pulled his hands out again, hooked his thumbs on the waist of her jeans and tried to peel them down her hips.

He was only moderately successful. Clearly on a mission now, he pushed her up to her knees, sat up and carried her down on her back, and then got on his knees, grabbed her jeans and hauled them and her panties off, dragging her halfway down the couch in the process. Pitching the jeans and panties aside, he caught her waist, shoved her back up the couch and sprawled on top of her, covering the tip of one breast almost in the same motion.

Shiloh arched against him as if the suction of his mouth had pulled her into a bow, squeezing her eyes tightly as fire poured through her and created a lava pool in her belly. He teased and suckled the nipple he'd captured until she was grinding her teeth and then released it abruptly, nuzzling her breasts in search of the other. She tangled her fingers in his hair as he found it, latching onto it with such enthusiasm she thought for a moment she would pass out.

"Heath!" she gasped, torn between the urge to pry him loose and an equal reluctance for him to stop.

Heath jerked his head upward in response to the distress in her voice. Unfortunately, he didn't let go of her nipple quite as quickly. Electricity shot through her when he stretched it and let go abruptly. After staring at her face blankly for a moment, he surged upward to cover her mouth, shoving his hand between them to wrestle with his own jeans. The teeth of the zipper snagged his boxers on the way down and refused to budge. After wrestling with it a moment, he grabbed his cock and tried to pry it out, hissing into her mouth as he bent his painfully swollen member nearly in half.

Abandoning that option instantly, he broke the kiss, burrowed his face against the arm of the couch for leverage and lifted off of her enough to grab his jeans with both hands. A piece of the zipper flew off as they yielded to his force. Shoving them down his hips, he grabbed his cock again and stabbed blindly at her cleft several times until he finally rang the hole he'd been searching frantically for.

She grunted, bowing up and shifting away from him as he thrust. "Wrong hole!" she gasped.

"Sorry!" Heath muttered, dragging his cock upward a fraction and heaving again. To his relief, he felt her flesh close around his cock in greeting. Curling one arm around her shoulders to hold her in place, he worked feverishly against the yielding surfaces he had to deal with, the couch beneath his knees and her body, climbing inside her by tortuous degrees until he'd

burrowed as far as he could go. He didn't want to stop then. Her flesh had clamped around the entire length of his cock from root to tip, making it throb so agonizingly that it took his mind a few moments to catch up to the fact that he couldn't drive any deeper.

He stopped, panting for breath, struggling with the feverish urge to pump when he knew that was all it would take to blow his load and end the party. He squeezed his eyes tightly, trying to divert his mind to something else. All he could think about, though, was the urge he was fighting and the fact that it felt so good he wanted to stay perfectly still and enjoy it as long as he could stand it without having a heart attack. "Jesus, baby!" he gasped. "It feels so good!"

Bad move! As soon as he'd voiced his pleasure it ripped his efforts for control right out of his hands. His hips jerked as his belly spasmed almost painfully with the war between his mind for control and his body's urges. Realizing he'd lost the battle, he began to pump into her frantically, trying to push her over the top before he ran out of steam. Luckily, he'd primed her thoroughly. She bucked against him after a few feverish strokes and then groaned as the muscles along her channel began clenching and relaxing around him.

He felt like he was being gutted. He'd pumped everything he had into her earlier. His body strained harder to eject the little semen he'd managed to accumulate since. He was so wrung out with the effort by the time it finally stopped, he couldn't move, could barely breathe. It occurred to him that he was probably crushing her with his weight, but he couldn't seem to gather enough strength even to roll off for several minutes. Finally, he managed to heave himself upward enough to roll between her and the back of the couch. He nearly shoved her off the couch in the process. Fortunately, he still had an arm around her. Dragging her back, he dropped his other arm around her to anchor her, threw one leg across her hips for added measure, and then gave up the effort to prevent himself from sliding into a coma of satisfaction.

The vibration in the vicinity of his pelvis woke his dick before it woke him. Groggy, disoriented, he lifted his head, trying to figure out where he was and why he was shaking. It dawned on him finally that the vibrations seemed to be centralized in the region of his groin. He felt around until he found the source—his cell phone. It stopped vibrating before he could figure out how to get his hand in his pocket.

Dismissing it, he nuzzled his face against Shiloh's neck, trying to decide if he could get up the energy to make love to her again. His phone went off again just about the time that he admitted, reluctantly, that he was going to have to rest a while longer before he could manage anything else. It had been a hell of a long time since he'd had sex twice in such quick succession.

Leaning away from Shiloh, he felt around until he finally managed to grab the phone and pull it from his pocket. Lifting it, he stared at the screen owl eyed, trying to bring the message into focus. A jolt went through him when he managed to read the numbers, bringing him to full alertness.

He struggled to extricate himself from Shiloh and lost his balance when the edge of the cushions yielded more than he'd expected. He rolled off and hit the floor, taking Shiloh with him. She grunted when she landed on his chest, lifting her head sleepily.

"Sorry, baby. I got to go," he whispered, rolling her off and getting to his feet. She'd managed to sit up by the time he was on his feet. Reaching down, he hauled her up, scooped her into his arms and looked around for the bedroom.

She clung to him when he settled her on the bed and he felt his chest tighten. Reluctantly, he removed her arms and flicked the cover over her. Leaning down, he kissed her soft lips briefly. "I have to go, baby, otherwise I'd take you up on that."

She nodded. "There's a spare key on the rack by the door. Don't climb up next time."

Heath felt his throat close. Wondering if he should take her up on it or if she was too sleepy to realize what she'd said, he leaned down and kissed her a little more lingeringly. "Baby, if you had any idea what you do to me, I'd be in serious trouble."

Her lips curled. He gave them a light peck and left the bedroom, punching the redial on his phone. "Dr. Sinclair," he said when the line opened on the other end. Listening to the emergency room nurse on the other end, he searched the walls near the door for the key until he saw the key rack in the shadows. Unhooking the key, he shoved it into his pocket, instructing the nurse on what to do until he got there and giving her an ETA on his arrival as he let himself out, locked the door, and jogged down the stairs.

## Chapter Six

It was the harsh, jangling ring of her phone that woke Shiloh not the gentle morning sounds programmed into her alarm. Her head came up off the pillow as if some invisible hand had jerked it upwards. She blinked, staring with wide, burning eyes at her headboard, tensed, listening for the noise that had awakened her. When the phone rang again, she rolled over to get up, discovered she was perched on the edge of the bed and hit the floor so hard it rattled her brain in her skull. She might have lain where she landed, too stunned to move for a while, but the phone jangled again.

Surging to her feet, she looked around a little wildly, realized she was in her bedroom and dashed toward the door. She managed to pick up the receiver just in time to hear the dial tone. Her jaw went slack with outrage even while her mind scrambled to identify the caller. It was a short search. Aside from Marcy and the school, nobody had the number, so it was either one of them or a random wrong number.

Glancing out the window, Shiloh stared at the light for several moments before it sank in that it was way too bright outside to be early morning. “Damn it!” She made a grab for the phone to call the school just as it rang again.

“Hello?”

Why wasn’t she at school?

She searched her mind for a lie that might be believable. “Car trouble.”

Why hadn’t she called to let them know?

“Uh ... actually that’s because I didn’t break down until after I’d left the house—flat tire!” she elaborated on inspiration. “And I was so filthy after I’d changed it I had to come back to the apartment to clean up. I was just on my way out. Could you get someone to watch my class till I get there?”

It occurred to her as soon as she hung up that she should’ve given herself more time while she was fabricating excuses! “Shit!”

Dashing through the apartment, she turned the shower on and grabbed her toothbrush while she was waiting on the water. Fortunately, she didn’t have to undress. Heath had undressed her.

The thought distracted her from her purpose and she did a brief mental ‘radar’ survey of the apartment. She didn’t hear him moving around and she hadn’t seen him when she’d been running around the house. He must have left.

Dismay flickered through her, but she didn’t have time to examine it. Shoving her hair into a shower cap, she leapt into the shower, scrubbed frantically, and leapt out again. She’d already pulled her dress over her head before she realized she hadn’t grabbed a bra. *That* would go over like a lead balloon, she thought, racing to her dresser to search for one! She’d be accused of trying to seduce the high school boys before she could turn around!

Heath’s image rose in her mind.

She resolutely dismissed it. She hadn’t seduced him! She hadn’t even tried!

She'd wanted to, but wanting didn't count, damn it! If it did, ninety percent of the world's population would probably be in jail for wanting something *sometime* that they shouldn't have—maybe even ninety nine percent!

Maybe she didn't deserve brownie points for behaving herself, regardless of temptation, but she wasn't going to beat herself up over something she *hadn't* done!

She arrived at the school almost halfway through her second class, completely unprepared since she'd dashed out and left the papers she'd been grading the night before, and it went downhill from there. Generally, she spent her lunch period dividing her time between watching the students and trying to make friendly with the other teachers. She was so distracted, however, she didn't pay attention to the students let alone the other teachers.

"You ok, honey?" Emily Watson asked her sympathetically as they were leaving the lunch room.

Shiloh stared at her blankly. "Uh ... yeah! Fine!"

It had been an opening and the possibility of making a friend, she realized later, but she hadn't felt up to inventing another lie and she sure as hell couldn't tell the truth!

It finally jelled in her mind about halfway through the afternoon why it was a lie that she was 'fine'. Heath had vanished during the night without a word! She picked over that and the implications with morbid intensity for a while before a vague memory surfaced. She'd wondered how she got from the couch to the bed when the last thing she remembered was conking out on the couch under Heath's dead weight!

They'd fallen off the couch and then he'd picked her up and carried her to bed.

He hadn't joined her, though. He'd said he had to go.

Did that constitute 'wham bam, thank you, ma'am', she wondered? Or was it sort of a good bye? As in, I'll see you later?

She focused on it, trying to remember something that would make her feel more hopeful that he was planning a return engagement until she had a blinding headache. She'd almost managed to convince herself that he did when the school day ended and he didn't show up. Trying to convince herself that he'd call her in a day or two, or maybe show up again, she went home. The papers they'd been grading together were strewn all over the living room. Glumly, she moved around the room picking them up and trying to smooth out the wrinkles on the papers that had gotten crumpled.

When she'd collected them all, she began sorting those that had been checked from the ones that hadn't. Heath's bold script leapt out at her and she paused to read through the paper. Pleased when she saw he'd caught everything, including a few things she might've missed, she checked several others carefully. Once she was certain she didn't have to worry about it, she merely scanned the papers looking for the ones she hadn't finished.

She was nearing the bottom of the stack when she flipped a page and found herself staring at a big heart. In the middle of it were the letters HS + SL. She stared at it blankly, mentally reviewing her student's names until it dawned on her that the bold drawing was nothing like the writing on the page. Her heart tripped over itself. Heath Sinclair plus Shiloh Ledger? She bit her lip. It was so ... sweet! So romantic! Ok, so maybe just a teensy bit juvenile, too, but the sentiment thrilled her to her toes. She found herself grinning at it like an idiot until it abruptly dawned on her that he'd written it on a student's paper!

Her smile flat lined. Had he meant for her to find it?

Surely, he had, she thought doubtfully. He would've expected her to look through the papers, wouldn't he?



She was sure he would have, and yet there was just a niggling of uncomfortable doubt that it was more in the nature of a prank than could've made her extremely uncomfortable if she hadn't noticed it.

Maybe he'd just sort of doodled it without realizing what he was doing?

She shook the thoughts off. It didn't matter, she'd found it. She was going to have to 'lose' the student's paper! There was no way to get it off and leave the paper intact.

And she didn't want to give it back, anyway. It was sort a love note, wasn't it?

She listened for him until it was so late she was forced to go to bed or fall asleep on the couch. The bed dipped sometime in the wee hours, tipping her over and rousing her. A jolt rippled through her when a man's arm settled heavily across her waist. "Sorry, baby. Late night. Go back to sleep."

Relaxing when she recognized his voice, Shiloh snuggled closer and dropped off the edge again. There was something heavy on her when she surfed toward awareness the next morning, breathing its hot, moist breath against her neck. She was still trying to figure out what it was when her alarm went off. Sighing, she opened her eyes and discovered the 'heavy' was Heath's muscular thigh and about half his upper body. A flock of goosebumps erupted along her neck and raced down her back as he shifted.

A search of her mind produced absolutely no memory of having Heath over the night before, but she finally decided she must have let him in. He was sleeping in her bed.

Or had she left the patio door unlocked?

Dismissing it after a moment, she struggled to wiggle out from under him. His arms tightened. "Where you going?"

"Work," she whispered.

He seemed to wrestle with that for a moment and finally let go and rolled over. She moved around the bed to turn off her alarm. It occurred to her as she did that he might need to get up for work. She realized she had no idea what his work schedule was like. Did he work all week, or just the weekends? As reluctant as she was to wake him, she thought she should. "Do you need me to reset the alarm?"

He lifted one eyelid a fraction, rolling his eyes around. She bit her lip. "Twelve," he said finally.

Weird! Shrugging, she set the alarm for him and headed in for her bath. He was sprawled on his belly in the middle of the bed, spread eagle when she came out. She paused to appreciate the view. He really was a beautiful man and the beauty didn't stop at the skin.

She frowned at the thought, abruptly wondering how well she really knew him. She'd felt like she understood the boy he once was, but she didn't even know if that was true. Part of the reason he'd always seemed so mature to her, older than he actually was, was the fact that he was so reticent—surprisingly eloquent for one so young when the mood moved him—but he kept his cards close to his chest. He'd not only been extremely selective about the people he let get close, but he'd been guarded even around them. If he'd been openly hostile or prone to violence, someone might have noticed sooner that he hailed from a background he should've been removed from, but he'd been able to project 'well adjusted'.

Truthfully, she'd thought he was surprisingly well adjusted, all things considered, but he'd had a rougher time than any child ought to and it had to have left scars, even if he hid them well.

"Is my ass hanging out?" he growled from the depths of her pillow.

Jolted, Shiloh flicked a look at the back of his head. Embarrassed that she'd been staring so hard she'd roused him, it took her a moment to recover. "Unfortunately, no. I'd take a peak but I've been admiring the scenery too long already. I need to rush. Sorry I woke you."

"Light sleeper," he muttered.

"I'll remember that."

She discovered as she headed for the door that the security chain was broken, part of it dangling from the frame and the other part still attached to the door. Braking to a halt, she stared at it, wondering how she could possibly have slept through Heath breaking in! She must have really been out of it! It unnerved her, filled her mind with all sorts of scary possibilities. When she flicked a glance at the key rack and saw her spare was missing, however, she relaxed fractionally, deciding he must have helped himself to it. There was a note taped to the door. Pulling off, she read it.

*You forgot and left the chain on. Sorry. I'll replace it tomorrow.*

Frowning, she mulled that over as she headed out and suddenly recalled she'd been worried since he'd climbed her balcony the night before that he might get hurt if he tried it again. She'd told him to take the key and not climb the balcony.

The vague sense of uneasiness that had been churning in the back of her mind vanished with the realization that he hadn't simply appropriated the key.

He wasn't like Kenneth—at all! Well, not beyond being a man. Being bossy seemed to be a natural side effect of testosterone. He'd been willing to compromise after what she'd told him about Kenneth. She doubted many men would've been. They would've worried that it reflected badly on their manhood to sneak around as if they were afraid of getting caught, even for her sake.

And she knew he'd only been willing to do it for her—not very happily—but he'd wanted to protect her.

The thought warmed her and by the time she arrived at the school she'd thought of something else that pleased her. He'd come to be with her—just to be with her.

Unless he'd been thrown out of his apartment for some reason?

She dismissed that. He made damned good money if the women screaming and waving bills at him were any indication! And probably even more when he did private parties.

That wasn't a particularly happy thought, and it was one she'd been struggling really hard not to think about. How much faith could she have in a man that had that much pussy thrown at him?

It was really flattering that he seemed to want her, but why? Was he jaded on caviar and had decided plain old tuna would do?

Not likely, she decided. If he was ninety—maybe. Men that could get caviar never seemed to get tired of it. When they became jaded, they just looked around for kinky caviar.

She struggled with it for a while and finally decided she needed to quit worrying about it. If wasn't as if figuring it out was going to make a difference. He'd hang around as long as he wanted to and then disappear just like he had before. She could spend all of her time waiting for the ax to fall, or she could enjoy it while it lasted and cry later. It was really stupid *not* to enjoy it while she could just because she knew somebody else was going to get it later!

It was sound self-advice. She knew it was. She was old enough to know how fleeting happiness could be and to realize how utterly stupid it was to deprive oneself of whatever came along just because it wouldn't last. *Nothing* lasted forever! And it was *still* hard!

Disappointed when he didn't show up at the end of the day again, she headed home, trying to convince herself he would be there, or that he'd come by later. He wasn't there, but he was considerate enough to leave her a note on her fridge. Her heart leapt when she saw it and she snatched it down to read it.

*Sorry Baby! I'll be working late tonight at the club. Don't put the security lock on!*

She studied the note with mixed feelings. Obviously he meant to come by when he got off, she thought, feeling abruptly euphoric and then crashing when she realized he was going to be working at the club—which meant waving his dong at a bunch of screaming women! Jealousy twisted sickly in her stomach and dismay as it occurred to her that there was bound to be at least one and probably more than one who'd be trying to coax him home.

She might not see him at all!

Sighing, she studied the note again and fought a round with the green monster. He at least *intended* to come see her, she reminded herself.

He probably just wanted to hedge his bets if he didn't get any offers at the damned club, she thought sullenly!

Wondering what he meant about the security lock, she glanced toward the door and then headed over to check it out. There was a stout lock similar to the security bolts at hotels on the door where the chain had been. She studied it for a moment and felt a smile curl her lips as it occurred to her that he'd decided the flimsy chain wasn't secure enough for protection.

If that wasn't the sweetest, most thoughtful thing!

She needed to stop questioning his motives and imagining things she had no reason to suspect him of, she realized guiltily. He was working, and it was damned strenuous work to perform as he did, however effortless it looked when he did it. Maybe he had taken advantage of opportunities before and maybe he would again, but that had nothing to do with her. It wasn't her business—until or unless he *made* it her business. The *present* was what counted—not the past and not the future. And even at that, she didn't have any real rights beyond the right to throw him out of her apartment. She didn't have the right to make demands or have expectations.

If she couldn't get that in her head, she was going to chase him off and make it a fact that he was in someone else's bed, not a figment of her imagination!

"Shaky ground, girl! Get a grip!" She needed to appreciate what she had and what he'd willingly given!

She didn't know what was wrong with her anyway! She hadn't acted anything like this when she'd been dating Kenneth, hadn't felt any of the things she'd felt since Heath had come into her life—as if she was on an emotional rollercoaster, deliriously happy one moment and hideously depressed the next. Hormones?

She frowned, thinking. She'd never been a clock watcher. Her periods came when they came. It was bad enough just have to deal with it. She didn't want it to dominate her life! She was pretty sure she was somewhere around mid-cycle, though, so maybe that explained it?

Great! Something wonderful to look forward to! She supposed that might end up being the true test of just how interested in her he really was. If Heath could stand her in bitch mode—and do without for a solid damned week—he must really, really like her!

It occurred to her when she reached the kitchen that she ought to try to think of something nice to do for him—beyond the bed. She supposed if he was like most men that was pretty much all he needed to make him happy—a steady supply of pussy—and peace when he got home. Of course, even that hadn't seemed to make Kenneth happy, but then he also hadn't

been particularly pleased with her cooking or cleaning efforts—or anything else—because he was determined *not* to be pleased about anything she did.

She thought Heath *would* appreciate a meal he didn't have to cook or fetch from a restaurant. There wasn't much point in cooking, though, when he'd already let her know he would be really late if he came at all. He would've already eaten, she was sure.

Maybe she'd get the chance another time?

Or would it set off alarm bells in his head? Uh oh! She's getting domestic! Danger! Danger! Run for your life, boy!

Shaking it off, she opened the fridge. There were two long necked beer bottles on the top shelf. Uneasiness slithered through her. Heath's father had been an alcoholic—a mean drunk by all accounts.

It was just two beers, for crying out loud! *She* drank occasionally. Hadn't she just lectured herself about jumping to conclusions!

She glanced toward the trash can, wrestling with herself. Closing the fridge, she walked to the can and studied the assortment of wrappers and boxes. Relieved when she didn't find it full of beer bottles, she went back to the fridge and studied the contents again. Finally deciding on an omelet, she grabbed the egg carton, only to discover it was nearly empty.

Ok, so Heath had an omelet—or a lot of eggs! She decided to settle for an egg sandwich.

She found a single red rose lying on her pillow. Pleasure swelled in her chest. Rushing to it, she grabbed it up and took a deep drag of its sweet perfume and then picked up the note.

*Sorry, baby. I ate most of your eggs. I'll get more. I stole this for you from your neighbor's garden. I can't believe they let people keep fucking dogs around here! The little bastard almost bit me on the ass before I could jump back over the wall.*

Shiloh clapped a hand over her mouth and laughed until she was breathless. "Oh Heath! You shouldn't have! You *really* shouldn't!" Making a mental note to tell him he shouldn't have been filching the neighbor's roses to start with, she headed into the kitchen to find a vase for it.

Despite the note saying he expected to work late, she tried to stay up to wait for him—and ended up falling asleep on the couch. Heath roused her when he came in, working his hands beneath her. She curled her arms around his neck when he'd lifted her.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Waiting," she murmured sleepily.

"Poor baby—all tuckered out."

She thought he was going to leave again when he'd settled her on the mattress. Instead, he headed into the bathroom. She dozed off to the sound of the shower and woke again when he climbed into the bed beside her. He smelled like her shampoo and soap. She smiled at the flowery scent and nuzzled her face against him drowsily. Instead of starting something interesting, he arranged her like a bed pillow, threw one arm across her waist and a leg over hers and settled with a deep sigh.

Mildly piqued, she waited ... and waited ... and fell asleep.

She was still irritated when she woke up—and confused. If he'd been out half the night screwing, though, why come back to her place to crash? Why not stay with his bed partner? Or head to his own place?

As annoyed as she was, though, she could see his face was drawn with exhaustion and guilt smote her. She was really going to feel like a total bitch if she found out he was just worn out from working!

And that was the only reasonable explanation, she realized after mulling over it a while. He had taken a shower, but it was ridiculous to think he'd done it to hide anything from her when all he'd had to do was not come to her place at all.

It took all she could do to resist the urge to smooth his unruly hair but as badly as she wanted to touch and not just look it would be awfully inconsiderate to wake him when she could see he was exhausted. Sighing, she got up and headed into the bathroom. She was halfway through her damned shower before it dawned on her that it was Saturday and she could've slept late!

Dismissing her annoyance after a moment with the reflection that there was no way she could've slept, or kept her hands to herself if she'd stayed in the bed, she left the bathroom and dressed as quietly as she could.

"Did you set the alarm?"

Shiloh halted abruptly on her way out. "No. Do you need it set?"

"What day is it?"

Poor baby! She *did* feel like a bitch! "Saturday."

"Yeah."

Saturday was usually her day for her chores, but Heath slept so lightly she decided to put them off until he left for work. Instead, after a little thought, she decided to cook him that meal she'd considered before. She could always say it was just returning the favor since he'd cooked for her. Heading into the kitchen, she fixed herself a cup of instant coffee and piece of toast, nibbling while she checked the fridge and her cabinets to make a list. If she was going shopping for something special to fix, she decided, she might as well take care of the chore while she was at it and lay in a week's worth.

When she'd finished, she wrote Heath a note, in case he woke up before the alarm, and left the house to him. It was unfortunate that she didn't have any idea what his favorite foods were, but he was a meat eater, a man, and a very muscular man. He needed protein to maintain all that muscle. A roast was out of the question—too much time to cook. He probably ate steaks regularly since they were quick and easy to cook. She decided on lamb chops—elegant—expensive as hell, but it wouldn't be too heavy for lunch, it should still satisfy his need for protein, and they wouldn't take long to cook.

She was in no particular hurry. She thought he would probably rest a lot better without her in the apartment, so she finished her shopping in a fairly leisurely manner and loaded up the car to head home, timing her arrival so that she'd have just enough time to prepare the meal before he had to leave.

The apartment was empty when she got back. Dismayed, disbelieving, she searched it. Sure enough, the bed was empty and the shower still dripping. "Damn it!" she exclaimed angrily, flopping down on the edge of the bed. He was like a phantom! Drifting in to arouse her from her dreams and then vanishing with the light!

Sighing, she went out to haul the damned groceries in and put them up. Spying the note she'd left him still on the counter, she picked it up, wadded it, and tossed it into the trash. It had no sooner landed than her brain assimilated the image she'd glimpsed when she'd snatched it off the counter. She dove for the trashcan and dug the note out again, smoothing it.

*I'm sorry as hell, baby. I got called in early. Don't lock me out. I'll make it up to you, I swear!*

Sighing again, wondering if all she was going to get anymore was hastily scribbled notes and somebody to take up most of the bed while she was trying to sleep, she tossed the note in the trash again and set about doing the chores she'd put off to let him sleep.

At least he didn't snore—not that she'd noticed, anyway. Kenneth snored like a grizzly bear. She'd gotten so used to tuning it out she thought that was probably why Heath hadn't woke her up when he'd broken her security chain—probably also why she hadn't noticed whether he snored or not.

The bathroom hamper, she discovered, was full of his dirty laundry. She stared at the pile of clothes irritably for several minutes and finally piled them in the basket with hers, reflecting that it wasn't going to take any longer to do his than it would to do her own when she had to go to the laundry-mat anyway.

She was thoroughly confused about the entire situation, though. Every time she left the house and came back, it seemed, she found a new item he'd left at her apartment. Was he just so busy rushing around he had no idea where he left things? Or was it his idea of moving in by stealth?

And, if he was moving in with her inch by inch, how did she feel about having Heath as a roommate? It didn't take long to figure that out—unhappy if it didn't include benefits—*very* unhappy if it meant he might be bringing dates home!

She was just going to have to get up on her hind legs and tell him that was completely unacceptable! She didn't mind helping him out if he needed it, but he was *not* going to install a revolving door on her damned apartment!

## Chapter Seven

Shiloh didn't even try to wait up for Heath that night. It was Saturday and she was sure he would be performing at the club until all hours. And didn't it just figure that the moment she gave up, he decided to come early?

She'd barely settled in the bed when she heard him at the front door. Sitting up, she listened intently for a moment until she heard the door open and then lay back down, debating whether to pretend she was asleep or not. She never actually decided. He made so much noise coming in she began to wonder if it was deliberate. Surely, even if she had gotten in the habit of tuning out loud noises to sleep, nobody could sleep through that?

He practically slammed the front door and she could distinctly hear the locks as he set them. Then he strode directly to the bedroom and dropped the heavy duffle bag he was carrying just inside the door.

He flicked a look at her. "Did I wake you?"

She stared back at him a moment, trying to decide if he seemed angry and that explained his entrance and finally shook her head.

His gaze moved over her face as if he was trying to decide the same thing—if she was angry. "I need a shower. I've still got oil all over me," he said. He didn't make any move to head that way, though.

"I got you some body-wash and shampoo while I was at the store this morning," Shiloh volunteered finally.

He seemed to relax fractionally. He even smiled faintly. "Thanks! The guys have been looking at me funny for the last couple of days and I keep forgetting to go by my place to pick mine up. I'll give you the money."

Shiloh shook her head but he'd already turned and headed into the bathroom. She lay staring into the darkness, listening to the shower and trying to decide what to make of what he'd said and the way he'd been acting. She really didn't think he was in the habit of making quite that much noise but he hadn't seemed angry—maybe tense? Maybe he hadn't been certain the little note he'd left was enough to smooth things over and had expected a confrontation?

So, either he knew her better than she thought he did or she was more typical of women in general than she'd thought she was—because she *had* been working herself up to a confrontation, she realized. The only reason she'd decided to go to bed instead of waiting up was because she'd been working just as hard to talk herself out of making waves.

She was disappointed. She was also confused and uncertain about the situation, wondering just where she fit in to his life, but she didn't want to do or say anything she might regret—especially when he had a perfectly legitimate reason for 'ignoring' her. He was working some outrageously long hours, though, and as much as she wanted to believe anything he told her, was that completely within the realms of possibility? She didn't know a thing about entertaining. She supposed he must have to work up that build, and maybe he had to rehearse, and she knew they went out into the audience afterwards to give lap dances for tips.

It still seemed like too many hours for that kind of job.

As for taking her for granted—well, he couldn't do that if she didn't let him—so if he did, that was as much her fault as his.

The problem was, even if she hadn't been struggling to be reasonable, or wanted to fight just to get her resentment off her chest, she didn't feel confident enough in his interest or detached enough about it to rock the boat. If she'd felt either, or better yet, both, she wouldn't have hesitated to let him know he couldn't just expect to pop in any time he pleased and find her waiting for him.

He was still damp when he came out of the bathroom and not wearing so much as a towel. Shiloh stared at him as he strode around the bed and climbed in. He'd left the bathroom light on and slightly ajar and the light spilling from the room bathed him in all his glory in light and shadows as he settled on his side, propping on one elbow.

"Are you pissed off at me?" he asked.

Shiloh thought it over and realized she'd been angry because she was disappointed, again. She didn't think it would've upset her nearly as much if she hadn't had her hopes raised and dashed quite that many times. She sighed. "Disappointed."

He studied her warily, but some of the tension eased from him. His lips twisted wryly. "Me, too, but it comes with the job."

Shiloh frowned. "They called you in early at the club?"

Something flickered in his eyes. "My other job. I work two."

Shiloh gaped at him, dismayed, smote by guilt that she'd thought awful things when he really was working hard! She shifted toward him impulsively and lifted a hand to caress his cheek. "No wonder you're so exhausted all the time!"

He lifted his free hand to cover hers and then clasped it, bringing it down to kiss her palm. "Not all the time. Some days are worse than others. I'm only working one tomorrow so I have a half day off. I thought I'd take you somewhere—make it up to you for neglecting you so much the last few days."

Conflicting emotions collided within her—pleasure that he wanted to take her out; excitement at the possibilities; uneasiness at the possibility that her ex or some of his buddies might see them together; and guilt at the idea of taking up his rest day. "You haven't neglected me." She'd felt neglected, though!

He looked down at her hand, which he was still holding, toying her fingers. "Not intentionally," he murmured, lifting her hand to his lips again and nibbling at her fingers.

Ignoring the butterflies that took flight in her belly the moment he began nibbling at her fingers, Shiloh studied his face worriedly, wondering why he had to work two jobs. She'd been convinced he must make really good money dancing. Either it wasn't as good as she'd thought or he had financial problems. She wanted to ask him, but it wasn't polite to pry. If he wanted to tell her, he would—and he probably wouldn't, she concluded. He'd always been guarded about his personal life. She doubted he'd changed.

He lifted his head, studying her face, and expelled a derisive breath. "Don't look so worried, baby. I'm not in trouble."

"I didn't think you were," she said a little testily, "not like you think I think."

His lips twitched. Settling the hand he'd been holding against his chest, he curled his hand along the side of her head and dragged her face close, tilting his head to match his lips to hers. "How do you know what I think you think?" he murmured teasingly, nipping at her lips with his own.



“Well, I think I know what you’re thinking, and if you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, then you’re wrong!” she whispered, smiling against his lips.

He lifted away for a moment to meet her gaze. “Baby, I always know what you’re thinking.”

“Really? What am I thinking now?”

He grinned abruptly. “You’re thinking I’m taking way too long to get to the good stuff.”

She chuckled. “Maybe I’m thinking I’m not really in the mood for the good stuff?”

He scanned her face. “I guess I’ll just have to test it with my dip stick,” he murmured, slipping his hand down the middle of her stomach and cupping her mound through her night clothes.

She fell back against her pillow grinning when he grabbed a handful of her nightgown and jerked it up to her waist. The smile faded as he slipped his hand beneath the waist of her panties and cupped her mound again. Holding her gaze, he slid a finger along her cleft and pressed it inside of her, sawing slowly in and out. He tsked. “Looks like we’re about a half quart low here.”

Shiloh uttered an amused snort. “I don’t get that damned wet!”

He grinned. “You do when I make a deposit.” Rolling over her abruptly, he lowered his head to nip at her lips again. “We’re going to have to be mighty careful. The pipes are so backed up, you’ll be lucky if I don’t blow your brains out.”

“Eew!”

He chuckled. “Just warning you, lady! I’m locked and loaded.”

“I guess we need to do something about that then.”

His eyes lit. He came up on his knees and dragged her upright. Grabbing her nightgown, he pulled it off over her head and then grabbed her panties, tipping her onto her back again as he ripped them off and tossed them. “I thought you’d never ask!”

She sucked in a gasp as he dove over her. He caught himself with his palms on either side of her and then dropped to his elbows, pressing his chest against hers. Matching his mouth to hers, he thrust his tongue between her lips and raked it boldly, possessively along hers. It brought her to stark awareness of every point where their bodies met. She could feel the roughness of the hair on the thigh he’d wedged between hers as he dragged it upward, pushing her legs wider, the heaviness of his erection pressed against her belly. The light sprinkling of hair along his belly and chest made her skin tingle and her nipples stand erect as he rubbed restlessly against her. The muscles in his arms flexed and stretched against hers with his movements, his fingers tightening along her shoulders.

Trapped by the weight of his chest and the band of his arms on either side of her, she could only lift her hands high enough to grasp his waist to pull him closer but the moment she did, he pressed his pelvis more tightly against her, moving against her rhythmically for a moment before he broke from her lips and leaned away.

She opened her eyes slowly when he did and discovered he’d shifted his weight to one arm and was studying her breasts. Self-consciousness pierced the bubble of warmth that had risen in response to his kiss. Even as she lifted one arm to cover herself, though, he caught her wrist. Meeting her gaze with a commanding look, he held it for a moment and then pushed her arm down and cupped the closest breast lightly, gently squeezing it and then releasing it to stroke it with his fingers. He cupped it again, catching the erect tip between his fingers, squeezing lightly and then lifted his hand to catch her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it.

Tingling sensation trickled through her, joined the heat in her belly and made her womb contract. Releasing that nipple, he stroked her other breast, caressed it briefly and slid his hand down between her breasts, pausing for a moment with his palm above her heart before he lightly stroked her ribs and then her belly. His eyes narrowed as he smoothed his hand over the small patch of hair at the apex of her thighs and parted the lips of her sex with one finger. He paused, as if wrestling with what he wanted to do and swallowed audibly. "You are more beautiful than I imagined," he murmured huskily, turning his head to meet her gaze and then surging over her. "I didn't think it was possible."

She might've doubted his sincerity if his kiss hadn't robbed her of thought with the sheer ferocity of it, if she hadn't felt feverish need in the way his hands shook as he explored her, hadn't felt tremors rippling through his massive muscles as he surged against her and lifted slightly only to surge against her again. His kiss gave swift rise to euphoric intoxication, however, and the restless movements of his body along hers stirred hectic sensations within her, spawned need and then a sense of desperation.

She clutched at him, digging her fingers into his flesh in a mindless effort to pull him closer. He curled his hips in response, pressing his swollen cock almost painfully against her. She didn't object. Eager to feel the pressure where she needed it, she struggled with his weight, trying to realign her body to his.

He dragged the thigh he'd thrust between hers higher, pushing her thighs wider and then lifted the leg lying beside hers and used his foot to push her legs wider still so that he could nestle his narrow hips between her thighs. The move repositioned his cock, moving it out of her reach just as she thought to reach for it and aligning it with her cleft where she'd meant to guide it. When he curled against her that time, the pressure exerted against her nether lips sent shards of pleasure through her.

She was gasping so desperately for air after a few moments that her mind reeled with encroaching darkness. All she could think was that she was going to come any second if he didn't stop teasing her. "Heath! I'm going to come!" she gasped a little desperately.

"Jesus, baby!" he muttered hoarsely, reaching between them hastily to guide his cock along her cleft.

She dug her fingernails into him as the head of his cock nudged her clit, sending an electrifying jolt through her sex. She thought for a moment that she'd started to come, but the frantic palpitation of her muscles, she discovered, was a demand for something of substance to hang on to. The moment he pushed inside of her, they locked down on his cock and froze, making her belly cramp almost painfully.

Realizing he wasn't making a lot of headway, Heath paused in his efforts to dig a trough in the mattress with his toes, expelling a pained breath. "Relax, baby," he growled from between clenched teeth.

Shiloh opened her eyes and widened them at him in disbelief. Relax?

"Never mind," he muttered, locking one arm around her shoulders and the other around her hips and trying to stuff her down over his cock as he thrust again. Thankfully, it sent a thrill through her to feel him inching toward the spot where she needed stimulation. Her muscles unclenched long enough to get a better hold and tried to drag him in with a series of palpitations. Heath, aided by a great deal of moisture and teeth gritted determination, abruptly slid home hard enough and deep enough to slam into her womb. She nearly blacked out as pain exploded in her belly, but she'd sounded the battle cry. "I'm coming!" Heath had the bit between his teeth by that time and was racing for the finish line.

Sucking in a gulp of air as the waves of pain mellowed, yielding to sharply climbing waves of pleasure, Shiloh squeezed her eyes closed and strained to grab the gold cup before he could get to it. As close as she was, he still nearly left her in the dust. Fortunately, the sharp jerk of his cock, the flow of hot semen inside her, and the thrill both sent fluttering through her, pitched her over the top. The first convulsion was so hard her body arched into a bow, forcing a sound from her throat that most nearly resembled fingernails on a chalk board. A shudder travelled all the way through Heath and then her muscles clamped around his cock as it jerked again, forcing a strangled grunt from him. "Jesus! God, baby! Oh Jesus, baby!" he muttered in a choked, agonized litany, sounding as if he was on the verge of passing out.

Shiloh sucked in a breath and sang hallelujah in soprano as another convulsion hit her, threatening to shake her apart, strumming her nails along his back mindlessly every time she hit another high note.

Heath let out a hiss of breath and bowed backwards, grinding his pelvis against the lips her sex in an apparent effort to shove the head of his cock into the mouth her womb lest any tadpoles go astray, jerking as his body ejected the last of his seed.

Shiloh's entire body felt like so much dead weight the moment she stopped convulsing. Her arms and knees hit the bed limply and everything in between seemed to melt and form a spreading puddle as her nerve endings continued to spark and sizzle like short circuited wiring. Heath collapsed heavily on top of her, blowing gusty breaths of hot hair against her neck that made her skin pebble all over and a shudder run through her. Their skin seemed to meld together as if they'd been rubbed down with super glue.

Shiloh, panting for breath and struggling against gathering darkness, began to feel like a pancake beneath him as he settled, pressing her deeper and deeper into the mattress. "Heath?" she managed to grunt finally.

"What baby?" he asked drunkenly.

"You're crushing me."

He jerked reflexively and then managed to heave upward high enough to shove his hand between them, plant a palm in the middle of her left boob, and pry himself loose. Alarm flickered through Shiloh briefly as she felt her breast flatten and the ribs beneath it yield, but she was too near death to feel any pain and too focused on expanding her lungs as soon as Heath removed his weight to think about complaining. Thankfully, he managed to shift enough of his weight to one side for gravity to take over. He hit the bed and sprawled out limply, nearly clobbering her with an arm that felt like a falling tree as it glanced off her forehead.

Shiloh was surfing toward Neverland when Heath apparently regained enough consciousness to entertain a few doubts. "You ok, baby?"

The question, coming to her from beneath fathoms of sleep, was completely incomprehensible beyond the questioning tone. "Wha ...?"

He patted her belly with a hand that felt like a lead pie plate. "Good."

"Ok," she muttered, struggling onto her side.

It stirred him up again. He rolled toward her, dropped grappling hooks around her in the form of an arm and leg like cast iron tree trunks, dragged her beneath him, and began to breathe heavily in her ear. She considered stuffing something in his mouth, but decided he might suffocate. Instead, she managed to wiggle far enough up the bed to get her head on a pillow. Bliss followed for about two seconds and then he shifted upward and burrowed his head next to hers. Fortunately, he discovered burying his nose in her hair wasn't particularly comfortable. When he'd fought free of the clinging strands, he turned his face just far enough to rest his cheek

on the back her head and expel his breaths past her ear instead into it. Happy at last, Shiloh dove toward oblivion.

She woke to bright sunlight spilling through chinks in the curtains and a sense of profound well-being. A little surprised at the happiness that began to percolate through her as soon as she rose toward consciousness, she searched a little vaguely for the source and discovered that it was attached to the hard rod wedged between the cheeks of her ass and the stickiness that had dried overnight and glued her upper thighs together. Grimacing at that not-so-delightful reminder of the night before, she wiggled away from the wedge and lifted one thigh to peel it from the other.

Uttering a deep sigh, Heath rolled away from her. Hearing a grunt of pain, she glanced toward him just as he lifted his hips to adjust his cock. “Wha timesit?” he asked in a morning growl.

The clock was on his side of the bed! Sighing a little irritably, Shiloh rolled over to look at the clock and froze, staring at his back in horror. There were three or four long scratches on his back that looked like a close encounter with a wild cat—well, three welts and one scratch. Unfortunately, the moment she saw them, Shiloh instantly remembered stroking his back a little frantically in the throes of her climax the night before. She didn’t remember scratching him, though!

At the thought, she lifted her hands and examined her nails, discovering to her dismay that she had several chipped nails from her chores the day before.

A rustle drew her attention and she discovered Heath had twisted his head to look at her. She dropped her hands guiltily and stared back at him.

He frowned, his gaze flickering over her face curiously. “What time is it?”

Shiloh flicked a look at the clock. “Uh ... ten something.”

Groaning, he burrowed his face back into the pillow. Shiloh scooted off the bed and headed for the bathroom. She’d already used the toilet and brushed her teeth and was about to step into the shower when she heard Heath try the door.

“I’m feeling a little desperate here,” he called through the door.

Mildly annoyed that he hadn’t mentioned that before she’d claimed the bathroom, she turned from the shower and unlocked the door. He caught before she could escape and waltzed her back against the wall next to the shower. “Mornin’, baby,” he murmured huskily.

“I thought you needed to go?” she retorted, smiling in spite of her annoyance.

“Mornin’ darlin’,” he responded in an attempt at a falsetto.

She reached down and cupped his balls. He flinched. “Nope. Still there.”

He gave her a look and released her, turning away. “Fine, Miss Sunshine. I’ll just take a piss and be on my way.”

Shiloh hesitated at the door and made an about face, sidling up behind him and stroking a hand over his ass. “Mornin’ darlin’,” she sang sweetly and turned and headed for the shower. “Don’t flush!”

She’d just stepped beneath the spray when she heard the toilet handle jiggled. “Heath! I swear to god ...!”

He snatched the shower curtain back and climbed in with her. “Need some help, lady?”

“No, I don’t,” she said testily. “I can manage by myself, thank you!”

“I’ll let you bathe me.”

She flicked a grin at him, eyeing him with speculative interest. “You’re so generous,” she murmured moving out of the way so he could get under the spray while she lathered her bath

scrungy. When she looked at him again, he had his head under the showerhead and his back to her. She winced at the marks on his back. Those were going to sting when she soaped his back.

He flicked a glance at her over his shoulder after a moment. Shrugging inwardly with the reflection that he was bound to find out anyway when he washed his hair, she moved closer and very carefully scrubbed his back. He sucked in a hissing breath when she rubbed the scrub over the worst one and she winced again.

“Is there a scratch or something on my back? That stings.”

“Uh ... maybe a teensy, tiny one—or two.”

He twisted his head, trying to look at his back, and finally met her gaze. She tried to look innocent. His lips twitched. “No wonder I passed out afterwards—blood loss.”

“It isn’t that bad!” she said a little testily, then batted her eyelashes at him hopefully and added, “I’ll kiss it and make it better.”

A gleam entered his eyes. Encircling her with his arms, he dragged her closer. “Do I get to pick which ‘it’ you kiss?”

Heat wafted through her at the look in his eyes, the huskiness in his voice, and images that instantly rose in her mind. She swallowed with an effort against the sudden dryness in her mouth. “Yes.”

His expression tautened. Releasing her, he took the bath scrub and began bathing her, paying special attention to her dirty old breasts. Her nipples were throbbing almost painfully by the time he decided he’d teased them long enough with the rough pad, made a half hearted stab at washing her middle and focused on thoroughly scrubbing every crevice between her thighs. Her kegel were clapping in frantic demand by the time he crouched down to scrub her legs and feet.

She nearly slipped down when she planted her soapy foot and lifted the other. He steadied her, flicking water on her feet to rinse them and straightened. Catching her shoulders, he rotated her, gathered her hair and flicked it over one shoulder and scrubbed her back. Naturally her cleft and buttocks got all the attention there.

Drawing her back against his length when he’d finished, he placed the bath scrub in her hand and pushed his cock between her legs, stroking it back and forth against her nether lips while he massaged her breasts, tweaking her nipples with his fingers.

“My turn,” he murmured huskily.

## Chapter Eight

Shiloh's belly was already doing a shimmy when she pulled away and turned. It was sheer pleasure to run her hands over his beautifully sculpted chest and belly and arms. She used both hands, swapping the bath scrub from one to the other. Ignoring the dick standing at attention, she knelt down and washed his feet and legs next, starting at his feet and working upwards. Straightening when she got to the tops of his thighs, she reached around him and washed his buttocks and cleft and then pulled away to focus on his joy stick, watching his face while she stroked it and reached beneath it to gently massage his testicles.

Heath watched her from beneath his lashes. "You keep playing with that, baby, and it's gonna go off," he drawled lazily.

Her lips curled with a smile of satisfaction. "I've got to make sure it's clean."

"Maybe you could wash it a little faster?"

Confusion flickered through her until she caught his meaning. She chuckled. "It might spit at me and then I wouldn't get to kiss it to make your back better."

He grinned at her and pulled away, turning to rinse off. "I don't know if I want you kissing it or not. You got sharp claws, lady. Maybe you got sharp teeth, too."

She moved up behind him, reaching around him to help him rinse the soap off and nibbling kisses over his back. A shudder went through him when she lathed the welts on his back with her tongue. "Guess I'll have to just settle for kissing these then," she murmured teasingly.

He twisted his head to look back at her, but he didn't comment. Moving away from her he stepped out of the shower. As soon as he did, she moved under the spray to rinse off.

He jiggled the toilet handle again.

"Heath!"

Laughing, he moved to the lavatory and turned on the water instead to brush his teeth. The water in the shower went from warm to hot in two seconds flat. Leaping back, Shiloh hastily turned the water off. "You ass!" she said without heat as she climbed out and grabbed a towel.

He choked in the middle of his gargle.

"Serves you right!" she snapped, flushing the toilet and heading out.

He caught up to her before she managed to pass the bed, snatching her up and diving sideways onto the mattress. The bed creaked ominously as they landed. They both stilled, waiting to see if it would collapse.

"Wobbly bed," Heath commented after a moment, shifting around and stuffing one of her pillows beneath his head.

Shiloh sent him a look. "It isn't used to having a two hundred pound man leaping on it," she said dryly.

He caught his dick in one hand and pointed it at her. "Now ... we were discussing penance. On your knees woman."

Shiloh studied him with a half smile for a moment. "I thought we were talking about kisses?"

"I'm maimed and weak with blood loss. I need resuscitation."

She crawled toward him. "You aren't worried about the teeth?"

He cupped his dick protectively against his belly, his eyes gleaming with suppressed laughter. "Ok, change of plan."

Shiloh halted on all fours, one hand planted on either side of his hips. She curled her lips inward over her teeth. "Look, no teeth."

He studied her a long moment and held it out to her. Smiling, Shiloh settled on one hip, braced herself with one arm and curled her fingers around his shaft. "Ok. Now ... how do I perform the resuscitation?"

"Put it in your mouth and suck."

She lifted her brows. "You sure I'm not supposed to blow? I've always heard it called blowing."

"Suck."

Shrugging, she settled closer and covered the head with her mouth, sucking it and running her tongue across the slit in the tip and around the rim of the head. "Feeling any better?" she murmured when she released it.

"A little more," he responded a little hoarsely. "You could stroke it with your hands, too."

She curled her hand firmly around it and stroked it from root to tip and then reversed the motion several times. "Like that?"

"Yeah ... just like that," he said tightly.

Shifting to a more comfortable position, she abandoned the tease and focused on pleasuring him with her mouth and her hands. The warmth he'd generated inside her in the shower built as she felt his rise. He speared his fingers in her damp hair after a few moments, adjusting her rhythm, and then released her, expelling a harsh breath. He shifted a little jerkily a moment later and then stilled for a space of heartbeats, then his hips lifted in counter to her strokes. Releasing a pent up breath, he curled his fingers into the bedclothes.

His restless, jerky movements sent heat spiraling through her, a sense of excitement. She sucked on him more enthusiastically as the urge rose inside her to bring him off with her hands and mouth. She knew the very moment he reached the limit of his endurance. He clamped his hands beneath her arms and hauled her upward. "Wait!" she gasped in dismay.

He ignored the demand. Dragging her onto her knees and aligning himself with her body, he shifted his hands to her hips and pressed her downward as he curled his hips and thrust upward. For once, he met little resistance. She was so wet her moisture flowed over his hard flesh as soon as he impaled her with it. With no more than a couple of jabbing forays, he'd buried himself to the hilt inside of her.

Shiloh stared down at his face dizzily, too stunned to find herself in control to think what to do for several moments. He sat up, curling his arms around her and dragging her close enough to cover a breast with his mouth. She rotated her hips experimentally as she felt heat pouring through her from his mouth on her breast and the responding flutter of reaction in her sex. The movement stirred harder currents of pleasure. When he finally fell back against the pillows, she leaned over him, struggling to find the movement that gave her the most pleasure. Finding it at last, she began to move more rhythmically, striving to reach her climax. She'd already begun to feel the first warning flutters when he pulled her down and captured one nipple with his mouth. The moment he curled his tongue around it and sucked, fireworks exploded inside her. She gasped, tensed, and then rode her climax until her body stopped quaking.

He dragged his legs up as she went limp on top of him, planting the soles of his feet against the mattress. Clamping an arm tightly around her hips and one around her upper back, he lunged upward, landed on his knees and then tipped her over onto her back, landing above her. The feat of strength stunned her. The moment he changed positions with her, however, he positioned himself for better leverage and set a feverish pace that lit a fresh conflagration inside her. She climaxed again just as he began to shudder with his own orgasm.

It wasn't until she was drifting in the euphoric aftermath that she remembered he'd stopped her before she could make him come with her mouth. "Why didn't you let me finish the BJ?"

Heath tensed, pushing himself away from her to study her face while he tried to gather his wits. The woman knew her strategy! By rights her mental processes should've been as sluggish as his was after what they'd just finished doing, damn it to hell! Unfortunately, he couldn't seem to coax any sort of mental calisthenics to life. The only thing that was really clear to him at the moment was that it was a loaded question he needed to avoid until he'd thought of an answer she would accept, because he was pretty damned sure she wasn't going to be especially delighted with the truth!

He'd given her fair warning, though, damn it! Granted, he'd *counted* on her dismissing it, just like she clearly had, but the fact remained that he'd covered his ass when the shit went down! She couldn't accuse him of being underhanded ... or careless.

Well, he supposed she could. She was a woman, after all. They didn't worry too much about being reasonable when they were thoroughly pissed off.

It sure as hell hadn't been any part of the plan to give her a chance to confront him about it, though—the number one reason being that he didn't want to give her a chance to run him off before *he'd* had the chance entrench himself! Number two being a serious confrontation too early in the game might lead to failure or retreat or worse and he wasn't about to let that happen.

He finally decided to simply pitch the ball back into her court when nothing came to mind. "Did you want to?"

"If I hadn't I wouldn't have done it."

Fuck! He hadn't expected her to volley it right back. He looked away from her, scanning the room until he located the clock. "Shit! I've gotta go." Capturing her face with his hand, he kissed her lingeringly. "Be thinking about where you want to go while I'm gone. I'll be back ... I *should* be back around nine."

Shiloh pushed herself upright. "You haven't even eaten!" she exclaimed in dismay.

He sent her a smoldering look. "Maybe later?"

She watched him as he strode across the room to the bag he'd dropped by the door the night before, crouched down and unzipped it, rifling through the contents.

"I meant food," she said a little testily.

"I'll grab something on the way," he said absently. "Did I leave a pair of jeans here?"

Shiloh sighed. "I washed them. They're in the bottom, middle drawer of the dresser.

Heath threw her a speculative look as he straightened with a knit shirt and a pair of knit boxers, trying to digest that, wondering if he could place any significance in it or not. He couldn't tell anything about her expression, though. She might've done it for no other reason than the fact that he'd left them—and be annoyed at being put to the trouble. Pulling his shirt and shorts on, he moved to the dresser and pulled the drawer out, dug through the other clothes she'd cleaned for him and unearthed the jeans he was looking for. "You washed them," he commented neutrally, struggling with the pleasure it gave him that she'd washed them, carefully folded them,



and put them away. She was neat. Don't be stupid, Heath! Flicking them to unfold them, he focused on stepping into them and adjusting them.

Shiloh frowned. "I didn't mess them up."

He flicked another glance at her when he'd fastened the waist and zipped them, frowning as a vague memory surfaced. "I thought I broke the zipper."

"You did. I put another in."

He studied her curiously a moment and strode toward her. Capturing her face between his palms, he kissed her soundly on the mouth. "You're an angel. Thanks!" he said, smiling.

She smiled back at him tentatively, feeling curiously relieved. He left her. Grabbing a pair of sneakers out of the bag and shoving his feet into them, he glanced at the clock again. "Shit! I really do need to get a move on. Pick a nice restaurant, baby. I'll see you in a bit."

She heard him pause in the living room and the jingle of coins. He'd collected his wallet, change, and watch by time she reached the door to the living room and was heading out the front door. Frowning as it slammed behind him, feeling oddly ambiguous, she stared at the door for a few moments and finally looked down at the semen snaking down her thigh. Uttering an irritated huff, she headed into the bathroom to clean up.

She didn't know what to think of the man! He'd acted so ... *strange* when he found out she'd washed his clothes and repaired his jeans. He'd seemed both pleased and sincerely grateful when he'd thanked her, but she wasn't altogether certain he had been. She'd almost felt like she'd ... encroached. If he hadn't expected, or at least hoped, she would wash his clothes, though, why leave them in her hamper?

And why had he evaded her question if it came to that? He'd deliberately avoided answering, tried to distract her—succeeded, for that matter. She would've thought he'd *want* a BJ. It had always pissed Kenneth off royally if she stopped short of bringing him off and he sure as hell didn't mind asking for one! In fact, he'd pestered her constantly until she'd reached the point where she hated giving him blow jobs.

Maybe Kenneth was just kinky like that?

She considered it while she dressed and finally dismissed it.

Heath had wanted it and he'd thoroughly enjoyed it. The only reason she could think of that he might not want her to finish was because he'd been worried he wouldn't be able to satisfy her afterward. That pleased her until she'd gone over it in her head again. He'd stopped her the first time, too, she remembered abruptly, and she was almost certain he'd reached the point where the only thing that mattered in that moment was finding release. He'd been so frantic to get inside her that time that he'd almost left her behind. That seemed to eliminate anxiety about her getting her cookie.

Ok, so he wasn't *that* selfless! She was sure he was smart enough to know that a woman was a lot more likely to put out if a man pleased her, but there were still a lot of them that didn't worry about that—because they didn't actually have to. A man like Heath could change women as often as he changed his socks, which meant he didn't actually have to worry about getting a good report card.

She gave up on trying to figure that one out when she reached the kitchen, focusing for a little while on whether she wanted breakfast or lunch. It was too late for one and too early for the other, but she finally decided to have breakfast anyway.

Was it the domesticity thing that had unnerved him when he'd discovered she'd done his laundry, she wondered while she ate her eggs? She decided he *had* seemed almost unnerved about it, but why? He slept in her bed every night and had since he'd followed her home from

school! And the operative word was 'slept'. *Not* that she had anything to complain about! When he was hot, he was really hot! But wasn't *sleeping* with a ... fuck buddy a no-no for single men who were phobic about relationships? Weren't they afraid it might give a woman ideas?

Not that she knew that Heath was phobic. He was still young. He might just not be ready to settle down. As far as that went, she hadn't seen him in years. He could've married and divorced in that time.

He hadn't mentioned it, but it wasn't as if they'd had a lot of time to talk even if he'd been willing to share—and he'd never been the kind of person who wanted to 'unload'.

It occurred to her to wonder if he was just so unaccustomed to anybody doing anything for him that maybe that was why he'd behaved so oddly. She knew he'd pretty much had to fend for himself throughout his childhood, but surely in the years since he'd had to beat women off? And she wasn't buying the possibility that *none* of them had tried to hogtie him!

Realizing finally that she wasn't any closer to understanding—which really annoyed her when she'd felt like she understood him as well or better than anyone else!—she gave up and focused on setting the apartment to rights. It didn't take long when she'd done most everything the day before. Facing a long day of nothing to do, she decided to head to her sister's house for company.

She should've had Kenny for company. He was supposed to spend two weekends a month with her—which was damned little to ask considering he was with his father all the time!—but he'd called the week before, told her he had plans and would she mind if he came the next weekend.

What could she say? Hell no! Get your ass over here and have fun, god damn it!

It wouldn't have been so bad if it was just once in a while, but it was a different story every time her weekend rolled around. Insisting that he come because she'd missed him and do something with his friends the next weekend didn't work. He just locked himself in his room and sulked all weekend and gave her the evil eye when she called him to eat.

Where had the little boy gone who'd used to love her, she wondered sadly? What did he think she'd done that he wouldn't even give her a chance?

Or was it not that all? Was it just that he was growing up and didn't have time for her anymore?

She didn't believe it was just that—maybe part of it—but not all of it. Even if he was twelve going on grown now, he shouldn't be so hostile about spending a little time with her.

She shook it off after a few minutes. Dwelling on it didn't help. Until and unless he decided to drop his guard and let her in, she was the enemy.

As preoccupied as she was, she still noticed the man sitting in the car across the street. He had a newspaper in his hand, but he stared at her all the way down the stairs to ground level. Uneasiness flickered through her, but when she turned to look at him, trying to decide if he looked familiar, he returned his attention to the newspaper he was holding.

He was either waiting for somebody or he was looking for an apartment, she told herself. He'd probably only noticed her and was bored and that explained his interest.

It sounded reasonable. It seemed a lot more reasonable to think that than to think he was somebody Kenneth had watching her. The marriage was over and both the custody and the disposition of all assets were settled. Kenny had long since established that he wasn't going to cooperate with court ordered visitation and proven time and again that it was a battle of wills she couldn't win. There was no reason, at all, for Kenneth to have her watched.

Except that whatever Kenneth owned *remained* his until he was damned good and ready to toss it out. Even that didn't make sense to her, though. Granted, she'd been the one who wanted the divorce, but it had been because she'd found out about the affair. He'd already picked out wife number two before the divorce and he'd annihilated her in court. What the hell else could the bastard possibly want?

\* \* \* \*

Shiloh was sorry she'd decided to go to her sister's house. Marcy was like a damned bloodhound once she got a scent in her nose and there was no shaking her loose!

"So ... you heard anything from Diablo since the party?" she asked oh so casually once they'd settled on the lounges by her pool.

Shiloh felt a wave of cold wash over her. "Who?"

"Oh! Don't even try that little sister! You were practically drooling all over yourself *before* he offered to give you a private dance!"

Shiloh felt her face heat. "Really, Marcy! I wasn't that damned bad ...and I'd like to know how you would've even noticed! Like everybody wasn't salivating to get hold of him!"

"Oh, they were. I'll give you that, and I'll admit he had my little heart pounding with excitement, too—but you're the one he invited to the back. What *were* the two of you doing all that time, I wonder?"

The blood surged a little hotter in her Shiloh's cheeks. She cleared her throat. "Dancing," she said a little hoarsely. A sudden thought popped into her mind that brought an awful sense of dread with it. "Marcy ... you didn't have anything to do with him offering me a private lap dance, did you?"

Marcy looked uncomfortable. "You needed cheering up."

Shiloh turned to stare at her sister accusingly. "You ... *arranged* it?"

Marcy shrugged and then frowned. "Well, I did suggest when I hired him that I'd give him a bonus if he'd ...." She shrugged. "I didn't see any harm in it. He turned me down flat, though. If you want the truth he was a little nasty about it! He said he didn't do that, that soliciting was against the law, regardless of the gender. I figured he probably thought I was an undercover cop or something so I didn't say anything else. But I *did* throw it out there. I'll admit that much. I figured you needed to get laid. My god it's been almost a year!"

Shiloh didn't know if she believed that or not—now. She felt like squalling. She didn't think she'd ever felt more betrayed—both by Marcy *and* Heath—or more like a complete fool! Why had she been stupid enough, or gullible enough, to think Heath could possibly have any interest in her at all?

Well, she hadn't believed it—not in the beginning. She'd *begun* to think it might actually be a possibility because he kept coming back and he *seemed* so ... passionate when he was with her she'd begun to feel ... special. What if that was just him, though? What if he was like that with *any* woman he felt like fucking?

"I was really surprised when he did it after all," Marcy continued thoughtfully. "Especially when he had no way of knowing you were the birthday girl that I could see."

"You didn't point me out to him?" Shiloh asked a little hopefully.

"Well ... I *did* try. I was signaling him like crazy, but he was already completely focused on you. I don't think he saw me."

Shiloh's heart sank. "He might have, though."

"Maybe," Marcy agreed a little doubtfully and then brightened. "He might have discovered it when I let him in the back. I bet that was it!"

Gee, thanks Marcy, Shiloh thought unhappily! She finally shut up, though—thank god! Shiloh closed her eyes, pretending to enjoy the sun while she struggled for composure. She'd just begun to formulate a lie to cover a swift retreat when Marcy thought of something else to wreck her peace.

"I never did tell you he called."

Shiloh didn't bother to pretend she didn't know who 'he' was. "Really?"

Marcy sighed. "Well, really Shiloh! He's an exotic dancer! Cute—sexy as hell—but trashy, as badly as I hate to say it. He could tell I have money. He probably thought you'd be a good meal ticket. Naturally, I wouldn't give him your number. I wouldn't have even if you hadn't forbidden me to give to anybody. I just wanted you to have a little fun for a change. I wasn't trying to make you a mark for a con man!"

Shiloh sat up, furious and making no attempt to hide it. "I would've expected better from you, Marcy! He isn't trash and he isn't a con man! That is so unbelievably bigoted I'm ashamed you're my sister!"

Marcy gaped at her for several moments while all that sank in and then her own anger kicked in. "*Bigoted*? Honest to god, Shiloh! You're a grown woman! You're old enough to know better than to be ... sucked in by a pretty face and a hot body! I thought you were anyway! It may be an ugly fact of life, but it isn't *bigoted* to assume somebody with his background is bad news! It's self-preservation! He might not be a bad person, but you know damned well the odds are against him!"

"The odds were *always* against him!" Shiloh said angrily. "But he wasn't a bad kid in spite of all the shit he had to deal with and he damned well isn't a bad man! There's nothing wrong with what he does for a living! Nothing! That doesn't make him a ... whore! Or trash!"

"I never said he was a whore—not that eight out of ten men aren't!—you're the one that said that."

"You didn't have to! You suggested it when you made the nasty remark about him being an exotic dancer!"

"You've been seeing him, haven't you? He tracked you down and you fell for whatever hard luck story he thought up to con you with, didn't you?" She studied Shiloh's set face for a long moment. "Shyly—you've got a heart of gold and I've always loved you for it, but ... it blinds you to people's faults and makes you a perfect target for anybody with a sob story! Didn't you learn anything from Kenneth?"

"Yes, I did," Shiloh said tightly. "I learned how to tell the difference between a real man and a monster!"

"Well, you obviously didn't!" Marcy snapped angrily. "The pretty ones are the worst of all!"

"That's just as bigoted as calling him trash for being a dancer!" Shiloh said indignantly. "I'm going home. I'm not having this conversation anymore! You're making wild assumptions and you don't even know him! You might at least give him the benefit of a doubt!"

"I would if he hadn't targeted you!"

"He didn't target me!" Shiloh yelled back at her, feeling the first flicker of uneasiness since they'd begun arguing. "I *know* Heath Sinclair! I've known him for years. He's nothing like you think!"

Marcy stared at her wide eyed. "*Oh my god!* Shyly, *tell* me he isn't a former student! You wouldn't do anything that unforgivably stupid!"

Shiloh felt her face heat guiltily. “He *was* a student—a long time ago, but he’s damned near thirty! What difference does that make?”

“The difference is it could be twisted into a noose for you, damn it! You think it won’t cause a bigger stink than a rupture of a sewer line if anybody was to find out he’d been a student? They’d say you’d been molesting your students since you started! It could turn into a witch hunt—and any kid that feels like he has a grudge could lie and say you’d molested him, too!”

“I didn’t molest Heath!” Shiloh said angrily.

“Prove it!” Marcy snarled at her.

Shiloh blinked at her. “How the hell could I prove it?”

“Exactly! You can’t! And they don’t have to try you and convict you in a court of law! They can do that in the newspapers! If you’re involved with him, you need to break it off before it gets out, Shiloh. I’m serious! There won’t be enough money in the world to get your life back once you’ve been tarred and feathered by public opinion!”

## Chapter Nine

Shiloh didn't think she'd ever been closer to a nervous breakdown in her life than she was when she finally got home! As hard as she tried to dismiss Marcy's warnings, she couldn't. She knew it was true. The threat was real.

She *might* be able to avoid disaster, but she sure as hell couldn't count on it!

People always seemed to want to think the worst, anyway, and she'd left herself wide open for all sorts of accusations.

They could even twist her decision to stop teaching into something sordid. It was only a coincidence that she'd finally given in to Kenneth's demands and resigned just before Heath graduated, but even she could see how that could be interpreted as fleeing the scene of the crime!

She didn't think it would've been quite so bad if she'd at least been able to dismiss the nagging fear that Marcy was right about Heath, too—not that she could, or would, believe he was a con man! The problem was, she was almost a hundred percent certain that he was only serious about screwing her brains out at every opportunity—until he was tired of her and ready to move on to greener pastures.

Even if he *had* been a ... gold digger, as Marcy suggested, he would've realized the moment he saw her apartment that she was as close to broke as made very little difference! She didn't believe he was. *That* had certainly never crossed her mind! She supposed it *should* have given the fact that she was years older than him, but he hadn't even tried to bum money off of her—not once! He'd been scrupulously careful to pay her back for everything she'd spent on him or that he'd helped himself to.

She'd figured it was just the sex. She *still* thought that. Sure she was older and he could've gotten pretty much any woman he wanted, but she wasn't *that* old! She might not be a great beauty, either, but she had a decent figure and she certainly wasn't ugly. She also didn't think she would've tempted a lot of men his age, if it came to that, but she'd figured it was a fantasy thing for him. It wasn't as if impressionable young men didn't notice their young teachers! They hit high school ripe to fuck anything in sight that they could chase down and plenty of them wanted nothing more than to get their hands on a *woman*.

In all honesty, she suspected she'd been caught up in a similar fantasy. She knew absolutely that if she'd never lain eyes on Heath before the night of her party, she would've felt much the same as she did now. There was just something about him and always had been that was magnetic to her.

She *had* known him before, though, and forbidden fruit or not he'd been just as magnetic to the young Shiloh as he was now to her older self. She hadn't been able *not* to wonder if he could possibly be as good as he looked like he was. She'd even had a couple of seriously hot dreams featuring Heath in the starring role.

So she'd been putty in his hands when the opportunity presented itself—because she *had* always wanted to know. And of course now she did and she realized she'd totally underestimated him.

So she wasn't just putty in his hands, she was hopeless—a lost cause!

Even now, as frightened as she was at the future Marcy had drawn for her, as many doubts as she'd planted about Heath, all she could think about was figuring out some way to keep from having to give him up. She didn't think she could ask him to leave even to save

herself. All she could think about was that life wasn't really going to be worth living if she had to do that.

She'd been unhappy *before* Heath and she knew without any doubt that when he left it was going to be ten times worse.

She thought he was probably going to leave soon enough anyway. Couldn't she just enjoy it a little while? Wasn't there some way to protect her future and still have Heath as long it lasted? Couldn't she have her cake and eat it, too?

The thought finally gave her some focus. She'd worry about the other things later—when she had to.

Fortunately, she'd still had enough sense before they'd gotten involved to consider the consequences and Heath had agreed to see her secretly. That didn't mean Kenneth couldn't find out if she wasn't paranoid and he really was having her watched, but it at least lowered the risk.

So all she really had to do was hide, right? She honestly couldn't picture Heath making a stink and telling anyone. He hated anyone prying into his private life. He wasn't going to announce it to anybody that he was fucking his ex-teacher! And she sure as hell couldn't picture him telling anyone she'd molested him! If she had, he would've gone to his grave to keep anyone from knowing.

So that left her and Marcy and possibly Kenneth.

Kenneth would've cut her throat and thrown her off a bridge if he'd thought he could get away with it. If he got his hands on the story, she was cooked. Otherwise, she sure as hell wasn't going to tell and Marcy wouldn't and Heath wouldn't.

So hiding seemed the best bet.

Of course, she'd no sooner realized that than she remembered Heath had told her he was taking her out and she should pick a nice restaurant. She didn't know what his idea of 'nice' was, but she didn't think it was likely to be any of the super expensive places Kenneth frequented.

It still seemed like a really bad idea to be seen in public with him. She might not run into Kenneth, but she couldn't be sure she wouldn't run into somebody that knew him and knew she was his ex.

Heath would think she was ashamed of being seen with him! She knew he would!

She didn't want him to think that! Because it absolutely wasn't true!

She was *afraid* to be seen with him, and that was entirely different!

Right!

He wasn't going to see the fine difference—and there was a difference, damn it! He was a fine man and she was proud of him! She would've been proud to be seen anywhere with him—except she knew what Kenneth could do with the fact that he was an exotic dancer! Ruin her! She could lose any chance of seeing Kenny. She could lose her job. And worse, if he got to digging, he could *really* ruin her, set off the witch hunt Marcy had warned her about!

She could fix the meal she'd planned before! She could tell him she didn't want the expensive meat to ruin and she also thought it would be nice to just take it easy and have a leisurely 'date' at her place since he only had a half day off!

She was *sure* she could pull that off!

She didn't know what she was going to do if he decided to take her out again, but she could cross that bridge when she came to it. The important thing was to be careful *now* without giving Heath the idea that she didn't want to be seen with him! She didn't want to hurt him, or hurt his pride, and she didn't want him to get angry with her and leave.

\* \* \* \*

There were times, Shiloh reflected, when she wished she had chill pills on hand or happy pills or maybe both. She hadn't managed to achieve any kind of real calm since she'd argued with Marcy. She'd done her damndest. She'd thoroughly indulged in an 'oh woe is me' crying jag when she couldn't convince herself that her life wasn't falling apart. She followed that with a long, hot soak in her tub—and another crying jag. She'd fought a round with a panic attack when she realized how late it was and how unprepared she was and then she'd rushed around in a blind panic trying to put everything together for a 'quiet, relaxing' evening at home.

If hysterics wasn't the road to calm, she didn't know what the hell was! But she'd run the full gamut, thoroughly exhausted herself, and she was still on edge.

Every time she went to the refrigerator to get something, she stared at the beer Heath had left. She didn't know if it was the last of the two she'd found before, or a new one, but there was only one.

He was bound to notice if she took it.

She'd probably puke if she tried to drink it anyway.

Unfortunately, she didn't drink so she not only didn't have 'happy-calm' in a bottle, it didn't occur to her that she could buy a bottle of 'happy-calm' until she'd already started cooking and couldn't leave.

She was just going to have to wing it, manage the old fashioned way—drug and alcohol free.

*My god, how did they do it before*, she wondered when she took the lamb chops out and discovered she'd overcooked them! *Nothing* had turned out! Absolutely nothing! Heath was going to think she couldn't cook!

Her chin wobbled threateningly as she glanced from the disaster she'd prepared to the clock for the umpteenth time. Her nose stung. She sniffed, setting the pan down and dashing to the bathroom to throw cold water in her face. When she'd fought back the urge to yield to her emotions again, she looked at herself in the mirror and felt worse. Her eyes were swollen and she'd washed her makeup off. Her hair was falling down and she'd dripped something on her damned dress!

"Kill me, god! Just kill me now!"

A sound emanated from the front of the apartment that instantly distracted her. Her eyes widened. "Oh please! Not now!" Racing on tiptoes, she reached the door to the living room just as Heath opened it and stepped inside. She froze, staring at Heath in wide eyed dismay, trying to remember the play she'd rehearsed to convince him he really didn't want to go out. When her search turned up empty and she refocused on Heath, she discovered he'd spotted her frozen in the doorway like a deer caught in the headlights of a car.

He was looking at her a little strangely.

Was it the hair and makeup, she wondered? Or the mannequin pose? She smiled brightly. "I cooked!" Can't you smell the charred meat in the air?

He blinked a couple of times. "I thought we were going out?"

She blinked back at him, trying to remember her next line. "Oh! Well, you know I bought something to cook for you before. Well, it was lamb chops and I didn't want them to go bad, so I cooked instead."

He frowned. "I thought I put them in the freezer."

"*That's* how they got there!" Shiloh exclaimed. "But I didn't realize that until I had everything else ready ... and I didn't want to just throw it all out, so I thawed them."



He sniffed the air a couple of times. "Is something burning?"

Shiloh sniffed, wondering if that was old burn or something else she'd .... "Oh fuck! I forgot the rolls!"

Smoke billowed out of the oven when she snatched it open. Fanning her face and coughing, she grabbed the pot holder and snatched the rack holding the flaming pan of rolls out. The rack stopped. The pan of rolls didn't and Shiloh made an instinctive grab to catch the pan as it fell.

"Don't!" Heath shouted.

It took a moment for shock to give way to pain. When it did, Shiloh dropped the pan on the floor, waving her hands to cool them off, looking around frantically for the pot holder she'd dropped as the smell of melting floor vinyl joined the odors of charred rolls and burned lamb chops.

The smoke detector went off with an ear piercing, endless scream that rattled her eardrums.

Shiloh didn't know if the tears streaming down her face were from the pain, the smoke burning her eyes, or despair, but at least she had an excuse.

Heath opened the window and patio doors and finally got the smoke detector to shut off. Shiloh plopped down on one of the kitchen chairs and stared at her blistered hands. In a moment, Heath crouched in front of her. "Here, let me see your hands."

She curled her fingers toward her palms to hide the blisters. "They're ok."

He flicked a look at her face and pulled her from the chair, dragging her to the sink and shoving her hands under the cold water. The relief was almost instantaneous. "Keep them under the water. I think I might have something to put on the blisters."

Shiloh stared bleakly at the water running over her fingers, her mind curiously blank. The water was soothing beyond the coolness, almost hypnotic as she watched it trickle over her hands. Heath returned a few moments later and set something down on the counter. Taking her hands, he lifted first one and then the other to study her fingers. "It's not as bad as it could've been."

"I burned the rolls," Shiloh said pointedly.

His lips twitched. "I'm more worried about the fingers."

Shiloh sighed. "I really can cook."

Heath studied her face for a long moment and finally wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close. "Bad day, baby?"

Shiloh nuzzled her face against his chest, wrapping her arms around him. "It's better now."

He held her for a few moments, rocking her slightly and finally pulled away. "Let's get something on these burns." Guiding her back to the chair, he helped her sit and then grabbed what he'd brought. She stared at the assortment of bandages, tape, and the tube he opened curiously. "What's that?"

"A topical. It's an antibiotic, too," he responded absently, dabbing a dollop of the salve on each blister and even the lighter burns. For a moment, the burning intensified. He blew on her fingers gently until the burning stopped and then cleaned the salve from his own hand and tore open a box that had gauze pads in it.

"Good thing you had a first aid kit handy," she said wryly.

He flicked a glance at her face and then focused on his task, frowning slightly. "I've always found it's a good idea to be prepared."

"Next time I cook maybe we should call the paramedics and the fire department and have them on standby."

He chuckled, flicked a look at her face and wiped the smile off. "It isn't that bad, baby."

"I feel like crying."

"Don't! I'll cry, too."

Shiloh stared at his profile a moment and chuckled.

His lips curled at one corner. "You'd laugh at my misery, lady?"

Shiloh leaned toward him impulsively and kissed his temple. "No, I wouldn't."

He finished wrapping her hands and studied his handiwork.

"A little higher and I could play the mummy."

He reached to settle his hands along her waist. "You making fun of my work?"

Shiloh smiled at him and curled her arms around his neck. "It's beautiful, Dr. Sinclair," she murmured teasingly.

He tensed, but before she could wonder at it, he straightened, pulling her to her feet and then swept an arm behind her thighs and lifted her against his chest. "Doctor, huh? That's got a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Shiloh smiled up at him. "It does, but I like Diablo just fine."

He paused in the doorway to her bedroom, searching her face. "Do you?"

"Of course I do! You're a *wonderful* dancer."

He made a derisive sound and moved to the bed, settling her and then fluffing the pillows behind her back. "I don't know if many people would really call it dancing," he retorted wryly.

Shiloh shrugged. "I call it beautiful. I just wish I could do that sort of thing," she said a little wistfully.

His expression hardened. "Don't even think about it! No way in hell I'd have my wi .. woman out on a stage like that with horny men pawing her and drooling all over her!"

Shiloh blinked in surprise, feeling a thrill rush through her. She smiled at him tentatively before it occurred to her that he was damned bossy for somebody that got on stage and wagged his ... *dong* at a bunch of horny women! She glared at him. "Well! I don't like that part either!"

He studied her a long moment and abruptly grinned. "You don't?"

"I don't!" she said emphatically.

He settled on the bed next to her. "I thought you said it was beautiful?" he murmured, clearly amused.

"Well, it is! All the leaping and twirling you do and the splits—it looks so effortless when I know it couldn't possibly be! Like gymnastics. That's what I was talking about, how it must feel to have that power, the control, the grace—that's beautiful! *You're* beautiful. I just don't like the screaming, horny women ... much."

He slipped down the bed and propped on one arm, lifting one of her hands. "I guess you wouldn't mind if I quit that job, then?"

Shiloh felt like her chest inflated with helium. He was asking her? Like it might be her business? The buoyant feeling deflated. "Can you ... afford to?"

He shrugged. "The money's good but the hours suck ass. I've pretty well saved up what I figure I'm going to need. I'm thinking maybe another month to a month and half and I can hang up the thong."

"Seriously?" Shiloh gasped, struggling with the impulse to jump up and down and cheer.

He grinned at her a little ruefully. "I guess you'd like that, huh?"

Shiloh threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "I wouldn't mind if you wore it for me," she said tentatively.

He chuckled. "You want a private lap dance, lady?"

"Now?"

He laughed at that and hugged her back. "I think my stomach's going to cave in if I don't get food pretty soon. What do you think? Check out the kitchen to see if anything's salvageable? Or I should I pick something up and bring it back?"

"I doubt anything's salvageable," she said with disgust.

"I'll hit the road then and be quick." He kissed her and pulled away.

"Be careful—don't worry about quick," she said when he reached the door.

He threw a glance back at her and grinned. "Careful but quick."

Shiloh swallowed a little convulsively as an awful thought flickered through her mind. "Just be careful."

Nodding, he left. Struggling with the completely unfounded fear that he might have an accident, Shiloh settled back on the pillows, wondering uneasily where it had come from. She wasn't inclined to believe in omens, though, and finally realized it had sprung solely from the sudden realization of just how important he was to her.

It wasn't something she wanted to dwell on, however, not when it seemed there were so many black clouds gathering on the horizon.

It occurred to her to wonder after a few moments why Heath had thought it necessary to carry her to the bed. Really! She was fine, maybe a little shook up and battered from her disaster of a day—tired, too.

She must look like pure hell, she thought irritably just before she dozed off. Heath woke her when he came in again. He paused in the doorway. "Kitchen? Couch? Or bed?" he asked, holding up a couple of white carryout bags.

"What is it?"

"Chinese."

"Table. I can't get half of it in my mouth. We'll be sleeping in rice."

"I got lomein," he said a little doubtfully.

"Or noodles." She looked down at her dress when she'd gotten out of bed and decided to change before it was a total loss. She discovered as she headed to the dresser that she actually felt a little woozy. Too much sun? She didn't think she'd actually been at her sister's house that long. Maybe it was just the overexcitement? Oh she had had a hell of a day!

After a brief struggle with the mitten/bandages, she discarded the dress and her bra, pulled on an oversized t-shirt, and headed into the kitchen. The pan of blackened rolls was still in the floor and she paused, staring down at it.

"It's stuck," Heath volunteered. "I would've gotten it up otherwise. Just leave it. I'll find something to pry it loose that, hopefully, won't damage anything."

"More," Shiloh amended. "If it's stuck, I'm guessing the smell of melted plastic means it might be a permanent part of the floor. The landlord's going to freak! I'll have to replace the whole damned kitchen floor!"

"Naw—well, maybe not. I'll check it out tomorrow. If we can find some tiles that match, we'll only need to replace a couple—four at the most. If not—well, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Collecting the tea pitcher from the refrigerator, Shiloh moved to the chair opposite Heath and opened the box. Her stomach growled in anticipation. She sent Heath a quick look.

His lips twitched but he pretended deafness. She cleared her throat. "I skipped lunch," she murmured, trying to figure out how to get the plastic fork out of the wrapper when both hands were bandaged.

Heath took it from her and opened it. "Why?"

"Why what?" Shiloh responded absently, trying to curl her hands around the fork Heath was holding out.

He uttered a sound of impatience and set the fork down. "Come here."

She glanced at him questioningly.

He scooted out from the table and patted his leg in invitation.

"You're going to feed me?" Shiloh asked with a mixture of amusement and indignation.

He grinned at her. "It doesn't look like you're going to be feeding yourself tonight. I don't want you getting anything on the bandages anyway. You can take them off tomorrow and I'll have a look at the burns."

Shiloh shook her head at him, but she got up and perched on one thigh, curling her arm around his shoulders. "I see you're in doctor mode again," she said teasingly. "This is going to be weird!"

Heath scanned her face, looked like he might say something, and then leaned over and dragged her plate next to his. Twirling a wad of noodles on the fork big enough to choke a horse, he held it up. "Open wide."

"I can't get that in my mouth!"

His eyes gleamed with amusement. "I'm bigger than that and you got me in your mouth."

Amusement joined her irritation. "You may need glasses."

"Wanna compare?"

She chuckled. "No, no! I'll take your word for it," she responded, opening her mouth. She managed to corral about half the noodles. The other half landed on her lap, part of which slid onto the floor. She gave Heath an 'I told you so' look, but her mouth was too full to comment.

He grinned at her. "You look like a chipmunk."

She frowned at him, but she was too busy trying to chew and swallow to do anything else. Heath picked up the noodles in her lap and put them back in her box. Picking up a teriyaki wing, he tried to eat it one handed.

"Takes two," Shiloh commented around the wad of noodles she was still chewing, reaching for the other end of the bone.

He growled at her, holding it out of reach. "Bandages!"

"Thit!"

He grinned. "You are *such* a lady, Shiloh Ledger! Don't you know ladies aren't supposed to say thit?"

She held up one hand, trying to form a bird.

He watched with interest. "More noodles?" he asked innocently, rolling another wad around the fork just as she managed to swallow the last of the 'first bite'. "Don't you dare stuff my mouth with noodles again!" she said with mock anger. "Is that sweet and sour chicken?"

He picked up a piece. "You want the sauce?" Without waiting for a yea or nay, he took the sauce out of the bag, flicked the lid off with one nail and dunked the piece of chicken.

"Open wide!"

Shiloh stared at the steadily dripping piece, lifting her hands to try to catch the drips. Heath snatched her hands out of the way. It left a trail of drips all the way up her t-shirt. "Heath!"

He stuck the piece of meat in her mouth. "Bite!"

She bit, tucked the piece in her cheek and tried to lick the sauce off her chin.

Heath's eyes narrowed on it. "Nice tongue."

She stuck it at him. "I've got sweet and sour chin!"

"Hold on." Instead reaching for a napkin, he leaned toward her and sucked her chin. It felt oddly erotic to feel the heated suction of his mouth on her chin—or maybe just weird? It made her nipples pucker, though.

"Give me the tongue. I'll clean that, too."

She clamped her lips together. "I've got meat in my mouth," she muttered between her lips.

"I've got some meat you can put in your mouth."

She wagged her brows at him. "Sausage?"

He studied her face a moment and leaned toward her again, lapping at the drops of sauce on her shirt. He paused when he reached her breasts and then very deliberately moved to one of the tips tenting her shirt and sucked it through her shirt.

There was no doubt in her mind that time that it was erotic. The pull of his mouth set her heart to racing and made heat coil low in her belly. "There wasn't any sauce there," she murmured.

"No? Tastes sweet to me. Let me try the other one." She gasped when he jerked her shirt up and burrowed his head under it, curling her other arm around his shoulders as a heated lethargy invaded her.

"Did you get it?" she asked huskily when he finally released her nipple.

"Hmm. I see a few spots here I missed," he murmured, lathing his tongue over her stomach.

His hair was standing on end when he emerged from beneath the T-shirt. Shiloh smiled, smoothing it down with her hand. She thought they got more food on themselves, the table, and the floor than they actually ate, but she'd never had a picnic that was more fun.

"I'm going to need a shower," she said ruefully.

"Not with the bandages—you'll have to settle for a tongue bath."

Shiloh felt butterflies take flight in her belly. "I thought they called those sponge baths."

He sent her a heated look. "Not when they use the tongue."

## Chapter Ten

Despite the ‘wounds’, which were actually minor even though she thought it was really sweet that Heath had been so concerned about them, Shiloh was glad she’d managed to convince Heath to stay in rather than go out—until she woke the following morning. She wasn’t nearly as happy about it then, because she felt vaguely nauseated as soon as she woke. Breathing slowly and shallowly, she tried to subdue the queasiness by force of will. She’d just decided that she had conquered it when Heath rolled over. As faint as the shift was, it was enough to upset her attempt to calm her stomach.

Leaping from the bed, she raced to the bathroom. She barely managed to make it to the toilet, drop to her knees, and get the seat up.

She didn’t have *time* to lock the damned door! She’d slammed it, though, and if Heath had had any damned consideration for her feelings, he wouldn’t have followed her to watch while she puked her guts out. He caught her hair and held it back, which she was mildly grateful for, but it didn’t make up for her humiliation!

“You alright?” he asked, concern in his voice when she finally stopped gagging and sat back, heaving for breath and trying to decide if she was done or she was going to start puking again.

“Go away!” she said miserably.

He closed the toilet lid and flushed, but he didn’t leave.

“I mean it, Heath! Let me die in peace.”

He made a sound that could’ve been amusement or disgust. “For god’s sake, baby! You’re sick.”

“You think?” she asked weakly, fighting tears as she struggled to her feet.

He caught her around the waist, trying to lead her back to the bedroom.

“No! I need to brush my teeth and get this taste out of my mouth!”

“Don’t use the toothpaste. It might make you gag again,” he advised.

“Are you going to go away?”

“No,” he said grimly. “You might faint.”

She wanted to argue with him, but she just wasn’t up to it. Deciding to ignore him, she put a tiny bit of toothpaste on the brush and carefully cleaned her mouth. He was right, damn him! The toothpaste made her queasy all over again but water wasn’t enough!

“You going to be alright now or do you need to throw up again?”

Shiloh thought about it, mentally evaluating the state of her stomach. “I think so.” He braced her when she headed back to the bed. She was sort of grateful for it since she felt weak all over from her bout, but she still felt like crying from embarrassment. Thank god she hadn’t had diarrhea to go with it!

“How about your bowels?” Heath asked when he’d helped her into the bed.

Shiloh squeezed her eyes closed. “I am *not* going to discuss ... *that* with you!”

“You think I don’t know you’re human?” Heath growled testily.

“I think I’m going to brain you with something if you don’t shut up!”

“Diarrhea?” he demanded.

“No!” she snarled at him instead of demanding to know how he could possibly have missed it if she had when he had his nose up her ass the entire time she was puking her guts out!

He lifted her arm and pressed his fingertips to her wrist. Confusion flickered through her but she still felt too bad to pursue it. He lowered her arm after a minute and pried her eyelids up. She glared at him, but he seemed oblivious.

He cupped her breasts, squeezing them. Shiloh was on the point of informing him that she wasn’t currently in the ‘mood’ when he asked, “Any tenderness in the nipples?”

“You mean aside from the tenderness from having you gnaw on them half the night?” she asked cattily. She discovered he was glaring at her. “Not that I noticed, but now that you mention it they do feel a little sore.”

He ran his hands over her sides and then lightly pressed on her belly, as if he was feeling around for something. “Any tenderness here?”

“I don’t have an appendix!” she responded irritably. “Seriously, Heath, I don’t feel like playing doctor right now.”

“Still nauseated?” he asked, focusing on the middle of her belly and digging his fingers into the soft flesh.

Shiloh considered it. “A little,” she said finally. “I must have had something that disagreed with me.”

He grunted, but she couldn’t decide whether he was agreeing or not. “Just lie still, baby. I’ll get something to help that.”

“I need to call the school and tell them I’m going to be late,” she muttered.

“What’s the number? I’ll call them.”

Reluctance fluttered through her, but she thought if she could just lie perfectly still for a little bit the nausea would go away. She gave him the number. He disappeared and she could hear him on the phone. Relieved, she drifted toward sleep, drowsing.

\* \* \* \*

Heath was so shaken when the woman at the other end of the line picked up, it took him a moment to focus on what she said. “This is Doctor Sinclair at Parker Memorial—I’m calling for Shiloh Ledger. She came in a little bit ago complaining of nausea. I’m sending her home to rest for the day.”

He could tell he’d thrown the woman for a loop since doctors didn’t usually do such a thing, but he hadn’t thought Shiloh would want him to tell them it was her boyfriend calling. “Dr. Who?”

“Sinclair.” He spelled it. “I’m on the emergency room staff—Parker Memorial.”

Bitch, he thought when he hung up. She was bound to check. He just hoped she was satisfied when she discovered he was on staff and didn’t ask about Shiloh. Shrugging it off, he headed into the kitchen to search the cabinets for saltines. He found those but he discovered without much surprise that she didn’t have any ginger ale. She didn’t have an alternative that would do either.

He debated whether to leave her long enough to go after some or not and finally decided he needed to. Nausea was one thing, the vomiting .... They’d eaten too late, he decided.

He hoped that was it, anyway. She was going to be so pissed off she was going to be ready to choke him if this turned out to be a daily thing.

He grinned abruptly, allowing the sense of excitement and triumph he’d been holding onto to rush through him. He felt downright lightheaded. Discovering his hands were shaking,

he shook his head at himself and went to the door of the bedroom to tell her he needed to go out for ginger ale.

She was asleep. Again, he debated, wondering if she would get up and head to work if he wasn't there to keep her in bed. Deciding on a compromise after a moment, he scribbled a note, threatening to beat her ass if she wasn't in the bed when he got back, and placed it beside her with the saltines and instructions to nibble on them.

Euphoria filled him as he jogged down the stairs to his bike. Unless he was very much mistaken his baby had a bun in the oven! Now all he had to do was figure out whether it would be better to wait until she figured it out herself and offer to marry her or try to keep her distracted until it was too late for her to try to do anything about it, and *then* offer to marry her.

It was underhanded. He knew it, but he couldn't think of anything else that would more swiftly or surely sweep aside any objections or excuses she might think of, and he was tired of waiting, god damn it! He wouldn't have minded courting her a while if it wasn't for that son-of-a-bitch she *was* married to, but he could see the bastard had royally fucked things up for him—and would try to get in his way.

He thought it would've been hard enough to convince Shiloh if it had only been the nightmare of a marriage she'd just ended. The bastard just couldn't be satisfied, though! He was using her son to make her afraid to even try a new relationship and *he* sure as hell wasn't in any position to do anything about it—not until he had Shiloh shackled anyway.

He had her now, though, he thought with a shaky, but pleased, grin as he pulled into the parking lot of the nearest convenience store! It was a lucky thing that he'd already switched the engine off and kicked the stand down before the other side of the coin fully sank in. It abruptly hit him right in the gut, though, and a wave of dizziness washed over him.

His baby had his baby in her belly, he thought, suddenly nearly as terrified as he was awed at the thought of a son. "Jesus," he muttered, wondering if he'd been suffering from temporary insanity. Maybe he should ask her before she found out? She might shoot him first and ask questions later when she found out—if she found out—what he'd done!

He wished abruptly that he was more certain. He'd been pushing it to examine her like he had, though. He was pretty sure she'd be suspicious if he tried a more thorough pelvic exam. In any case, as early as it was, a blood or urine test was the only way to be a hundred percent and he sure as hell couldn't think of any way to manage that!

'Piss in the cup for me, baby! Yeah! That really turns me on!'

He shook his head. No way he could slip that one past her, he thought wryly.

\* \* \* \*

"Good to see you back," the secretary in the office said pleasantly when she saw Shiloh. Shiloh smiled her appreciation. "It's good to be back—better yet, good to be past that flu."

The secretary gave her a commiserating look. "God! I hope it doesn't go around! Dr. Sinclair must be a friend?"

Shiloh felt the blood drain from her face. She stared at the woman in horror for a split second before she thought to paste a brittle smile on her lips. "Yeah—we go way back—gotta go!"

A cold sweat broke from her pores as she scurried down the hall to her classroom. What had Heath been *thinking* to tell them he was a doctor? She hoped to *god* that nosey old bitch in the office hadn't decided to call the hospital and check up on him, *and* her excuse! She was going to be trouble if the woman had!



She managed to get a grip by sheer determination of will as she reached her classroom, but she was a long way from calm! She was more focused on trying to decide if the woman had seemed to be baiting her or if she hadn't actually checked and decided the excuse was fiction than preparing for class.

Maybe that was what the remark about Heath being a friend had been about? A play for more dirt?

She realized after a moment that there really hadn't been anything Heath could've said that wouldn't have aroused suspicion. Well, if he'd said he was her friend, or boyfriend, they probably wouldn't have even entertained the possibility that she really was sick! Still ...!

*Doctor?*

Reflecting that her life had begun to seem like a series of nightmares interspersed with almost hysterical highs, she began to wonder if she was developing some kind of mental disorder or if her life really was seesawing out of control. She didn't think it was pure overactive imagination, though.

The fight with Marcy had taken her to an all time low and then, when it had seemed like she was facing complete disaster and utter ruin, Heath made everything wonderful again. They'd had fun! They'd followed it with great sex—and then she'd woken up the next morning with stomach flu!

Weird stomach flu! She'd felt vaguely nauseated half the day after worshipping at the porcelain altar and then perfectly fine until the next morning when it had hit her almost as bad as the day before. By day three, she'd been ready to head for the hospital even though she really hated hospitals and she hated what they cost even more! Fortunately, Heath had come to her rescue, again—by way of a friend who had had some of his medication for nausea left over after his own bout with the flu—*Not* something she would ordinarily have considered! But she'd already missed three days of work!

She still wasn't feeling a hundred percent, but it was a definite improvement over the way she *had* been feeling!

She was almost inclined to think it was food poisoning rather than the stomach flu, but it was hard to dismiss the fact that it hadn't seemed to affect Heath and he'd eaten pretty much the same things she had.

And to get back to work, finally, and discover the old bat in the office suspected she'd been sand bagging!

Despite her anxiety, she didn't get summoned to the office for an interrogation. Relieved, still feeling wrung out from being sick for days, she trudged homeward after work, more depressed because she didn't even have company to look forward to. Heath would be working both jobs since it was Thursday and she wasn't likely to see him unless she sat up until all hours—which she actually couldn't afford to do when she'd already missed three work days herself. If she stayed up, she'd be half death the next day.

The significance of the next day didn't hit until she woke up from a nap and got up to look for something to eat. Actually, it didn't hit her until Kenny called. She almost broke her neck to get to the phone when she heard him calling out to her on the answering machine.

"Kenny?" she gasped a little breathlessly. "Hi!"

"Hi," he said coolly. "Look, I just called to tell you not to pick me up tomorrow."

A dozen thoughts and emotions collided inside her at the same time. She'd forgotten she was supposed to have him for the weekend! How in the world could she forget something like that? What on earth was she going to do about Heath?

"You still there?"

"Sorry." She cleared her throat. "When did you want me to pick you up?"

"I don't. Dad said I didn't have to go over there anymore."

Blinking anger abruptly ousted everything else from her mind. "That isn't his decision," she said tightly, struggling to get her anger under control, and then added in a placating tone, "I haven't seen you in a month, baby. I was looking forward to this weekend."

"I'm not a baby. And Dad says I don't have to go anymore and he'll take you back to court if you don't watch your ass!"

"Kenny!" Shiloh snapped. "I don't appreciate you talking to me like that, young man! I happen to be your mother!"

"Dad's gonna marry Lila. She's going to be my mother from now on."

"Stepmother," Shiloh managed tightly. "I'm your mother."

"Whatever. I gotta go. Dad said to call you and tell you not to come."

He hung up before she could say anything else. The impulse to call right back and demand to speak to his father was so strong she was shaking with it. She hung the phone up instead and moved to the couch, trying to think, trying to calm herself.

She realized after a moment that she'd done the right thing. She wasn't in any frame of mind for a battle with Kenneth. She needed to think.

She discovered it didn't actually take much effort to understand the threat.

Kenneth had found out about Heath.

That had to be it. Wrack her mind though she might, she couldn't come up with another thing that he could possibly think would give him the leverage to oust her completely from Kenny's life. In any case, it was what she'd feared from the start.

The question was, did he know *all* about Heath? Or just some of it? How far back into Heath's background would he check? Or did he just figure it was enough that he was an exotic dancer?

Angry frustration filled her, bringing her to the verge of tears—again, but she was more angry than anything else. There was nothing wrong with the way Heath made his living, damn it! It wasn't as if he would be strolling around the apartment naked—or dancing! Of course he did, but that was when it was just the two of them and there was no reason to worry about it!

She'd just begun to feel like Heath was actually interested in a relationship. He'd been so sweet to her when she'd been sick, running to the store to get all sorts of things he thought she might eat! He'd taken care of her.

Kenneth hadn't done things like that for her and he'd been her *husband*! Actually, just the opposite. Not only had he not helped her when she was sick, he'd complained if she 'laid in the bed' and didn't do her chores!

And he'd made that remark about her being his woman, too!

Well, not actually. It had been a sort of vague reference to the way he'd feel about his woman being an exotic dancer, but he'd said it in a way that had *suggested* he meant her!

Well! Kenneth could just go fuck himself! He wasn't her husband anymore and he damned well didn't have a right to dictate who she could see and who she couldn't! She could've seen a judge siding with Kenneth if she'd been living with Heath, but she wasn't—not really. He still had his own apartment—she was sure he did.

Besides, he'd already said he was going to quit dancing soon. And she sure as hell didn't think he was likely to be a bad influence on Kenny if his *father* wasn't!

Unfortunately, she wasn't the judge and she couldn't completely convince herself that she could convince the judge—if Kenneth took it that far, and she was sure he would! Any excuse to make her life hell!

She was sitting on the couch, staring at nothing in particular, feeling curiously empty when Heath came in. She lifted her head and stared at him in surprise. "I thought you had to work at the club tonight?"

He frowned, studying her. "I do," he said slowly. "I thought I'd come by and check on you first, though."

She smiled with an effort. "That's so sweet! I hope it wasn't far out of your way. I'm fine."

He moved to the couch and dropped down beside her, curling an arm around her. "You don't look fine. Is there a problem? Are you sick?"

Shiloh sighed and leaned against him, enjoying the sense of security she felt with his arm around her. "No. No problem. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

She lifted her head and looked at him. "Actually ... uh ... I guess I wasn't really thinking about anything."

"And this nothing made you look like someone took your last cookie and you cried about it?" he murmured, turning to pull her more fully against his chest.

Shiloh swallowed with an effort as a knot rose in her throat and managed a halfhearted chuckle. "It's nothing, really. I don't know why I've been so weepy lately. It's probably just my pe ... riod." A wave of cold washed over her, making her stumble over the last word. Panic followed it as she struggled to remember the last time she'd had her period and discovered she couldn't.

Heath felt her tense, realized it had just dawned on her that she hadn't had a cycle since they'd been together. He wrestled with the urge to prompt her and an equal urge to distract her. The latter seemed the safest bet at the moment, but he couldn't think of a damned thing because his own mind was fixed firmly on the subject she'd brought up. He brushed a kiss on the top of her head, fighting the sudden desire to retreat, and cleared his throat. "You didn't get bad news or anything? Trouble at work?"

Shiloh sent him a wide eyed, hunted look. "No," she said quickly.

Her face was paper white despite the denial and Heath couldn't decide if it was just her sudden realization that she might be pregnant or if there was something else. "You sure you're ok, baby?"

"I'm fine!" she said quickly and pasted a fake smile on her lips. "Don't worry about me! You should probably go. I know you don't want to be late for work."

There was enough panic in her voice to kill Heath's craven urge to retreat. "I'm not worried about it. I was planning on quitting soon anyway. If they fire me, I don't give a fuck."

"Yes, but I do! You said you needed to work at least another month ... and there's no sense in risking the job when I'm just fine."

"I'd be more convinced if you looked fine," Heath said, an edge to his voice. "What's going on with you, Shiloh?"

Shiloh stared at him a long moment and looked away. She'd been doing her best, damn it! She wasn't going to tell him about Kenneth's latest stunt—because she was afraid he might be tempted to do something she would regret! And she sure as hell didn't want to talk about the idea that had popped into her mind! "I think I'm just really tired," she said finally.

His arms tightened around her. "Alright, baby. I'll quit bothering you."

"You aren't bothering me. I'm glad you came. I'll probably be asleep when you get in ... uh ... you were coming back tonight?"

"I come back every night, don't I?"

He had been, she realized abruptly—every single night since that first night he'd come—even when he only curled up next to her and went to sleep.

Did that constitute living with her, she wondered?

"Did you eat?"

She thought about it. "I was going to ... uh ...." And then Kenny had called and she'd been too upset to give it a thought since. "I got side tracked."

"Well don't eat anything too heavy. It's late now to be eating, but you're liable to be sick in the morning if you don't."

Tipping her head up, he kissed her and got up. "I'll be late."

Shiloh nodded, but he'd already strode into her bedroom. He returned a few moments later with the bag he usually carried with him. She smiled with an effort when he paused at the door and turned back to look at her. "Be careful!"

She resumed her posture of before when he was gone, propping her elbows on her knees and cradling her face in her hands. Her head was throbbing with the effort to jar memories lose that might be helpful and she still only had a vague recollection of thinking she must be about to start—a week ago? Two? Three?

She couldn't for the life of her remember. She couldn't think of any other memory to tie it to beyond the fact that she'd worried that it might interfere with her fun! "Oh god! Oh my god! Heath is going to totally freak!" She was probably going to get to see just how fast he could run!

## Chapter Eleven

Whether it was the fear that she was right or the desperate hope that she was wrong, Shiloh decided to dash out for a pregnancy test almost as soon as Heath left, even though it was far later in the evening than she would've ordinarily considered safe for gallivanting. She realized as soon as she started cruising the streets in search of a store for a test kit *why* it was a bad idea. There didn't seem to be a damned thing open! Even the damned 'all night' pharmacy was closed! And if that wasn't outrageous enough, she was informed when she called their emergency number that pregnancy test kits didn't fall under the definition of 'emergency' to them!

"It might if you thought *you* were pregnant, you asshole!" Shiloh growled at the man and hung up.

After sitting in the parking lot for a few minutes, drumming her fingers nervously on the steering wheel, she finally decided to try a convenience store. She was in luck! The first one she stopped at had one!

The box was dusty it was so damned old! She couldn't find an expiration date, though, so she decided to fork out the outrageous sum they demanded and drove home again. Slamming the door behind her and locking it, she dashed to the bathroom and tore the box open, scanned the instructions and then flopped on the toilet and tried to hit the little stick. Fortunately, she didn't have a shortage of piss at that moment because she had a *hell* of a time ringing it. They couldn't make the damned test strip a little wider and longer for what they charged? Honest to god! It was like trying to hit a toothpick at fifty yards—blindfolded!

Feeling a little relieved—actually a lot once she'd emptied her bladder—she set the test down on the counter and stared at it for several moments before she remembered the instructions she'd tossed in the trash. Digging them out, she scanned the paper again until she found the wait time. Dashing to the door, she craned to see the clock and note the time and then put the lid of the toilet down and sat down to watch. When she was convinced ten minutes had passed, she got up and checked the clock again. Two minutes.

Her stomach growled. Remembering Heath's warning, she decided she might as well grab something while she was waiting. The suspense was killing her! She needed a distraction anyway. "Light. Something light," she chanted while she searched the refrigerator and then the cabinets and finally went back to the fridge. There was absolutely nothing to appeal to her.

She found a box of ice cream in the freezer. After studying it a moment, she shrugged. It was dairy! Grabbing the box, she glanced toward the kitchen clock as she reached for a bowl and discovered fifteen minutes had flown by while she was searching for sustenance.

Dropping the box on the counter, she raced into the bathroom and snatched the test kit up. After staring at the little display window for several moments, she grabbed the empty box and looked it over. Pregnant two lines. Not pregnant one. She stared at the little window again, trying to decide if the really faint pink line beside the dark one was actually the results of the test or if the ink was running because she'd accidentally pissed on the little window. She moved it in and out, trying to get better focus and finally held it up closer to the light.

Still uncertain, she put the test kit down and sat down with the instructions, scanning them for an explanation of 'light' line. She didn't see anything that specifically referred to whether the line was dark or light, but she did see a warning—useless if not pissed on first thing in the morning—or words to that effect.

"Well, damn it!"

Throwing everything in the trash, she stomped back to the kitchen, grabbed a spoon, and started eating chocolate ice cream out of the box. A straw would've come in handy. It was already melting.

She wasn't going to sleep a wink, damn it! She didn't even have a test for the morning! She could stop and get one on the way to work, but could she hold 'it' till then?

Well, she was just going to have to try! She didn't see an alternative at the moment.

By the time she'd arrived at that decision, she discovered she'd eaten almost a third of the ice cream. Feeling suddenly queasy, she dropped the spoon in the sink and put the ice cream up.

She stared at the kitchen clock, considering whether there was any possibility of finding another store that was open that also had pregnancy kits and finally discarded the notion. She didn't want to wait. She wanted to *know*! But it didn't look like it was going to happen.

Sighing, she checked the doors and windows and headed to the bathroom to get ready for bed. She'd nearly dozed off before it suddenly occurred to her that she'd left everything in the trash can in plain view!

Leaping from the bed, she raced into the bathroom, dug the test strip, the box, and the instructions out and looked around for some place to hide them. The back of the toilet?

She could just imagine the look on Heath's face when he flushed and her pregnancy kit popped up in the bowl! Surprise!

She studied the trash can, wondering if she could shove the stuff to the bottom and cover them up and finally discarded that idea, too. It would be just her damned luck Heath would drop something in and go after it, or decide to empty the damned thing!

Carrying the trash to the kitchen, she pulled the can out and shoved the evidence beneath a layer of trash. "Gross!" After disinfecting her hands, she headed back to bed.

She was still wide awake, staring into the darkness when Heath came in. She closed her eyes when he glanced her way, but she didn't hold out a lot of hope that she'd fooled him into thinking she was asleep. Fortunately, as unnerving as her secret fear was, she still found it soothing that Heath was home and the sound of the shower finally helped her grow drowsy.

He roused her when he climbed into bed beside her. Bracing on his elbow, he looked down at her for a long moment and finally settled when she continued trying to pretend she was fast asleep. Gathering her against his length, he curled around her, 'pillowing' her head on his rock hard arm. He rubbed his cheek along the top of her head and finally settled. "Whatever it is you're worried about, you know you can talk to me, don't you baby?"

Shiloh wasn't even *almost* tempted to confide. She struggled to think of a response and finally gave up. "Mmmhmm. Goodnight, baby."

\* \* \* \*

Exhaustion was nothing new to Heath. He'd lived with it so long that he figured he'd gotten as used to it as anybody could ... and gotten used to running on a lot less sleep than the average person considered essential. On top of that, he was a man with a mission so, although he ordinarily merely rolled over and went back to sleep when Shiloh got up and left for work, he was wide awake when she left that Friday morning.

Bounding from the bed the moment he heard the front door close, he headed into the bathroom to start his search. The trashcan didn't contain anything but a couple of empty bottles, a soap wrapper, and a few wads of tissue. Setting it down again, he searched the medicine cabinet and then the drawers of the vanity. When he still came up empty, he straightened and scanned the room for any other possible hiding places and finally lifted the top of the tank.

Shrugging when he saw nothing but water, he left the bathroom and looked around the bedroom. He knew she hadn't disposed of the kit there, though, and headed into the kitchen and went straight to the trashcan. Picking it up, he tilted it and shook it until he found what he was looking for. "Ah ha! Pay dirt!" He fished it out and moved to the window for better light.

Briefly disappointed when he saw the results was indecisive, he dropped the test strip in the can and shoved it back under the kitchen sink, considering the situation while he washed the gunk from the trashcan off his hands.

She must have tested the night before, he realized, shaking his head in disgust that that hadn't occurred to him. She wouldn't be far enough along to get an accurate result if she had. Blind panic—not a good sign, but not altogether unexpected all things considered.

The problem was she was on high alert now. If he hadn't succeeded, he might not get the chance.

He shook that anxiety off. He was no specialist in that field, but he'd boned up on it and he was almost a hundred percent certain she was pregnant.

It was the one percent doubt that bothered him.

Well, she was bound to buy another test kit. He'd just have to try to get to it before she could get rid of it afterwards.

Dismissing his disappointment with an effort, he headed back into the bathroom to shower. The great thing about working pretty much every hour of the day that he wasn't sleeping was that he didn't get much chance to spend the money he was trying to save. The problem was that it didn't leave a lot of time for shopping when he wanted to, or needed to ... and he needed a ring if he was going to convince Shiloh that he wanted to marry her. Otherwise, the little idiot was liable to get the notion that he was just being noble when she finally got around to telling him she was pregnant!

He was going to be seriously pissed off if *she* decided to be noble and deal with her 'secret' by herself! If that wasn't just like her, though, he didn't know what was! He decided to give her another week. If she was still trying to hide it from him, he was just going to have to confront her about it, as little as he liked that particular strategy. He was damned if he could think of anything else to try to convince her, though. He was just going to have to go with what he had. If that didn't work ... he'd have to think of something else.

\* \* \* \*

The problem with being a creature of habit, Shiloh reflected irritably, was that she was always on automatic when she was tired and she was never bright eyed and bushy tailed when she rolled out of bed in the morning. She'd already flopped on the toilet to empty her bladder before she remembered the damned test—which she was *supposed* to get on the way to work!—and she discovered she couldn't cut it off once she let go.

Mentally kicking herself, she finished getting ready for work and left, promising herself that she was going to leave a note on the bathroom mirror for herself before she went to bed! She didn't think she could make it through another day with so little sleep.

It was a rough day to face with only a few hours of honest to god rest! Fridays always were and this one was worse than usual. By the time school had let out, though, she'd decided

she was going to confront Kenneth face to face instead of taking the coward's way out and calling him up. It wasn't as if he could *do* anything else to her!

Well, she supposed he could. Crazy men killed their wives, ex-wives, and girlfriends every day, but she didn't think he was *that* crazy. He wasn't going to do anything that might bite him in the ass and he had enough sense to know he couldn't get away with murder.

She hoped. Since he managed to get away with just about every other low down thing in the world, he might think he could get away with that, too, but she was pretty sure it was safe. In any case, he was certain he had her by the throat. He wasn't nearly as dangerous when he was confident he was going to win.

It seriously sucked to drive all the way to his place and discover that no one was home! She settled in her car again to wait, certain somebody would get home before much longer, and fell asleep. It was nearly dark when discomfort finally outweighed exhaustion and she woke up.

The house was dark and there wasn't a car in sight, she discovered, so either they'd come and gone again while she was sleeping in the car—unlikely, she decided—or they'd made plans for the weekend and left before she arrived.

Anger flickered through her, but she was just too worn out to feed it. Grabbing her satchel, she got a piece of paper out and scribbled a note for Kenneth informing him that she would be back the following day to pick up Kenny. After a little consideration, she decided to make two more just in case she picked the wrong door to attach the note to or it blew away. She put one on the front door, one on the back, and then stuck the third in the mailbox on top of the stack of mail that was in it.

As tired as she was when she got home, she was still too wired to rest—possibly because she'd taken an hour and half nap in the car. She took the test kit out of her purse as soon as she got in the door and headed to her bathroom to look for a place to hide it. There weren't a lot of options. She finally simply hid it in the drawer of odds and ends, mostly cosmetics, figuring Heath had had plenty of time to discover what the drawer contained and wasn't likely to be rummaging through her makeup. Just to be safe, she put it toward the back under a pack of cleansing pads.

Leave a note or not? Heath would see it, but she could just put something cryptic—like check test. She was a teacher. She didn't see why he'd think anything about it.

Ok, so maybe it would look a little odd that she'd taped it in the bathroom, but there wouldn't be any point to leaving herself a note at all unless she put it where she could see it first thing. She thought, maybe, she could remember after screwing up once already, but she'd been so distracted lately she knew she couldn't count on it.

Restless once she'd done that, she decided to get a head start on her weekly chores. If she managed to run Kenneth down and wrest Kenny from him she didn't want to spend most of the time he was with her cleaning.

Heading to the spare bedroom, she opened the door and flicked the light on. The musty smell of a room that had been shut up a long time hit her as the air was sucked out of the room by her entrance. She paused, feeling her throat close as she scanned the room. The tops of everything were coated with dust.

Kenny was supposed to spend every other weekend with her, but she didn't think he'd spent more than one a month for the past six—and none in a solid month now. The first few months after the divorce, he'd dutifully arrived right on schedule. He'd been angry about the divorce even then, though, and hardly a ray of sunshine, and their relationship had deteriorated steadily ever since.



After studying the room bleakly for a few minutes, she thrust the thoughts aside and set to work tidying it up and airing it. She found a pair of jeans and a shirt he'd kicked under the bed that she'd missed the last time she'd cleaned the room. Leaving the door open, she took the dirty clothes with her when she left and got her laundry basket from the hall closet. She'd collected the clothes from the hamper in her bathroom and headed out again when she noticed Heath's bag by the door. There was a change of clothes crumpled up on top.

He was usually really good about picking up after himself, but he was always in a rush to get from one job to the other and he'd had a few lapses since he'd taken up the habit of swinging by to check on her between jobs. Setting the basket down, she picked up the clothes to sniff them to see if they needed washing or if it was just something he'd decided not to wear after he'd unfolded them. As she lifted them, something fell out and hit the floor with a dull rattle.

She saw when she looked to see what it was that it was a prescription bottle. Frowning, she picked it up and looked at the label. It had Heath's name on it, but she had no idea what the medicine was for.

Unsettled, she studied the unfamiliar medical name. He seemed so healthy it was hard to imagine what he might need pills for. He couldn't be sick, she assured herself. It didn't make her feel any better, though, to think he might be popping pills to keep going because he was working too hard to manage it without something.

She hesitated, chewing her bottom lip, and finally straightened and carried the bottle with her to the living room. Grabbing a note pad from her satchel, she wrote the name of the medicine down. She hesitated again when she took them back, but she was more than a little uneasy. As guilty as she felt about it, she decided to check to see if he had anything else in the bag. He'd left it open. It wasn't as if she'd *really* invaded his privacy.

Ok, so it was, and she felt bad about it, but it was going to worry her to death to think he might have a drug problem!

Thankfully, she didn't see anything else, but then she had another problem. She didn't want Heath to know she'd been snooping when she shouldn't have. Straightening the contents of the bag the best she could, she dropped the bottle in and then gathered the clothes she'd intended to wash and tried to arrange them like they had been before, half in and half out of the bag. She would just pretend she'd overlooked them, she decided, surging to her feet and grabbing the laundry basket.

She'd just put the basket in the trunk and closed it when she heard the rumbling growl of a motorcycle. Straightening, she looked around until she saw it coming along the street. She nearly had heart failure when she discovered Heath was on the damned thing! He pulled along beside her car and cut it off, pulling his helmet off. Shiloh stared at him, fighting the urge to shriek at him as if he was Kenny's age and she'd just caught him doing something that could get him killed.

"Where you headed?"

She blinked. "I didn't know you had a motorcycle."

His dark brows rose. He shrugged. "It's reliable and good on gas."

Shiloh bit her lip, but she couldn't stand it. "And dangerous to drive in city traffic."

He studied her a long moment. "There's risks with everything," he drawled.

And more risks with some things than others! She wished she'd never found out about the motorcycle! She wasn't going to be able to sleep a wink, knowing he was out on the thing! What else didn't she know about him, she wondered abruptly? Pills in his duffle bag and a motorcycle?

“Did you just get home?” he prompted.

She shook her head. “I was going to do the laundry tonight. Kenny’s supposed to stay with me this weekend and I didn’t want to spend all the time doing chores.”

He nodded. “I guess you’ll want me to disappear.”

Shiloh felt her heart clench. Impulsively, she moved toward him and slipped her arms around his waist. “Of course not! I mean—if you don’t want to come, that’s another story and I completely understand if it would be uncomfortable for you.”

His expression lightened. “Maybe we can just play it by ear? If I hit it off with him, I’ll hang around. If not ....” He shrugged. “Maybe the three of us could do something together. Or if you decide you want some time with just of the two of you, that’s alright, too.”

Shiloh slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “You’re a wonderful man, Heath Sinclair.”

He grinned at her. “You think so?”

“I do,” she said, smiling back at him. “Be careful on this thing. I’ll worry.”

“I worry,” he retorted wryly. “I’ll be careful. I’ve got to grab my bag. I’ll see you later tonight, baby.”

The reminder of what she’d found in the bag made her uneasy. “If you’ve got a little time, I’ll hang around until you have to leave,” she offered tentatively.

He shook his head. “If you’re doing laundry tonight, I’d rather you got it done and got back to the apartment before it gets much later. It’s Friday night. There’ll be drunks on the road.”

“You just keep that in mind for yourself.”

\* \* \* \*

Shiloh was tempted to leave the clothes at the laundry-mat and head for the nearest computer to look up the drug. She knew from experience, though, that one had to guard the machines. As she paced restlessly, waiting for the washers she’d appropriated to finish their cycles, however, she spotted a drug store across the street. Wondering if the pharmacist was still on duty, she checked the washing machines and calculated how much longer she had on the wash cycle.

Deciding she ought to be able to get the information she wanted and get back if the pharmacist wasn’t busy, she strode quickly to the door and went out, heading for the drugstore at a brisk walk. The store was nearly empty, she discovered, and the pharmacy at the back still well lit. Bracing herself, she headed that way and waited for the pharmacist to finish what he was doing and notice her.

“Can I help you?”

She hadn’t prepared a story, damn it! “I was just wondering if you could tell me what this is?” she asked hopefully.

He took the piece of paper and studied it. She couldn’t help but notice he looked a little uncomfortable. He cleared his throat, sent her a sharp look, and finally handed the paper back. “It’s a fertility drug.”

Shock suspended Shiloh’s thought processes for a handful of moments. She blinked at him, trying to get them going again. “Fertility?” she echoed.

He nodded. “For men.”

Her jaw went slack. Her mind scrambled around in another shocked circle. She felt her face heating. “You mean ... uh ... like when I guy can’t ... uh ....”

“It isn’t for erectile dysfunction. It’s to build the sperm count.”

She felt perfectly blank. "It isn't used for anything else?"

"No."

Pivoting on her heel abruptly, Shiloh headed out of the store faster than she'd headed in. She reached the laundry-mat without any recollection of the trip from the store and looked around blankly, as if she'd been teleported. She might have stood like a statue longer except she saw someone unloading her washers. Surging forward abruptly, she confronted the woman.

"These are my things," she said tightly.

"The washer stopped."

"Well, if you'll move I'll unload it."

The woman glared at her, but she backed off just far enough Shiloh could squeeze between her and the washers, throwing glances around to make certain nobody tried to sneak up and grab the washer before she could.

Her irritation held her until she'd loaded the clothes in the dryers. Shoving coins in to get them going, she wished she'd been in a better state of mind when she'd been going through her divorce and had had enough sense to demand custody of her washer and dryer. She missed them a lot more than any of the other things she'd lost—even the house.

When she'd finished inserting coins, she found a chair, checked it for nasty deposits and sat down when she saw it was relatively clean, staring at the tumbling clothes while she grappled with what she'd discovered.

Why would Heath be taking something to build his sperm count up? Was he sterile? Was that why he hadn't worried about using the condoms?

If he was sterile, she couldn't be pregnant!

Should she be relieved?

Would fertility drugs work if a man was sterile, though?

Maybe he wasn't sterile, just infertile?

That made more sense in one way, but she still didn't understand why he'd take them when he wasn't even married.

Planning ahead?

She considered that. She didn't think Heath had been any more inclined to plan ahead when he was a kid than any other teenager. They all thought they had forever and were invincible. Now—well he'd been working two jobs for a while from what she could tell. That was the MO of somebody with plans that they were willing to devote a lot of time and effort to, so she thought she could safely say he was definitely a planner now. And maybe he'd always had the inclination?

What was up with the fertility drugs, though? Did he think it would work like a male enhancement drug? Or help him with stamina?

His name had been on the bottle, though. A doctor wouldn't have prescribed them without a reason—or explaining it. So that meant he actually needed them ... or thought he did.

She frowned. She'd read somewhere in one of the studies always being conducted that men were as inclined as women to reach a time when they felt a 'nesting' urge. Heath was twenty seven. Maybe he'd just decided it was time to settle down and have a family?

She might have been thrilled at the idea except Heath had to know she wasn't a very good candidate for that sort of plan. She was thirty four and she'd *had* her family. Kenny was nearly grown.

She felt guilt swamp her the moment the thought congealed in her mind. Heath hadn't had his family. It wasn't fair to expect him to give that up even if he was willing to.

And she didn't know that he was. He'd seemed perfectly happy to settle in with her as if he meant to stay awhile, but how long would that last if she couldn't, or wouldn't, give him a baby when he clearly wanted a family?

Not long, she thought wryly, and he wouldn't be happy even if he tried to make it work.

So—maybe he wouldn't have a heart attack and die or take to his heels if it turned out that she was pregnant? She thought *she* might have a stroke, but would Heath take it as badly as she'd feared he would?

It occurred to her pretty forcefully that she couldn't count on that. He might not know exactly how old she was, but he had to have some idea and he also knew she'd only had one child. He'd probably assumed she was either too old to worry about or that she'd had her tubes tied, she thought unhappily. He might be *very* upset to find out he was wrong if he had plans already.

He'd worked so *hard*, too! God only knew how long he'd worked two jobs—just about worked himself to death—just to save up the money to start his family! And he'd never caught a break, poor baby! He'd had to fight every step of the way to try to make something of himself.

She couldn't do that to him! She couldn't *bear* to think that she'd ruined his plans when he'd worked so hard!

What was she going to do, though, if it turned out she *was* pregnant?

She knew the moment she considered abortion that she couldn't do that. It made her hurt for it to have even crossed her mind. If she was pregnant, it was Heath's baby and whether he wanted *her* to have his baby or not, he obviously wanted *a* baby if he was taking fertility drugs. What if it was just a fluke and the pills didn't really work for him and he never got another chance? She'd never be able to forgive herself if she 'disposed' of his only child because it was inconvenient to her and she knew Heath never would.

Beyond that, she loved Heath. She'd tried really hard to convince herself that she was just very fond of him, and admired him, and thought he was cute and sexy, but all it had taken was considering for a moment how she would feel if anything happened to him and she knew exactly how she felt. She might be able to lie to Heath, but she couldn't lie to herself. She loved him with a sense desperation she'd never felt for Kenneth—as if the world end without him. She couldn't consider it. She just couldn't. She didn't know what in the hell she was going to do. She just hoped she was wrong and she didn't have to figure that out.

She felt like kicking her ass all over the place that she hadn't dashed down to a clinic and gotten birth control right away when she'd realized the danger. It was all very well to say she hadn't actually *expected* him to come back for seconds, let alone thirds—or to hang around for any length of time, but the truth was she'd just been too damned busy making hay while the sun shone to give it another damned thought! And she was too old to behave so recklessly and excuse herself!

## Chapter Twelve

Heath noticed the note on the mirror the minute he stepped into the bathroom. It had occurred to him to wonder several times during the day if she'd grabbed a test on the way to work and used it there. Pleased to discover she obviously hadn't and that he still had the chance to see the results himself, he proceeded to the shower and turned the water on to warm up, glancing at the note several times thoughtfully.

After a moment's thought, it occurred to him that he might have misinterpreted the note. He didn't think that was likely, but he didn't see any sense in getting his hopes up for nothing. She was a teacher. She might've just left the note as a reminder that she had brought work home for the weekend. He didn't think so, but he couldn't rule out the possibility unless he could find a kit.

With that thought, he gathered his discarded clothes and opened the hamper. It was empty. Shrugging when he remembered she'd gone to do laundry earlier, he dropped the clothes in and looked around for another likely hiding place, wondering if he'd jumped to the wrong conclusion altogether. Maybe it wasn't a reminder for herself for anything? Maybe it was a hint intended for him?

Frowning thoughtfully, he considered that for several moments and finally discarded it. Considering the look on her face when the idea had occurred to her, he doubted she'd had time to come to terms with it at all, and he didn't think she would consider 'sharing' until she did.

On the hunt again, he checked the medicine cabinet—just in case she *had* decided to drop a broad hint. He wasn't surprised when he didn't find what he was looking for, though.

He closed the mirrored door again and leaned down to check the drawers of the cabinet and then the area beneath the plumbing—cleansers, no pregnancy test kit. He scanned the room but there were no shelves beyond those that held the linens.

He checked those thoroughly and frowned. Maybe he had misinterpreted the note, he thought, annoyed?

After a moment's thought, he returned to the lavatory cabinet and crouched down to see if there was anything tucked under the pipes or behind the assortment of cleanser bottles. Finding nothing, he tried the drawers again, pulling them all the way out that time and searching beneath the things stored in them. He hit pay dirt in the back of the drawer where she kept her cosmetics.

Smiling to himself, he closed the drawer again and stepped into the shower. He'd left the water running long enough while he searched that there wasn't a lot of hot water left. He rarely lingered anyway, but he almost regretted the thoughtlessness. He was wound up now. A longer hot shower might have relaxed him enough to help him sleep a little better.

Shrugging the thought off, he climbed out, dried off, and headed to bed.

He'd just climbed in beside her when it suddenly dawned on him that Shiloh had done the laundry—and he'd found clothes piled on top of his bag when he'd come in to collect it. It had unnerved him at the time to discover he'd left the bag open. He'd dismissed any possibility that she might have found the bottle of pills he'd left so carelessly exposed for discovery because the clothes looked undisturbed, but it occurred to him forcefully that she might not have wanted him

to know if she had. She might not have left it as he found it because she didn't notice, but because she did, and she didn't want him to know she had!

"Shit!" he mouthed under his breath, tensing all over while he struggled to decide what she would've thought if she *had* noticed.

He doubted she would know what that particular drug was for—but she might jump to the conclusion that he had a drug problem, and that sure as hell wasn't any comfort! And that didn't rule out the possibility that she'd checked the name and discovered what it was prescribed for.

It was almost more dismaying, he discovered, to think she might have concluded that he had a virility problem as it was to think she might have figured out why he was taking something to boost his sperm count. Actually, he was *positive* that possibility was a lot more disturbing. That sure as fuck hadn't occurred to him before! Then again, he had to consider her perspective. It wasn't nearly as likely, he decided, that she'd leap to the conclusion that he was underhanded enough to stack the odds in his favor as it was to conclude he had a 'problem'. Her mind didn't work that way.

Well fuck! He didn't like that possibility worth a damn! It pissed him off so thoroughly, in fact, that he had a hell of a time going to sleep at all. For the better part of an hour he struggled with the urge to wake her up and show her just how god damned virile he was. He might've given in to it if it hadn't also occurred to him that he wouldn't be proving a damned thing if she *had* found the medication and jumped to the conclusion he thought she might have.

He was still pissed off when he finally fell asleep trying to convince himself that he'd dreamed up the entire scenario and she hadn't discovered his stash at all.

\* \* \* \*

Shiloh had left herself a mental note just before she fell asleep that the next day was Saturday and she could sleep late. Unfortunately, she'd also been worried about forgetting to take the test again and the confrontation she'd planned with Kenneth and as soon as she began to skate toward awareness both those thoughts began circulating in her brain and made it impossible to reclaim sleep. Groaning inwardly, she fought it for a little while and finally gave up. It took her several more minutes to extricate herself from Heath, but although she'd given up trying to keep from waking him when she'd discovered what a light sleeper he was, she particularly didn't want him roused enough to wonder why she was taking so much time in the bathroom and she was more careful than usual.

Sighing with relief when she'd finally disentangled herself and he hadn't so much as grunted, she got out of bed, grabbed her wrist watch, and headed into the bathroom. She was fully prepared this time, by damn!

As soon as she'd locked the door, she dug the kit out of the drawer and sat down on the edge of the tub to go over the instructions again. She hadn't wanted to take any chances of screwing up again and she'd read them fully, and carefully, the night before, but she wanted a refresher before she got started, just to be on the safe side.

She'd already plopped down on the toilet with the test in her hand when it occurred to her that she hadn't turned on any faucets to keep from arousing Heath's suspicions if he had roused enough to notice she'd gotten up. Leaping up, she turned the faucet on. When she'd settled again, she carefully positioned the test strip and let her fly. Removing it from the flow after a moment, she examined the strip carefully, decided she'd hit it, and set it carefully on the vanity, checking the time.

She kept glancing at the watch and then the test while she brushed her teeth, but it didn't take her nearly as long to perform that task as she'd thought it would. Frowning, she turned the faucet off and sat down on the lid of the toilet, staring at the watch, watching the second hand tick the seconds off.

It was amazing how slowly time passed when one was actually watching it, she thought irritably! Getting up after a minute, she moved to the shower to turn the water on, debating whether to actually get in or not. She hated to waste the water, though.

She checked the watch again when the water temperature stabilized and climbed in a little reluctantly, leaving the curtain open so that she could glance at her watch. She'd just lathered her hair up when she glanced at the watch again and saw it was time.

Scrambling out of the shower, she snatched the test up and stared at it. Her mind went perfectly blank when she saw it was positive. She couldn't seem to take it in. She kept staring at the little window, expecting it to change.

A shiver finally recalled her to the fact that she was making a soapy puddle in the middle of the bathroom floor. She looked down at the water around her feet uncomprehendingly and then set the test down and climbed back in the shower, running on automatic since her brain seemed to have shut down.

Heath's eyes popped open the minute he heard the bathroom door shut. He pushed himself up, propping on one elbow to listen intently to the faint sounds emanating from the bathroom. His heart leapt unaccountably and began to hammer in his ears when he heard the faint scraping that told him she'd slowly pulled the drawer out, further impeding his efforts to figure out what was going on by the sounds.

The temptation to join her in the bathroom when he heard the shower come on was nearly irresistible. He toyed with the idea for a few moments, but the scenario that popped into his mind didn't encourage him to try it. Better to go with the original plan, he decided—wait until she disposed of it and try to get his hands on it.

The blank, white zombie look on her face when she came out seemed to answer the question in his mind. No big deal, he told himself uneasily. He hadn't really expected her to come bounding out joyously and announce the news.

It would've been fucking nice to see a little more god damned enthusiasm, but he hadn't expected it!

It made him damned uneasy—and impatient—the way she wandered aimlessly around the room, as if she couldn't figure out what she was doing. It occurred to him after a few minutes that he would've had a damned hard time sleeping through all the noise she was making opening drawers and slamming them again if he'd been trying to instead of just trying to pretend he was still asleep. He wondered if it was time to pretend to wake up or if she would notice one way or the other and finally decided it might be best not to 'wake' her from her trance.

He tensed to get up and race into the bathroom when she wandered out. He hadn't had time to manage more than whipping the covers back, though, before she darted back into the room and raced to the bathroom. He threw an arm across his face when he heard her coming out a moment later, peering at her from concealment. Fortunately, she didn't even glance toward the bed. She dashed out on tiptoes.

He hadn't caught more than a glimpse of what she was trying to conceal, but he didn't need to. She'd gathered the evidence and took off with it.

Listening until he heard a cabinet door open and then shut, he relaxed fractionally, trying to decide whether to get up or not. It was a short debate. He was wide awake now and not likely

to get any more sleep and beyond that he didn't want to give her the chance to rethink the situation and decide the trash in the kitchen wasn't a secure enough disposal location.

He was pret-ty sure she'd taken the test and gotten a positive given her behavior, but he wanted to see the damned thing himself. Rolling out of the bed decisively, he headed into the bathroom, leaving the door slightly ajar so he could hear her if she left the apartment. He discovered she was still in the kitchen when he left the bathroom and peered out the door of the bedroom. Deciding he didn't want to give her too much time alone to think, he grabbed a pair of boxers and a pair of jeans and pulled them on hurriedly, heading into the kitchen without even bothering to fasten or zip the jeans.

She was standing at the sink, staring out the window holding a cup of coffee. Steam was wafting in little puffs off of the top of the cup. He studied the cup warily, wondering if he would get it in the face—or worse, in the crotch—if he slipped up behind her for a cuddle and finally decided to risk it.

She dropped the cup in the sink, shattering it when he slipped up behind her and curled his arms around her. Jumpy! He whipped her away from the sink as the hot liquid sprayed upward.

“Shit, baby! Are you alright? I didn't mean to startle you!”

He couldn't decipher the look in her eyes—mostly vague—but she didn't look pissed off.

“What are you doing up so early?” she gasped after a moment.

“Couldn't sleep,” he murmured, dragging her close again and nuzzling his face against her neck. “Why did you get up so early? It's Saturday. You could've stayed and snuggled.”

“I felt a little nauseated,” she said flatly. “I thought breakfast might make me feel better.”

He frowned, but he didn't want to address the nausea issue. “Why don't you lie down? I'm up—and I could eat a horse. I didn't get the chance to grab anything last night. I'll fix us both something.”

“I'll do it. What do you want?”

He wasn't leaving the damned kitchen with that test so tantalizingly close! Folding his arms when she moved away, he propped against the counter, watching her as she moved to the refrigerator. “Eggs?”

Nodding, she took the carton out and set it on the counter. “Ham or bacon?”

“Whichever you feel like cooking.”

She took out a ham steak. “The water should still be hot. You want me to fix you cup of coffee?”

“Sure. If you don't mind.”

She picked up the pot and shook it, frowning. “Actually, it's low. I'll have to heat more water.”

He shrugged when she glanced at him, watching her intently as she moved to the sink while he tried to think of some diversion to get her out of the kitchen for a few minutes. Unfortunately, nothing occurred to him immediately. He saw his chance, though, when she opened the ham steak and pulled the trashcan out to dispose of the wrapper. Surging forward before she could push the trashcan back under the sink, he shouldered her aside and grabbed the bag. “I'll just take this out. I forgot to do it yesterday.”

She gaped at him in dismay. “It isn't even full!”

He snatched the bag out of the can. “Yeah, but we don't want it to start stinking up the place!”



He felt her gaze on him as he headed to the door and wondered if she was going to watch him all the way to the dumpster. He relaxed when he realized the community dump wasn't in view of the kitchen window. Setting the bag down when he reached it, he glanced around a little self-consciously, and opened it up to look for the test kit. A grin curled his lips when he spotted it. Snatching it up, he stared at the window and felt a dizzying wave of triumph shoot through.

He might have crouched staring at it longer, but a hollow metallic sound distracted him. Dropping the test guiltily, he jerked his head up just in time to see a man clambering out of the dumpster.

The other man halted half in and half out, staring back at him while his face slowly turned a deep red. He cleared his throat, seemed to wrestle with something, and finally shrugged. "My fiancée threw her ring in the dumpster. I thought there might be a chance of finding it."

Heath blinked at him, feeling coldness waft through him. "No shit?"

The guy climbed out, brushing at his clothes. "No shit," he confirmed tightly.

"You pissed her off, huh?"

"You could say that, I guess," he retorted dryly. "If you happen to spot it while you're looking for whatever your girlfriend pitched out ...?"

Abruptly conscious of the stickiness on his hand, Heath surreptitiously wiped his hand on his jeans before he thought better of it. "I was just looking for some instructions I lost. I just remembered I stuffed them in a drawer."

The other man frowned. "Is there another dumpster?"

"I think there's one at the other end of the complex."

Nodding, the man left.

Heath frowned as he watched the man walk off. Shrugging after a moment, he tossed the bag in and headed back to the apartment.

"You were gone a while," Shiloh commented as soon as he came in.

He glanced at her sharply. "There was a guy going through the dumpster looking for a ring," he responded a little absently, glad for an excuse. Not that he'd needed one!

"A ring?" Shiloh echoed.

"Yeah, weird, huh? I guess they had a fight."

"You mean she threw it away on purpose?"

He was actually pretty relieved that she sounded so shocked and outraged. "He seemed to think so—said they'd had a fight."

"Poor man!"

"Yeah, poor bastard—had shit all over him from dumpster diving. I'm glad you aren't like that," he said, studying her intently.

She shook her head and then looked a little self-conscious. "I flushed mine down the toilet when I broke up with Kenneth."

Heath frowned at the plate she set in front of him, thinking about the money he'd sunk into the ring he'd picked out and decided it was just as well he'd just put a third down to hold it. Maybe it would be better to wait a little longer to pick it up?

She hadn't thrown anything at him when she'd gotten the test results—not even harsh words—but she'd been in shock. She was still acting strange, if it came to that. He studied the food a little more closely and sniffed it, trying to remember if there were any odorless, tasteless poisons in the house, and finally dug into his eggs and cautiously took a bite, rolling it around in his mouth a moment to test it before he swallowed.

\* \* \* \*

It was a damned good thing she'd thought to take care of most of her chores on Friday, Shiloh reflected angrily. If she hadn't she couldn't have wasted most of the day Saturday driving back and forth to Kenneth's house in an attempt to collect her child!

Staring at the empty house angrily, she tried to decide if they'd left for the weekend or if she just kept missing them. It was hard to avoid the fact that the notes she'd left at the front and the back were still there, though. Kenneth might have ignored them, but she didn't think he would've left them.

Collecting the notes after a moment, she went back to the car and searched her purse for a pen. After scribbling out what she'd written before, she turned the paper over and wrote Kenneth a new note, informing him that she fully intended to talk to her attorney about getting a hearing to see what the judge thought about him ignoring the court order about her visitation rights.

She sat staring at what she'd written, going back over it several times and wondered abruptly if it was really a good idea to warn him of her plans after her temper had cooled a little. Kenneth would already have thought of it himself, she decided. It was what *he* would do, after all!

And maybe the threat would be enough, she thought a little hopefully? She wasn't going to let him get away with his damned highhanded tactics—ever again! But she'd just gotten her sister paid back from the last loan! Her lawyer would want another retainer. There wasn't any point in even scheduling an appointment if she didn't have the money in hand, and she didn't.

She paid her child support religiously—making sure it was delivered by registered mail—and that didn't leave her much after her living expenses. It was a good thing Marcy had suggested it, too, when she'd told her Kenneth made it a point to avoid her when it was time to pay.

"The bastard!" she'd growled. "He's trying to get you on non-payment! Don't think for a moment he 'accidentally' isn't there every time you go over to pay. Or that he's taken pity and doesn't want it because the bastard doesn't need it and knows you do! Send it to him by certified mail or delivery confirmation if he won't sign for it. You need to make sure you keep the receipts, too, as proof! It actually wouldn't be a bad idea to get a money order. It would have his name stamped on it and you'd have a receipt for that, too."

There was that not too subtle threat he'd had Kenny deliver to consider, she realized. She was damned if she could see why it would create problems for her, though! What if Heath *was* an exotic dancer? He didn't have a record—that she knew of.

She considered that and dismissed it. Heath had been a troubled kid, but he'd outgrown it. She knew damned well he wasn't a habitual offender and there was nothing about him to suggest 'jailbird'—that he'd ever spent a day in prison.

She didn't see how Kenneth could suggest Heath was a bad influence on their son. Well, she could. He could make up a pack of outrageous lies, but he couldn't provide any kind of proof to back them up and she didn't think the judge would listen.

Unless she ended up with the same bastard that had screwed her over so badly in the divorce and custody issue to start with?

She shrugged it off after a moment. She was either going to have to fight or to give up and let Kenneth have his way. The temptation to simply give up was strong. Fighting with Kenneth always left her the loser and made her so sick with frustrated rage she felt physically ill and she didn't know *how* to fight for Kenny. It seemed to her that the harder she tried the

more hostile he was. Maybe she needed to change tactics in spite of what the psychologist she'd consulted had suggested? It sure as hell wasn't doing any good to 'reassure him' of her affection. His typical response was 'yeah' or 'whatever'.

She dismissed the thought. That was the pessimist in her talking. The psychologist must know what he was talking about. She just had to hang in until he got over being angry about the divorce and was willing to listen to her side.

Getting out of the car, she strode decisively to the mailbox and opened it. The note she'd left there was buried under another mound of mail, making it clear there hadn't been anyone home to collect it. Removing her previous note, she resolutely shoved the new one in and shut the box.

## Chapter Thirteen

Waking up with an erection wasn't all that uncommon for Heath, particularly since he'd taken to sleeping in Shiloh's bed. It hadn't taken long to discover Shiloh not only wasn't a morning person, however, but she was opposed to being woken up for sex at any time and that was especially the case in the early morning ... and that was *before* she got pregnant and began to have morning sickness. He usually ignored it and it went away—eventually.

It was a combination of things—not really well thought out—that prompted him to make an exception when he roused Sunday morning and discovered Shiloh was still nestled warm, soft, enticing, and, even more importantly, dead to the world in his embrace. The first was the erection itself. His cock had somehow managed to work its way between her thighs and was nestled in such close proximity to where he really wanted it that his barely functioning brain suggested it might actually be possible to angle it just a hair and get it in without waking her until he'd had the chance to convince her it was a good idea. The realization that it wasn't just a piss hard but a product of abstinence due to a number of factors—including his thoughtfulness in being less demanding because she didn't seem to be weathering her pregnancy all that well—was the second ill-conceived prompt. The third was the fact that she didn't pop him or move away when he began fondling her breasts, further convincing him that he stood a good chance of planting himself successfully before she thought to object.

By the time his slumberous brain had worked through that much, he was alert enough that he should have been capable of detecting the flaws in his reasoning, but he was also fully aroused by that time, which deprived him of a number of IQ points, resulting in something of a stalemate. He was awake enough to recall he was on shaky ground at the moment due to the fact that Shiloh had yet to express her joy that he'd planted a bun in her oven, but deficient just enough intelligence to begin to feel a little resentful and a lot abused.

He knew she'd had a lot on her mind lately, but he wanted *her* when he was half dead from working twelve or fourteen hours! The very least she could've done was to try to convince him she wasn't pissed off with him!

He tried to dismiss that on the grounds of being completely illogical even to him even in his current state, but he knew immediately why the thought had occurred to him. He needed proof she didn't hate him. He wanted to catch her off guard and see if she responded to him as she always had before.

That worked!

Allowing one hand to drift from her breast after a moment, he glided it lightly over her belly and cupped her mound. Pausing for a moment when she shifted, he held his breath and then decided to tease her clit before he 'tested' the waters. She began to shift lightly against him after a moment, restlessly, but her breath had begun to catch slightly—enough to convince him she was aroused.

He slipped one finger along her cleft and checked the temperature. Hot and wet! That discovery was almost enough to make him blow his load right then and there, but he wasn't wasting it even if he *had* already successfully completed his mission!

He nudged her hair out of the way and sucked lightly on the crook between her neck and shoulder. Rear entrance? Or full frontal? He could get more depth with the frontal and that cinched the matter. Rolling her onto her back, he planted his mouth firmly over hers to stifle any objections she might think to make, sliding smoothly into position between her thighs at the same time. He'd managed to get the head of his cock firmly wedged before she came around enough to fully realize she'd been nailed. He was aroused enough by that time for both of them, however, and refused to be dissuaded by her sluggish reaction to his heated kiss, persevering until she kissed him back. By that time, he'd managed full penetration in a series of determined thrusts—because she was fully relaxed—mostly.

He had to break the kiss to suck in a lungful of air or pass out as the pleasure reached fever pitch and he began struggling to slow down enough for her to catch up. She gasped when he lifted his lips from hers. The sound threatened to push him over the edge. He gritted his teeth, struggling to think of something else, anything beyond the fact that his testicles felt like they were going to explode.

“Heath!”

Thank god! Grinding his teeth, he managed to hold out when she bucked against him a couple of times and then drove deeply inside her and released the floodgate before the dam could burst. The release was pure, agonizing bliss. He hadn't realized four days of abstinence when he'd grown accustomed to having sex at least every other day would result in such a mind-blowing, gut wrenching experience!

Or maybe it was the damned pills, he thought vaguely, nearly comatose with relief when his body finally stopped expelling his seed?

“Get off!” Shiloh growled through gritted teeth.

It was the latent instinct for self-preservation that propelled Heath off of her. He didn't think he could've consciously gathered enough strength to lift himself if his life had depended on it. He'd barely hit the mattress beside her when Shiloh leapt off the bed and raced into the bathroom, in too much of a rush to even slam the door behind her.

Brought abruptly down to earth by the painful sound of vomiting, Heath's eyes popped open in alarm. To go or not to go, he wondered uneasily? A sense of guilt and remorse, belated but perhaps stronger because of that, compelled him to rush to her rescue. A stronger sense of self-preservation urged him to vacate the apartment until she'd had time to overcome the wrath that was bound to follow her bout of worshipping at the porcelain altar. Resentment chased the uneasiness for, despite the fact that he *knew* she couldn't help her predicament, it was still a blow to have her dash off to puke the minute he finished making love to her.

He was still wrestling with his conflicting instincts when Shiloh dragged herself back to bed weakly. “You ok, baby?” he asked warily.

She sat up, grabbed her pillow, and beat him over the head with it several times. He glared at her back for several moments when she'd lain down again and put her back to him. After staring sullenly at the ceiling for several minutes, he got up and headed into the bathroom for a shower.

He had time in the shower to begin to feel like a total asshole.

She must have stopped taking the pills he'd gotten her for the nausea, he decided after a moment.

And he was supposed to *know* that, he thought, feeling some of his previous resentment surge forward the moment he thought of an excuse for himself!

He didn't enjoy the self-righteous indignation that spawned long before it occurred to him that she'd probably quit taking them because she knew she was pregnant and she didn't know the pills he'd given her were *for* pregnant women suffering from nausea.

His lies—those he'd told and those of omission—began to feel like a noose he'd placed around his neck.

Everything had seemed to be going smoothly to plan, though, damn it!

Had it all gone horribly wrong? Was it spinning out of his control? Or did it just feel that way because he'd begun to feel just a hint of doubt that he could actually pull it off?

He hadn't planned *not* to tell her he was a doctor. He just hadn't wanted her to think he was bragging or trying to entice her with the possibility of being a doctor's wife, god damn it! Alright! So it *had* occurred to him that he was never going to know if she actually cared about him if he used it to convince her and he'd *needed* to know, but the only reason he still hadn't gotten around to telling her was because it had finally occurred to him that he probably should have mentioned it a little earlier in their relationship.

She might not be exactly thrilled to learn it now—especially since it was bound to make her feel a lack of trust on his part.

And it really hadn't been a lack of trust. He knew she wasn't like that. It was his background that bothered him. She knew all the sordid details—most of them anyway—enough that she should've been leery of having anything at all to do with him. All he'd wanted was some assurance that it wasn't his fancy new title that made him acceptable, that altered her perception of him so she could pretend he was good enough for her.

Because he was still what he'd always been—the spawn of white trash—a mean drunk and a crack whore—a little more polished from his stint in the service and his education, but a bad seed just the same.

He studied Shiloh's face when he got out. She was lying with her eyes closed, but he didn't think she'd gone back to sleep. Heading in to the kitchen, he grabbed a pack of crackers and a glass of ginger ale and took them to her as a peace offering, setting them on the nightstand beside her. She cracked an eyelid and peered at him. "Thank you, Heath."

Guilt smote him. He stared at her for a long moment, trying to think of something to say and finally moved around to the other side of the bed and climbed in, careful not to jar her. "I'm sorry as hell, baby," he muttered against her temple.

She sighed, tilting her head to lean into his kiss. "I'm sorry for growling at you."

"It was way better than puking on me."

Shiloh reddened but uttered a snort of a laugh. "I was alright until near the last," she murmured.

"Well, that's a relief, anyway," he said wryly, but he settled more comfortably. "I was beginning to think you didn't enjoy any of it."

"I guess I ate something that made me sick," she said after a prolonged moment of silence.

Disappointment flickered through him, but, all things considered, he didn't suppose he had any room to complain. "Eat your crackers. I have a couple of hours before I have to go. I'll cook you something that'll make you feel better."

Leaving her with the crackers and ginger ale, he dressed and went to search the kitchen for something that would tempt her that wouldn't be too hard on her digestion. It occurred to him as he was scanning the shelves that her kid was supposed to have come over the day before and he sent a sharp look down the hall toward the spare bedroom. Hesitating briefly, he headed

that way to see if the kid was up and discovered the room was empty. He was mildly relieved since he'd been more than a little uneasy about how the kid was going to feel about him, but he doubted Shiloh was.

Maybe that accounted for her behavior the day before? He'd thought she was pissed off with him about the baby, but maybe he'd read her all wrong?

He moved back to their bedroom, wondering whether to bring it up or not. If he didn't he was going to look like an insensitive asshole when she'd told him the kid was coming. He probably would if he did, for that matter, since she hadn't said anything to him.

Should he go there or not?

"I thought your kid was supposed to spend the weekend with you?" he finally asked when he saw Shiloh was propped on the pillows and had noticed him.

She stared at the cracker in her hand. "I thought so, too," she said neutrally. "I guess they went somewhere for the weekend."

Heath frowned, studying her expression. The very fact that she was so carefully expressionless was enough to make him certain she was anything but unmoved by it and it dawned on him abruptly that she hadn't had the kid a single weekend since he'd moved in with her—damned near a month.

He supposed it should have occurred to him before and he should've realized that that had something to do with her occasional, but radical, mood swings, but he'd been too focused on his game plan—and working his ass off to pay for it—to think much about the broader picture. Turning on his heel, he headed back into the kitchen, but he was so furious by the time he got there he found it hard to focus on what he'd gone to do.

Her ex was grandstanding for attention and he resented the hell out of it. It was killing the bastard's soul that she'd slipped through his fingers and if tormenting her was the only way he could retain any kind control and keep her attention, he was perfectly willing to do it.

It was hard to say what made him angrier—the fact that he was fucking with Shiloh or the fact that he seemed to be succeeding in keeping her attention firmly focused on him.

What about *his* baby? That's what he'd fucking like to know!

He knew it was unreasonable, but he didn't fucking care. They'd just found out she was carrying his baby. They should be celebrating, god damn it! At the very least, they should be working on settling things between them. She shouldn't be in bed moping about her son—and she wouldn't be if her bastard of an ex wasn't such an asshole!

It wasn't as if he hadn't expected things to get a little rocky at this point. He had and he'd been prepared to do whatever it took to convince her that he was fine with the idea of getting married.

He didn't want to make trouble for Shiloh, but it seemed to him that he was just going to have to have a little heart to heart with her ex.

\* \* \* \*

All Shiloh could think for a while was that it was a hell of a way to end a relationship—nearly puking on him in the middle of what should've been a 'moment'. She sighed a little resentfully. She'd not only made every attempt to convince him morning sex didn't especially appeal to her, but she'd been sick enough in the mornings he should've *known* it wasn't a great idea to bounce on her so early!

Well! He couldn't complain that he hadn't gotten *his* cookie!

Not that it hadn't been really nice to start with, but just about the time she was really getting wound up toward blast off, he'd changed his rhythm and that was all it took to shift from imminent climax to an impending explosion of the most horrible kind.

As he'd pointed out, it could've been worse, but not much!

She was surprised, actually, that he'd taken it as well he had.

Actually, she thought, she was surprised he hadn't really questioned it.

Hadn't it occurred to him that her persistent early morning distress pointed to pregnancy? Or was he just too unfamiliar with such things for it to set off warning bells?

And should she be relieved that he didn't seem worried about it or distressed?

He'd been just as sweet and thoughtful as he could possibly be about the situation. She didn't see how he could be that way and still be too callous to worry about her, but maybe it just didn't seem like anything he needed to worry about?

She supposed he figured it was stomach flu since that was what she'd thought it was to start with.

Dismissing it after a few minutes, she nibbled her crackers and considered what to do about Kenneth. Wait until he made the next move? Or try to beat him to the punch?

She thought, even though she couldn't really afford it, she needed to see if she could borrow the money from Marcy and contact her lawyer. Maybe it would be better all the way around if she was the one complaining for a change instead of the one trying to defend herself?

It really sucked, though, that she was going to have to crawl back to Marcy and apologize and then try to borrow money from her after she'd vented her righteous indignation over Heath!

She toyed, briefly, with the idea of asking Heath for a loan, but dismissed it almost immediately. She thought it would be much better all the way around if Heath didn't know anything about it. She didn't think he would do anything that might get in him trouble, but she didn't want to risk it when he might feel duty bound to beat the crap out of Kenneth for her just to establish squatter's rights. He was a man, after all, and, considering the violence he'd known as a child, she couldn't rule out the possibility that he'd figure that was the way to handle the situation.

*Not* that she would've been totally against it if there was no way Heath could get hurt or end up in jail! There'd been a few times when she'd wanted to take a hammer to Kenneth herself.

\* \* \* \*

The pilgrimage to Marcy for money wasn't quite as bad as she'd thought it would be, but it sure as hell wasn't fun and not the way she would've chosen to spend her afternoon. Marcy had looked as if she was more inclined to slam the door in her face when she'd arrived unannounced than let her in—because she hadn't wanted to risk pissing Marcy off before she had the chance to explain—but she *had* let her in.

She actually didn't *want* to apologize for defending Heath and that was the big problem. Marcy had made judgments about him that were not only not true but unforgivable—if she hadn't been a beggar. Instead of launching into an apology she hadn't felt the least sincere about, therefore, she'd gone straight for the jugular. "I wouldn't bother you, but I need help."

Speculation immediately flickered in Marcy's eyes—and then she looked complacent enough Shiloh wanted to slap her. "I told you!"

Shiloh bit her lip. "It's Kenneth," she said tightly. "I wanted to see if I could borrow enough money to hire the lawyer again. I paid you back the last loan. I'll pay it back."



Marcy studied her. “Let me guess—he’s trying to use Diablo as an excuse to keep you away from Kenny?”

Shiloh felt her face heat, but it was mostly from anger. “Heath ... and I don’t know. All I know is that he doesn’t even make excuses for not letting me pick Kenny up anymore. He told Kenny to inform me that he didn’t have to come anymore.”

“Diablo is the real problem, though,” Marcy said pointedly. “You know that as well as I do. What other leverage could he think he had?”

“*Heath*,” she said pointedly, “has his own place! That’s not a reasonable excuse and I don’t see why the judge would listen to that bullshit! I wanted to complain first. I think it might make my chances better if I petitioned the court and he had to defend his actions. He can’t arbitrarily ignore the court order!”

“If he can convince the judge that you’re exposing Kenny to unwholesome behavior and/or a felon, it won’t matter whether you’re the one that files or not.”

Anger flooded Shiloh. “Exactly why is it that it’s ‘unwholesome’ for me to have a relationship and it’s ok for Kenny to live with Kenneth and his girlfriend—who’s barely legal, I might add!”

“I don’t think she’s a stripper,” Marcy said dryly. “And I think she’s in her mid twenties so the ‘barely legal’ thing won’t fly. As for the living together thing, they claim to be engaged from what I’ve heard.”

“So ... really what you’re saying is that it’s a double standard?”

“If that surprises you, Shyly, then you’re more naïve than I thought!” She shrugged, heading for her purse and pulling her checkbook out. “I hope you win this one, Shyly. You’re long overdue for a break, but you should expect the worst. At least that way you won’t be disappointed.”

\* \* \* \*

Shiloh supposed she was just asking for trouble, but when Heath suggested they go out to a nice restaurant and then take in a movie, she didn’t try to make an excuse to stay at home or suggest they just grab a bite at a fast food joint or some hole in the wall as she’d been in the habit of doing. Heath only had two evenings off a week and Sunday was the only one that coincided with her days off.

Of course, he also got two evenings off from his other job, too—mostly—but those never coincided with his nights off from the club, or her off days, and that didn’t leave a very big window for going out on the town.

He looked surprised but pleased enough she felt guilty for not having had enough guts to stand up to Kenneth before. He had never come right out and accused her of being ashamed of being seen in public with him, but she knew it had crossed his mind—probably more than once.

And what good had it done to hurt his feelings? None! Kenneth had still found out she was seeing him and he’d still decided he could use it against her!

In any case, she felt the need to make it up to Heath for almost puking on him that morning. He’d behaved ever since as if it was some sort of criticism of his performance, and it wasn’t as if she could *say* anything that would soothe the wound to his manhood!

As *if* it hadn’t mortally wounded *her* dignity!

If just *figured* that Heath would pick Kenneth’s favorite haunt and Kenneth would be there! If she hadn’t known better, she would’ve suspected that Heath knew and had taken her there with the hope of running into Kenneth—or that Kenneth had somehow found out about the reservation and followed them!

Oh, it was cozy, though! They were fortunate enough to get a table in direct view of Kenneth, his girlfriend, and her son—who pretended he didn't know her. Actually, although all three looked up and stared at them as they were escorted to their table, they *all* pretended thereafter that they didn't know them. It was a struggle to focus on Heath—at first—but he took care of that by shifting his chair so that he was directly between her and the other table, cutting off her view.

She'd just begun to relax enough to begin to enjoy the outrageously expensive meal Heath had paid for when Kenneth sauntered over the table. "Good evening, Shiloh," he said with false joviality. "I thought I'd just be polite and speak ... and perhaps introduce myself to ... uh ... Diablo, is it?"

Heath shot out of his chair so fast Shiloh sucked in a sharp breath and choked on her own spit. Kenneth looked more than mildly alarmed if came to that as Heath rose to his full height and looked down at him, a feral grin curling Heath's lips and exposing a lot more teeth than she was used to seeing. "Heath Sinclair," he growled, grasping Kenneth's limp hand and trying to crush it as he pumped it a few times. "You must be Shiloh's ex?"

Kenneth flexed his hand surreptitiously when he managed to reclaim it and pasted a false smile on his face. "And you're her current."

Heath slid a glance at Shiloh. "And future if I've got anything to say about it."

Kenneth's brows rose. He glanced at Shiloh and returned his attention to Heath. "Is that a fact?"

Heath's smile vanished abruptly. "That's a fact, Jack."

They eyed one another like two bristling cur dogs. "Well! Congratulations are in order, I guess? Or am I being premature?"

"Not by much, I hope," Heath assured him with exquisite cordiality. "We'll be sure to send you an invitation since you're so interested."

Kenneth's face tightened. "I'm sure *our* son would appreciate that."

"I wouldn't think she'd need to send *her* son an invitation."

They glared at one another assessingly for several moments. Kenneth looked away first, smiling at Shiloh a little tightly. "Nice seeing you, dear." He sent Heath a smug look at the endearment and strode back to his own table.

Shiloh hadn't even realized everybody at every table around them had frozen to watch until they returned their attention to their dining partners. "I'm ... not feeling very well," she murmured through stiff lips when Heath sat down again.

He sent her a hard, angry glance and then his expression abruptly softened as he shifted his focus from his encounter to her. He reached across the table for her hand. "Breathe slowly, Baby. Deep breath in—relax—exhale slowly. That's my girl," he murmured when she'd complied and taken several calming breaths as instructed. He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. "Feeling a little better?"

She smiled with an effort. "A little."

He seemed to wrestle with himself. "I upset you," he said flatly.

Shiloh swallowed a little convulsively. "No, you didn't."

He seemed unconvinced, but he returned his attention to his meal. Shiloh tried to do justice to her own, but it was a struggle.

It if wasn't just like Kenneth to ruin their evening—or try! When Heath suggested they forget about the movie and head back to her place, she vetoed it and insisted on going. She was

glad they did. She enjoyed the movie and it helped her to put the nasty episode behind her. Heath rewarded her for her efforts when they got back to her place by rocking her world.

## Chapter Fourteen

Shiloh discovered when she called her lawyer Monday morning that he was in court and expected to be there all day. She made an appointment to talk to him in person on Wednesday, the first day he had an opening. She discovered on Friday that it was a good thing she'd retained him, because she got a letter from Kenneth's attorney informing her that they had a hearing in family court the following week.

Considering the heart palpitations Heath had given her when he encountered Kenneth in the restaurant, she was not only glad she hadn't told him about her problem before, she was determined *not* to tell him. If he could act that hostile only because Kenneth had tried to provoke him in the restaurant, she didn't want to know what he might do if he felt the need to protect her!

She had, in fact, avoided any reference to the incident since, compelled by a need to protect Heath from himself—which sucked because she'd desperately wanted to try to discover just how serious Heath had been when he'd informed Kenneth that he expected to be around awhile and had even hinted that they might get married!

Luckily, she'd been too dumbstruck at the time to make any comment to the contrary, but she would've dearly liked to hear a little more on the subject. Unfortunately, there was no doubt in her mind that Heath had been as intent on provoking Kenneth as the other way around, but had he *only* said it to be provoking or had he meant it?

And if he'd meant it, why hadn't he asked her—before or since?

That was the burning question and the one she was almost afraid to have the answer to since it seemed to her he would've brought it up if he'd meant it.

She was almost tempted to tell him about the baby to see if that would prompt him to suggest they really ought to get married, but she'd promised herself she wasn't going to push it. If he had other plans, she wasn't going to throw up another roadblock for him. She thought he would probably feel obligated to marry her if she told him, but she didn't *want* him to feel obligated, damn it! She wanted him to ask her because he loved her, and if he didn't—well she was better off just keeping it to herself. A marriage begun that way was almost certainly doomed to failure. He was bound to feel resentment that she'd ruined his plans and she could end up in just as big a mess as she had now—with another child caught in the crossfire.

It might be hellish trying to go it alone, and probably would be, but that was surely better than *that* possibility!

She didn't actually have a lot of time to devote to worrying about it. The one thing that was absolutely clear to her as soon as she got the summons to family court was that the confrontation in the restaurant had been Kenneth's opportunity to gloat, to see if he could make her squirm—because he'd already made the arrangements to take her to court again. There was no way he could have gotten it arranged so quickly *after* that. She supposed her own threat might have prompted it, but she didn't believe that either. He had to have known about Heath almost from the start and been planning his coup for weeks.

So much for thinking she might actually get the jump on the bastard for a change!

She was such a nervous wreck by the time the day rolled around for the hearing that she thought she was going to have a panic attack before they were called. She knew if she couldn't

pull herself together she didn't stand a chance in hell of getting a decision in her favor, but knowing that didn't help her attain any peace. The only thing that helped at all was the discovery that the hearing would take place in a small conference room rather than the court room, and she wouldn't be facing the bastard that had presided over her custody case before.

Her tentative relief at the discovery that the judge was a woman wasn't enough to soften the shock she got when she discovered Heath had also been summoned. He settled at the conference table beside her and dropped a folder on the table in front of him, sending Shiloh an indecipherable look. Dragging her gaze from his, she turned to her lawyer on the other side and gave him a questioning look.

He leaned close. "The plaintiff suggested since it was Mr. Sinclair's reputation at issue he should be present. The judge agreed."

Anger sprang to life in Shiloh's belly and began to churn and build as Kenneth's attorney introduced Kenneth's complaint and his allegation that her intimate relationship with a stripper potentially exposed his son to unsavory situations, if not dangerous and possibly criminal elements. He respectfully requested that the court constrain his former wife from unsupervised and unrestricted visitation and require that she be limited to such places and times as were convenient to the child's father and under his supervision.

The judge stared at him for a long moment after he'd finished speaking and then looked down at the papers in front of her, reading them. When she lifted her head again, she studied Heath assessingly for a moment and then Shiloh and finally lifted a brow at Shiloh's attorney.

"My client maintains that Mr. Sinclair in no way represents any threat whatsoever to her son. She maintains her own household as does Mr. Sinclair. Furthermore, she had already approached me with a counter complaint regarding the fact that her ex-husband has blatantly and repeatedly ignored her court ordered visitation rights and prevented her from seeing her son at all."

The judge turned to look at Kenneth. "Is this true, Mr. Ledger?"

"No, your honor. She hasn't attempted to contact Kenny since she took up with the stripper."

It took all Shiloh could do to prevent herself from leaping to her feet and calling him a liar. Heath settled his hand over hers—either to comfort or in warning. She flicked a glance at him and then discovered the judge had turned to look at her. "Ms. Ledger?"

"I'm supposed to have visitation every other weekend and yet Kenny hasn't visited me more than six times in the past six months. At first, my ex-husband complied, then each weekend that was to be mine I was given an excuse for why he couldn't come—a school function, something to do with his ball games, or his friends. Each time I was promised the following weekend, but they rarely followed through. Kenny was to visit me two weekends ago. Instead, he called and informed me that his father had told him he didn't have to come anymore. When I went to speak to Kenneth and collect him, I discovered they'd left town. They weren't home, anyway."

She studied Kenny. "Is what your mother said true? Did this conversation take place? Keep in mind that this is a court and you're required to tell the truth," she added when Kenny flicked a frightened look at his father.

"It's not true," he said sullenly. "I called to ask when she was gonna pick me up and she said she was busy and she'd see me the next weekend."

Shiloh gaped at Kenny in shocked disbelief, too stunned to find her voice.

The judge frowned and asked Kenneth if he'd had any behavioral problems with Kenny. Kenneth informed her that he had ... recently ... since his mother had begun to ignore him in favor of her boyfriend.

Shiloh was so nauseated with pure fury that she could barely collect her thoughts when the judge questioned her. The judge finally turned her attention to Heath. "What do you have to say regarding Mr. Ledger's concerns about your reputation, Mr. Sinclair?"

Heath lifted the folder he'd set down on the table and handed it to her. His hand shook slightly, but Shiloh was inclined to think it was barely contained fury. His jaw was set hard enough to look like stone. "Dr. Sinclair," he responded tightly.

The judge lifted her brows. "Doctor?"

"My credentials are in the folder."

The judge opened the folder and scanned the documents. "You're a medical doctor?"

"Yes. General medicine."

She frowned. "You aren't an exotic dancer?"

"I am. I have been for years. I paid my way through college dancing."

The judge almost smiled. "You must be very good. College is expensive, particularly this one," she murmured, holding up his degree to study it.

"I've been told I am." His hand settled on Shiloh's.

The judge looked through the rest of the papers Heath had provided and finally closed the folder and handed it back. She looked at Kenneth and his attorney questioningly.

"The fact remains that he is still employed as an exotic dancer and, to all intents and purposes, living with Ms. Ledger out of wedlock," Kenneth's attorney said tightly, obviously furious that he hadn't had that information and struggling with his arguments. "The degree doesn't change the fact that he has years to develop associations with any number of unsavory characters."

Shiloh's attorney objected and suggested that they produce any proof that Heath had any unsavory connections if they had it.

The judge looked at Kenneth and his lawyer questioningly.

"Not at the moment," Kenneth's lawyer responded tightly. "I'm certain we could produce it given time."

The judge frowned. "I'm not sure I agree with all of this. I have my suspicions that I've heard as many lies as truth here today, but I do agree that if Ms. Ledger and Dr. Sinclair are 'to all intents and purposes' living together, this probably isn't the healthiest situation for a boy Kenny's age."

Heath shrugged easily. "We're engaged. And I'd planned to quit dancing as soon as I had enough money saved up to start my own practice. If that's the problem—then it isn't a problem. I can quit now."

Shiloh was still in a state of shock about the discovery that Heath was a doctor, but it flickered through her mind despite her first fright that he'd delivered forged documents, that she should've figured it out before. He'd examined her when she was sick like a doctor. He'd bandaged her hands like a doctor. She suspected, now, that the medicine he'd produced for her was a prescription written out specifically for her and filled for her.

She didn't know why he hadn't told her, but she didn't doubt it. She'd always known he was brilliant and that he could do anything he set his mind to do.

She squeezed his hand and looked at the judge. "May I speak, your honor?"

The judge looked a little wary, but she nodded.

She looked at Kenny, fighting the hurt she'd felt since he'd lied about her. "I love you. I always have and I always will, but I don't know how to fight for you when you have so much anger in you that you won't even give me a chance. When and if you ever decide to, I'll be waiting, and I'll welcome you. Until then, I won't bother you."

She looked at Kenneth. "I've slipped my leash, Kenneth. You don't control me anymore and I won't let you use Kenny anymore and I'm not going to let you get away with controlling Heath's life! He'll quit when *he's* ready to and not before because you think you're calling the shots and can control everybody's lives."

She looked at the judge. "Thank you, your honor. I needed to say that. I'm withdrawing my complaint and it won't be necessary to arrange monitored visits. I would appreciate it very much, though, if you would order my former husband to put Kenny in counseling."

The judge studied her for a long moment and looked at Kenneth. "I believe I agree with that. I'm ordering that Kenneth Ledger Jr. have a full psychological evaluation and, if recommended, I'll expect arrangements to be made to get him into counseling."

Shiloh looked at Heath as her lawyer pulled her aside to speak to her after the hearing. He nodded, but he didn't join her. Instead, he strode from the courthouse.

She watched him in dismay, wondering what was going through his mind when he'd gone to so much effort to support her and she'd refused his offer.

"I don't think I understand your reasoning," Clements said, drawing her attention to him. "I feel sure the judge would have relented given Mr. ... uh ... Dr. Sinclair's offer."

Shiloh bit her lip. She didn't really owe him an explanation. She'd paid for his services. "Truthfully? I realized as soon as Kenny lied for his father that I'd lost. It wouldn't have made any difference what the judge decided. I've been trying to convince myself that if I could just see Kenny regularly he'd stop being angry with me and give me a chance, but the harder I've tried the more determined he's been to shut me out.

"Maybe he just needs space to come around? I don't know, but pushing him isn't doing it. And I don't think it's right for Heath to give up his job just to pacify Kenneth when nothing in the world will. It would just be something else in a few weeks or a month and I can't afford to keep you on retainer. I do appreciate your efforts on my behalf, however."

Their attention was drawn by Kenneth, Kenny, and their lawyer as they left the hearing room. "I wouldn't want him raising my son," Clements muttered.

"I didn't want it either, but the court took that out of my hands."

Clements eyed her assessingly. "You think as soon as the psychologist evaluates him he'll recommend that he be removed from your husband's custody."

Shiloh smiled. "I hope so. If not ... hopefully he'll at least get the counseling he needs to cope with his father."

\* \* \* \*

No doubt the judge would have disapproved of his 'low' associations, Heath thought sardonically, but there was an advantage to knowing a few of the 'invisible' people of the world. They saw and heard things others wouldn't and it hadn't taken long to discover Ledger's proclivities.

He was one sick puppy, he thought with disgust, but it couldn't be denied that it was damned handy that he was. The hooker across the street signaled him just a few moments before a dark car pulled up to the curb. Sauntering up to the car, she leaned down and spoke to the man inside through the window and then straightened. Smiling in Heath's direction, she opened the door and got in.

Heath settled his helmet on his head and flipped the face shield into place. Leaning to one side slightly, he kicked the stand up and then started the engine. Glory had told him she usually entertained him at the roach motel a couple of blocks away, but he thought it was better to be on the safe side and follow in case Ledger was paranoid and decided to change his destination.

He discovered he'd worried needlessly. Ledger headed for his usual haunt like a homing pigeon. Heath stopped across the street and waited until he'd paid for a room, watching as Ledger parked the car and emerged. After glancing around a little uneasily, he pulled a large suitcase from the trunk and escorted his companion up the stairs that ran up the exterior of the building. When they disappeared into their room, Heath pulled across the street and into the parking lot. Parking his bike, he climbed the stairs at a leisurely pace. There was no point in getting in a hurry. It would take them a few minutes to 'suit up' and get into their roles, he thought derisively.

He didn't particularly like the fact that the open design of the motel didn't give him any place to hide, but it wasn't really the sort of neighborhood where people snooped into the business of others. Pausing at the door a moment to listen, he moved to the window. There was a two inch gap between the drawn curtains. Good girl, Glory!

Ledger was either very eager or pressed for time, he thought derisively. He'd already stripped down. Dragging his phone out of his pocket, he took a couple of pictures and moved away from the window, glancing at the lone bulb that lit the stairwell. After studying it speculatively a moment, he dismissed it. He was dressed in black and it was dark enough to make identification nearly impossible even if anybody happened to notice him loitering on the balcony.

The sounds filtering through the door he was leaning against escalated. He was fucking rambunctious, Heath thought derisively. The son-of-a-bitch must be really excited about his triumph in court earlier! Brazen, too. How many people, he wondered, would have the balls to talk to a judge about morality in the afternoon and go romping with a street prostitute the same night?

Turning when he decided they were well into their game, he fished a credit card out of his pocket and slipped it through the door, depressing the latch. The security chain was on, but, unfortunately for Ledger, that wasn't much of a deterrent. Pushing the door as far as it would go, Heath slammed his shoulder against it and popped the chain loose.

Ledger was down on his knees, bound up in leather straps with his white ass in the air. Glory, dressed in tight black leather and sporting a ten inch strap on dildo was fucking him in the ass and pounding on his back with the whip in her hand like a jockey going for the gold cup. Both of them whipped around at his entrance to gape at him.

"That's it, you prick! Smile for the camera," Heath growled, shaking his head. "Man this is some seriously fucked up shit!"

Glory screamed, dropped her whip, and ran for the door. Ledger leapt to his feet and stared at Heath blankly for a split second. Rage contorted his features. Uttering a growl like a grizzly bear, he charged Heath. Fortunately, he'd already pocketed his camera.

Ledger swung a meaty fist at him and caught Heath on the jaw, whipping his head sideways. Heath came around with a counterblow that carried a good half of his body weight, twisting at the waist as he threw the punch. Ledger's feet flew forward as his upper body took flight in the other direction. He landed flat on his back on the floor.



Heath looked down at him. "Get up! You and me, we're gonna have a long heart to heart."

Ledger wiped his bloody nose and sat up. "The cops will be here any minute!"

Heath tsked. "The cops take at least an hour when anything goes down in this part of town. They don't want to get here till it's over."

Ledger scrambled to his feet. Heath looked him over with disgust. "Man ... put some fucking pants on. I'll wait."

Ledger snarled, charging him like a bull with the clear intention of burying his head in Heath's belly. Heath leapt to one side and booted him in the ass for good measure as he charged past. Ledger slammed into the dresser and bounced back. Heath caught him and slammed him into the dresser again.

When he hit the floor, he lay panting, his eyes closed. Heath studied him for a moment and stepped over him. Moving to the door Glory had left open, he glanced outside and shut it.

Ledger slammed into it just as he stepped back out of the way. "You are one dumb fuck, you know that?" Heath growled, grabbing the back of his neck and slamming him against the door a couple more times.

Ledger slid to the floor, huffing for breath. Heath crouched in front of him. "We done here? Or do I need talk to you some more?"

Ledger glared at him. "What the fuck do you want? Money?"

Heath uttered a disgusted snort. "I've got what I want, dick-wad. Shiloh's mine. You got that? You ever fuck with her again, for any reason on any subject, and you won't live long enough to regret it. I can fuck you up so many ways it don't even bear thinking on."

Ledger studied him with a mixture of helpless fury and wariness. "What are the pictures for?"

"I sure as fuck won't be showing them to Shiloh, if that's what you're thinking. I wouldn't want to taint her with them. Call it insurance. I'm a firm believer in being prepared and I know your proclivity for using the law to your advantage. No cops, no lawyers. You stay away from me and mine, nobody ever has to know what a sick little turd you are. Mess with me .... Shame on you." He studied Ledger for a long moment. "Are we done here?"

Ledger swallowed a little sickly. "We're done."

Heath straightened. "You aren't nearly as stupid as I thought you were. It's a shame. I was just starting to enjoy it. Now, crawl your flabby white ass out of the way."

Ledger got to his feet with an effort and moved away from the door. Heath paused to look at him as he opened it. "I'd do something about that if I was you. The ladies like tight buns."

## Chapter Fifteen

Shiloh had spent three of the most miserable days of her life waiting in vain for Heath to come. It hadn't occurred to her when she'd seen him leave the courthouse that he wouldn't. She'd been so certain after the hearing that he cared about her.

True, he'd been summoned to appear. She wasn't certain he would've shown up otherwise, but he'd done his best to convince the judge that he was a decent man and wouldn't be a bad influence on Kenny and there'd been nothing to compel him to do that, or to make the offers he had. Why would he offer to marry her and quit dancing if he didn't care?

Or was it just ... like a gut reaction to what he saw happening? A sudden impulse to try to help her that he'd regretted?

She didn't think Heath was impulsive, but she knew he could be very protective.

Was he angry because she'd refused his help?

She would have explained if he'd given her the chance! It had begun to look like he wouldn't, though, and she didn't even know if she should try when he'd been so secretive about his other life.

She couldn't think of any reason why he hadn't told her he was a doctor. He must be proud of his accomplishments when he'd fought such tremendous odds to reach victory!

Maybe his pride? He'd guarded that ferociously even when he was a kid, maybe especially then because it had been battered so much. Most people were just like Marcy. They didn't look at him and see potential. They looked at him and saw failure.

And maybe they were right a lot of the time. The odds were so stacked against kids like Heath that only a handful ever even got a chance or managed to *make* a chance for themselves and of that handful there was always the poverty monster right at their shoulder, just waiting to drag them back—the masses that didn't make it and wanted them to fail too.

So maybe he hadn't told her because he'd needed to know she didn't see him like? Maybe he'd wanted to know that she cared about him—the real Heath and not just the place he'd made for himself?

She couldn't say she completely understood it, but then she hadn't had to face the things he had. Her place in society had been assured by her parents, inherited by birthright. She could've failed miserably. She could've fallen, but she'd been assured a chance.

The heavy knock on her door brought her from her thoughts and set her heart to racing with excitement for a handful of moments until it dawned on her that Heath had a key. Disappointment flooded her and then uneasiness. Getting up, she went to the door and hesitated. "Who is it?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"It's me."

She tore at the locks in her haste to get the door open and reassure herself that it really was him. A profound gratefulness filled her as she stared up at him, drinking in the sight of him when she'd begun to fear he wouldn't come back. "Why didn't you use your key?"

Something flickered in his eyes and across his expression that she couldn't quite identify. He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I thought you might have changed the lock."

She stared at him in dismay, wondering how he could've thought such a thing. As she studied his face, she noticed the bruises fading from his jaw and cheek and her heart skipped several beats.

Kenneth had been mugged the night following their hearing. He was still in the hospital.

And Heath had been playing least in sight—waiting for the evidence to fade, no doubt.

“Oh Heath!” she gasped, surging toward him abruptly and curling her arms tightly around his waist. “Baby, how could you think that?”

He flinched when she flung herself at him, surprised enough that he didn't begin to embrace her until she'd already begun to pull away. He encircled her with his own arms then, preventing her escape, and waltzed her inside, kicking the door shut behind them. He shifted his hold when she looked up at him, capturing her face instead and searching her eyes.

Her heart lurched when he abruptly closed the distance, tilting his head to fit his mouth to hers. Warmth surged through her the moment she felt the heat of his mouth settle over hers, thawing the frozen core of doubts she'd been harboring. The bold, possessive rake of his tongue infused her with the elixir of life, the drugging, powerful euphoria only essence of Heath had ever produced. She felt feather light and as heavy as lead at the same time, floating and sinking, dizzy and disoriented as he fired her blood, making it surge in every pulse point, awakening desperate need.

She kissed him back feverishly. Like a sonic wave, boosted and magnified from tower to tower, his kiss became more ravenous and in turn fed the growing hunger in her, building each time until waves of heat emanated from both of them. The heated, moist cloud that enveloped them carried their scents, swirled them together and combined them until it almost seemed as if they, themselves, merged.

Heath broke from her lips abruptly, sucking in a harsh, shuttering breath, and cast a swift, fevered glance around. Catching her waist, he pulled her close enough to cover her mouth again, working the buttons of her blouse free with shaking fingers. Too mindless by that time to think for herself, Shiloh mimicked him, reaching to tug at his shirt with fingers that had no memory of ever delving the intricacy of removing a t-shirt before. She'd barely managed to tug the hem from his jeans by the time he'd scaled the row of buttons on her blouse and shoved it from her shoulders. It tangled around her elbows, binding her arms behind her back and preventing her from dragging his shirt any higher than his breast bone. She was still trying to figure out how to get it off of him when she felt the restriction beneath her breasts vanish as her bra fell away and then the heaviness of her unsupported breasts for a moment before Heath cupped them in his hands.

She paused to enjoy the feel of his hands, dropping her arms to her sides to give him better access and felt her bra and blouse slip down her arms. Shaking the clothes loose, she reached for his t-shirt again and shoved it up to his arm pits. He broke the kiss, released her breasts and grabbed at the back of his t-shirt, dragging it off over his head and tossing it. When he reached for her again, he waltzed her backwards until she felt the seat of the couch against the backs of her legs.

They tumbled awkwardly onto the bouncy surface, sorting a tangle of body parts and trying to maneuver each other into a position more conducive to love play almost with a sense of desperation—kissing, touching, and caressing whatever bare patch of flesh they could reach at the same time. Heath caught her waist abruptly, shoved her to one end of the couch and fell over her, flattening her breasts with the weight of his chest. He undulated against the tight little spikes her nipples had become as if seeking a more comfortable position. The delicious abrasion

of his hair roughened chest against her sensitive nipples sent keen shards of sensation through her. She arched her back, following his movements to rub against him.

He released her abruptly, surged upright until he was balanced on his knees and began a search for the closure of her slacks with an expression of frowning intensity. She grabbed for the side closure herself. He shoved her fingers away, released the button and zipper and dug his fingers into the waistband, pulling her slacks and panties off at the same time in a series of jerks that dragged her toward him. When he'd removed them, he caught her legs and parted them, guiding one to either side of his shoulders. One of her heels landed on the back of the sofa and one foot hit the floor as he released his grip and grabbed her waist again, shoving her back up the couch.

He burrowed his face between her breasts as they settled and then scaled one mound to the peak, capturing the throbbing bundle of nerves with his mouth. It was like being branded. The force of the jolt knocked the breath from her for several moments. The sensations that poured through her were so acute they were a shock to her system and she couldn't decide for several moments whether it was agonizing pleasure or only agonizing.

Her womb contracted almost painfully when the wave hit it and she sucked in the breath she'd lost, clawing her way back up toward consciousness. Moisture flooded her channel as the muscles along it began to quake frantically in a demand to be filled. "Heath!" she managed to gasp out in a voice that rang with nearly hysterical need.

It penetrated his brain just enough to work like a boxing bell. He let go of the nipple he'd been torturing and swooped down on the other, sending her spiraling toward darkness again. When she managed to pitch herself toward the surface once more, she sucked in a choked breath. "Now!" she gasped, planting a palm on his forehead and trying to pry him loose. "Heath!"

He jerked his head upward, staring at her drunkenly for a moment before the demand seemed to click in his mind and then he surged upward. She thought for a moment his only intent was to gag her with his mouth and silence her, but he arched his back, curling over her enough to spear the head of his cock into the mouth of her sex. She grunted into his mouth at impact, struggling to find a hold on him to drag him in. Her hands skimmed the hard muscles of his back and waist in a frantic search for a hold and finally closed on his buttocks. She tightened her grip as he thrust, ignoring the pumping motion of his hips and pulling steadily as he struggled to coat his cock with enough moisture to slide home.

After a moment, he broke from her lips, sucked in a couple of deep breaths and mentally threw his shoulder into his task, plowing a little deeper, shaking with the effort. She felt the skin along her inner thighs tighten with the strain and then ease as he broke the impasse and drove deeply. Thankfully, he caught himself before ramming her womb. She flinched anyway in anticipation, but then relaxed when he caught himself and focused entirely on enjoying the feel of his flesh as it glided back and forth along hers in pleasurable friction that sent waves of keen sensation through her.

The climb toward her peak was a swift one, aided by the accumulated need of days of doing without. She curled tightly around him—arms and legs—as she waited breathlessly for the ascent. The first electrifying jolt tensed every muscle in her body for endless seconds until it released its grip and then surged again, over and over until she was completely inundated by the heated waves of pleasure, her mind floating free of her body like a balloon caught in a current of air, drifting up toward the sunlight and then down toward a dark pit. She lost all buoyancy when the waves of bliss finally drifted away.

Heath uttered a choked string of curses and profound praise as he lost control. "Jesus! Baby, Jesus! Oh god, that feels ...."

At his words and the feel of his body jerking in release, a rash of pebbling skin erupted all over her, sending another warming wave through her. Gravity exerted itself, pulling at her until she felt almost too heavy to breathe. She yielded to it abruptly, allowing it to pull her toward oblivion.

Heath sank heavily against her, huffing hot breaths against her neck and ear that lifted flocks of goosebumps that raced across her skin in waves that made her shiver in reaction. He dragged in a deep, shuddering breath finally and shifted his weight toward the back of the couch, easing the pressure enough that Shiloh managed to suck in a deep, sustaining breath of her own.

"Baby?"

"Mmmm?"

She heard him swallow. "Let's get married."

A jolt went through her, reanimating her dying corpse. Her eyelids flew open and she turned her head to look at him, wondering if she'd been so close to unconsciousness that she'd imagined it. He drew back enough to bring her face into focus when she merely stared at him, his gaze moving over her face. He seemed to wrestle with himself. "I make good money now. I've got enough put back to start my own practice. It'll be tight for a while, but not too long, I don't think and then I can give you things ... like you're used to having."

Pain made her chest tighten, made it hard to breathe as she studied his face.

He swallowed again. "I know you're pregnant. You need me. I'm not my old man. I'll be a good father, a good husband."

"Heath," she managed to say unsteadily, trying to keep from bursting into tears.

"And I love you, baby. I love you so much I can hardly breathe sometimes ...."

Shiloh placed her fingers over his lips to stop him. As thrilled as she was to hear it, it hurt to hear desperation in his voice, uncertainty. "All you ever had to do was ask, baby. I would've leapt at the chance that first night we were together. Couldn't you tell how much I love you?"

He stared at her a long moment and abruptly grinned shakily. "Seriously?"

Shiloh grinned back at him. "Crazy man!" She moved closer, snuggling her face against his neck. "I was so scared you were going to leave again." Her own doubts surfaced abruptly and she pulled away to search his face. "This isn't just because I'm pregnant, is it? When did you figure it out?"

He looked uncomfortable, seemed to wrestle with something for several moments. "About that, baby ...."

"It *is* because of the baby, isn't it?"

He winced. "Don't be pissed off, ok? I just figured if you were pregnant you'd be more open to the idea."

Shiloh blinked at him. "You were *trying* to get me pregnant?"

"Not exactly," he said evasively.

"That's why you had those pills!"

His face reddened. "Shit! I was just trying to hedge my bets. I'm potent, but it's pretty damned hard to maintain that peak when you're fucking two or three times a day, damn it—for anybody!"

Shiloh bit her lip and then burst out laughing. "Heath! You were trying to ... *trap* me into marrying you by getting me pregnant?"

"I was working on the romance end, too!" he said a little indignantly. "Like I said, I just figured a little extra push in the right direction wouldn't hurt."

She shook her head at him, laughing. "You *are* crazy! You know that? In an entirely wonderful way ...."

"You aren't pissed off about it, then?"

She frowned, thinking it over. "Actually, I am. Damn it, Heath! I was so scared when I realized it I could hardly sleep, thinking you were going to tear out of here like the hounds of hell were after you if figured it out! And I'm still scared! Do you know how old I am?"

He stared at her with a mixture of dismay and indignation. "You thought I'd *dump* you if I got you pregnant? Well, you've got a hell of an opinion of me!" he growled. "And I know how old you are! I used to sit in your class and wait for you to bend over so I could see what color of panties you were wearing that day! And I know what I'm doing—knew what I was doing! I'm a doctor, remember?"

"Isn't it risky?" she asked unhappily.

His anger evaporated. "I'll take good care of you, baby. I swear it! I wanted you to have my babies. I want a family."

Shiloh's heart melted. "Really?"

He squeezed her. "Really."

"Wait a minute! Did you say babies? Plural? You did notice I've been sick as a dog, right?"

"Yeah, but it's not that bad, is it? And it's worth it, right? Just two?"

She narrowed her eyes at him for a moment. "Maybe," she said a little sullenly. "But you can't be bouncing on me first thing in the morning."

"Oh, I don't think I'll forget that any time soon! Never again!" He frowned. "When you're pregnant."

"Heath!"

He went to nuzzling his face against hers. "You didn't really think I'd dump you, did you?"

"It's not like you told me you loved me, you know," she said a little crossly.

He smiled against her neck. "Baby, I've been loving you until my dick's sore and coughin' dust."

"And nothing says 'I love you' from a man like nailing you at every opportunity and fucking your brains out?" she asked dryly.

"Exactly."

She sighed. "I didn't think you would ... dump me," she said after a moment. "I was afraid you'd be noble and sacrifice your plans for me."

"You *were* the plan."

That admission sent a thrill through her. "But I didn't know that."

"So ... you were going to be noble and not tell me?"

She shrugged.

"I knew it, damn it! There isn't *one* plan a man can make that his woman can't screw up!"

"Ass!" She thought it over. "When did you make the plan? Not at first, right?"

"I would've if I'd known you were single again. The last time I'd checked you were still with the dick-wad and showing no signs of leaving the prick. I was beginning to think I was going to have to do something drastic."

“You checked?”

He shrugged. “I’ve got an army buddy that went into security. I got him to check for me.”

“So ... you didn’t know I was single when you ... uh ... gave me a lap dance?”

“I knew you were single—Your sister told me. She just didn’t tell me it was you. I mean, I didn’t know the birthday girl I’d been hired for was you until I got out there. That was a real shock.”

“So ... after that?”

“Yeah. I might not have thought of it if you hadn’t looked so horrified when I didn’t use a condom.”

“So ... you fell instantly in love with me?”

“About ten years ago. That’s a long time to wait for something good to come into my life. Can we get married tomorrow?”

“The sooner the better,” Shiloh responded firmly. “You know everybody’s going to be counting the months to see if I entrapped you by getting pregnant, right?”

“Fuck ‘em! Let ‘em count.”

\* \* \* \*

Nine months later

Heath didn’t know if he was excited or just scared shitless, but he didn’t argue when they shooed him out of the room to get Shiloh prepped. Weak with relief for a moment’s respite, he stared at nothing in particular, listening intently to what was going on in the room. Finally, his eyes focused on the waiting room full of people, though—all waiting on someone, waiting to celebrate.

He didn’t have anybody—anyone but Shiloh. His chest tightened at the errant thought, but she was doing good. He wasn’t really worried ... much!

Fishing his phone from his pocket, he scrolled until he found the number he was looking for and punched the autodial. The voice on the other end cracked halfway through ‘hello’. Heath tensed. “Kenny?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“Heath. Don’t hang up! I just wanted to let you know you mother’s fixing to go to the delivery room to have your little brother ... if you’re interested.” He paused, waiting. “I know she’d like to see you. She misses you.”

He heard a convulsive swallow. “What hospital?”

Relief flooded Heath. When he’d told him, he hung up and called Shiloh’s sister. Her answering machine picked up so he left a message.

“We’re ready, Dr. Sinclair. You can come in now.”

Heath nodded a little jerkily, gathered his nerve with an effort and strode inside, trying to look calm and confident. He almost made it to the bed before Shiloh let out an animalistic groan that turned his knees to water.

He gripped her hand, looking around a little dazedly for some place to sit. Someone shoved a chair under his ass. “Sit down before you fall!”

Irritation flickered through him, but he *felt* pale. He gripped her hand like it was a lifeline, glancing up at the mirror from time to time but unable to focus on much of anything. The sounds around him seemed muted and garbled, as if he was under water.

"You're rubbing a hole in my hand," Shiloh gasped after a moment, jerking him out of his fog for a handful of seconds. He stared at their joined hands blankly and finally realized he'd been stroking his thumb back and forth over the same spot since he'd grabbed her hand.

"Sorry, baby! Breathe!"

"Push!" the doctor standing at the end of the bed like a goalie ordered her at the same moment. "Hold on now! We're almost there."

"Already?" Heath asked blankly, feeling the beginnings of relief. "That was fast!" He discovered Shiloh was glaring at him when he looked at her. He searched his mind. "It wasn't?"

She growled as another contraction hit her.

"That's ok—push!"

"It's a big fellow!" the nurse murmured.

Heath felt his heart jerk. He surged halfway out of his chair, stared at the bloody, mucus covered blob emerging from his favorite place on earth and wilted onto the chair again.

"What does he look like?" Shiloh gasped as the baby sucked in his first breath and uttered an indignant wail, hope threading her weak voice.

Heath swallowed convulsively several times, trying to think of words to describe what he'd just seen. "Beautiful," he said feebly, squeezing her hand until she winced.

The nurse beamed at him. "He *is* beautiful! Absolutely perfect!"

"He is?" Heath said hopefully, surging up again. Disentangling his fingers from Shiloh's he followed the nurse on wobbly legs as she walked off with the baby. Doubt filled him as he watched her and then a thread of hope when she'd wiped the gunk off his face.

"He's got a set of lungs on him!" the nurse commented, bundling him tightly.

Heath grinned. "Yeah! Good lungs."

"You want to hold him?"

He stared at the woman as if she'd lost her fucking mind.

Shrugging, she headed back to Shiloh and placed the baby on her stomach. Shiloh roused when the weight settled on her and reached for him. Cradling the baby in one arm, she touched his face. "Oh! He *is* beautiful! Heath! He looks just like you!"

Heath studied the red faced infant doubtfully. "You think so?"

"Mmmhmm," she hummed, lifting the baby to kiss his cheek. His mouth opened immediately and he twisted his head, searching for a nipple to latch on to. Shiloh chuckled. He started wailing again when she settled him in the crook of her arm once more, but quieted instantly when Shiloh bared her breast and offered him the nipple, latching onto it and digging his fists into her breast. She cooed at the baby, "Aw! Look!"

Heath *was* looking and he wasn't particularly happy about it. "You're going to breast feed?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Of course. That's what they're for, you know."

Actually, he did. He just didn't especially care for the thought that he'd been usurped for the next several months. He wrestled with himself a moment and finally shrugged it off. It was cute, he decided.

He was relieved when the nurse detached him from the breast, though, and placed him in an incubator. "Want to push him down to the nursery, papa?"

His chest swelled. He surged to his feet eagerly, suddenly remembered Shiloh and stopped to kiss her. "I'm going to take him to the nursery."

She patted his cheek drowsily.



He was so preoccupied watching the nurse weigh the baby once they reached the nursery and take his measurements it wasn't until she'd finished that he noticed the glass wall and the people standing on the other side. Relief flooded him when she saw that both Marcy and Kenny had come. Shiloh was used to having family that cared about her. It was going to make her happy to see they loved enough to come even if they'd kept their distance since the wedding because they weren't happy about her choice.

"If you've got someone waiting to see him, you can take over to the window and hold him up."

Uneasiness instantly seized him at the suggestion that he hold the newborn, but he nodded, holding his arms out. The nurse arranged his arms around the baby and he moved carefully to the window, turning so that Marcy and Kenny could see the baby. He didn't realize he was grinning like an idiot until he glanced at Marcy and Kenny again to see what they thought. Kenny was staring at the baby, grinning almost as broadly as Heath was. Marcy was smiling, as well. She met Heath's gaze for a long moment and then smiled at him and blew him a kiss. "Good job!"

Heath chuckled, studying his son with pride he'd never expected to feel. "Shiloh did all the work."

He was reluctant to leave even when the nurse took the baby, settled him in the incubator, and began herding him toward the door. "Your wife will be in her room now."

Heath's eyes widened at the reminder that he'd abandoned his poor baby after she'd been through hell to give him a son. "Shit!" Turning on his heel he began to stride away when it occurred to him he didn't know what room she was in.

"Ask at the nurse's station," the nurse advised him when he raced back to ask.

"Right!"

The nurse turned to grin at one of her co-workers when she'd watched him stride away. "That is one proud father!"

Her co-worker grinned back at her. "He almost fainted in the delivery room."

Her friend snorted. "He wouldn't be the first."

"Or the last!"

Heath didn't realize he'd picked up a parade until he paused at the door to Shiloh's room. Glancing behind him, he found Kenny and Marcy. "Just give me a second. I'll see if she's awake. She was about two-thirds gone when I left her."

She looked like she was asleep, but she opened her eyes and smiled when he paused, trying to decide whether to leave or not. "How much does he weigh?"

He grinned at her, searched his mind, and came up with part of the answer. "Almost eight ... I think." He paused. "You've got visitors."

She looked surprised but pleased. "Tell them to come in."

He sent Marcy in as soon as he reached the door but detained Kenny, giving him a stern look. "You aren't going to hurt her feelings, are you? She's a good woman. You don't know how lucky you are. I would've given anything to have a mother like her."

Resentment flickered Kenny's eyes, but he looked away guiltily after a moment. "I won't."

"Your word of honor as a southern gentleman?"

Kenny stared at him blankly a moment and finally grinned a little sheepishly. "My word of honor as southern gentleman," he agreed.

Dropping an arm around his shoulders, Heath led him into the room. Shiloh glanced at them, did a double take and sat up straighter, holding her arms out hopefully. “Kenny!”

Heath felt his chest tighten as Kenny surged toward her and leaned down to embrace her.

Marcy watched them for a moment and glanced at Heath. He held out his hand when she stopped in front of him. Ignoring it, she hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. “I begin to understand why Shiloh loves you so desperately, Heath Sinclair.”

Heath felt his throat close. It was almost more reassuring that her sister believed Shiloh loved him than to hear Shiloh say it—not that he ever got tired of hearing it or suffered a lot of doubt anymore! “I’d move heaven and earth for her.”

She patted his cheek. “I’m beginning to think you could do it, too!”

The End.