

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a man and a woman in a nightclub. The man, in the foreground, is shirtless and wearing an open black jacket, looking directly at the camera. The woman, behind him, has long blonde hair and is wearing a black top. The scene is lit with vibrant blue and purple stage lights, and a crowd of people is visible in the background.

EARTH SCENTS 1

FALLING Star

OLIVIA BRYNN

Falling Star
by Olivia Brynn

Atlantic Bridge

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by Olivia Brynn

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Blurb

Adam Nash is a superstar. House, cars, money, women ... he's got it all. Yeah, he's conceited, but with his looks and talent why shouldn't he be? Not until he's banned from another hotel for his drunken antics does he realize that it's time to grow up and treat his music as a career and not a free ride.

Now Adam has set his sights on florist Jade Graham. She's not the kind of woman he's used to, she's too smart to play the role of arm-candy. Adam is going to have to keep his celebrity status a secret for as long as possible, because what woman in her right mind would get attached to a playboy without a conscience? Jade Graham is going to be one tough case, but she seems hell bent on proving that there is more than one way for a star to fall.

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Chapter One

"You forgot her birthday?" Adam's bodyguard shook his bald head with incredulous pity.

Adam didn't need Tyrell to tell him he had blown it. He already knew he would be in trouble. Carley was the one woman in his life that only expected one thing from him, and that was a card on her birthday. Just a card, nothing else. He'd failed to remember only one birthday in the four and a half years she'd been running his ... well, his life. It was two years ago, but he'd never forget how she'd made the following week hell on him. She deliberately "forgot" his dry cleaning, and sent emails to three different women inviting them on a date for the same night. Even Carley's husband joined in, and called to harass him. God, he didn't want to go through that again!

Adam scowled at the big man sitting across from him in the limousine. Tyrell might intimidate everyone else with his Mike Tyson look, but it sure as hell didn't scare Adam. "I didn't forget; I was busy."

Maybe he did forget. You can forget a lot of shit when you're falling over drunk. Adam and Tyrell had just returned from New York. After the last stop on his *Karina Live* tour two weeks ago, he made a whirlwind publicity drive with a stop at each of the late-night talk shows, followed by his stint in hosting *Saturday Night Live*. He was only a day late, and he *had* been out of town for Christ's sake. Maybe she'd

understand. He ran his hands through his hair. Already he'd have to listen to her bitching about the debacle in Florida.

His stomach churned. It would take him years to live down that night in Miami three months ago. He never knew four beautiful women could cause so much damage to one hotel room. He couldn't even explain how the curtains caught fire, but he suspected one of them, Brandi, if he had to guess, had been lighting her crack pipe while already half passed out on the floor. He never used that shit himself, but he could just see how easily drugs could get linked to his name in the papers, with his less-than-sterling reputation. Thank God he had people on his payroll to cover that shit up.

He rubbed his stomach as it rolled again. Who the hell was he kidding? Nothing gets completely covered up. He wasn't allowed back in that hotel, so he couldn't keep that a secret. Even his band members were smart enough to separate themselves from him on the road. His publicist called two days later to ream him a new asshole. *"Thanks to that bullshit, you lost two shows in the bible belt. Your career is going into the crapper, because you're acting like a goddamned fifteen-year-old left home alone."* He was right. No wonder the press loved to hate him. It wasn't until the morning after that ass chewing, when he woke up alone and hung over, that he realized how much he deserved it. He had to think hard to find a solid day in the four months before that night where he was completely sober.

His mother would be ashamed, which meant the first ass he'd have to kiss would be Carley's. He was pretty sure his mother paid her to chew him out when he acted like he did.

He would really be asking for it if he went into that spanking without so much as a birthday card.

"There ... there ... pull over." Adam knocked on the window behind his driver. The tiny flower shop on the corner looked out of place in the middle of the deserted street, almost as if it was placed there for him to see at this particular moment. He released his seat belt and reached for the door handle.

Tyrell blustered, "Hey ... let me..."

Adam cut him off with a dismissive wave. "No one's around. I'll run in and out." Adam barely waited for the car to stop rolling before he hopped out. Out of habit, he shot a quick glance up and down the sidewalk before going into the shop to an electronic "ding-dong" signaling his entrance.

"I'll be right with you!" a woman's voice came from the back room, behind a set of wooden louvered doors that reminded him of the old west saloon on the set of the video for "Not Tonight", his first hit single five years ago. He had been recording, touring or filming videos almost non-stop since then. Now, he had some time to himself before he went back into the studio to record next year's release, *Firestorm*.

And he was going to use every minute to relax, recharge and repent. No one would know what to think of the new Adam Nash.

He was the only customer in the place, and his shoulders dropped in relief. He looked around, and realized that he'd never actually been inside a flower shop. Any floral purchases were always done over the phone or through Carley. One wall was lined with shelves and every conceivable spot was filled

with vases. Glass, porcelain, crystal and even wood. There must have been hundreds of vases on that wall. He walked around the huge coolers full of floral arrangements that dominated the center of the space, and into another corner of the room where a plethora of teddy bears sat piled on a tri-level table. One was about to fall off the side, and some strange compulsion made him reach down to adjust it.

"Sorry about that. I was covered in baby's breath."

He straightened and spun around. The owner of the voice stood before him, wiping her hands on a terry-cloth towel. She wore a pair of faded blue jeans that hugged her shape and rode just below her waist. Her body was compact but she had just the right curves in just the right places. She had a canvas half apron on, green handled tools poked out from the pockets. His eyes moved up the pink polo shirt, with the florist logo above her left breast—at least that was his excuse for allowing his gaze to linger for a fraction of a moment, a thirty-four C, if he wasn't mistaken, and he rarely was. Continuing upward, he took in a long graceful throat and a delicate-shaped face. One that reminded him of a painting he once saw at ... who? Well, someone's house. Reddish blond hair was pulled into a thick ponytail at her nape, but curling strands fell free and brushed the flawless skin of her cheeks and neck. Jesus, she was beautiful! When he finally met her pale green eyes, he saw that she was regarding him curiously. He had taken too long to respond, and she was probably getting nervous.

"I ... uh, need some flowers." *Great Adam. Mr. Suave superstar with a brilliant opening line.* It did make her smile though.

Her eyes twinkled prettily. "You're in luck. I have a few on hand."

He smiled back; his famous pin-up poster smile, the one that won him a sponsorship contract with the toothpaste people. He waited for the recognition in her eyes, and braced himself for the myriad questions he knew he'd have to face before actually getting a vase full of flowers and leaving.

"Anything in particular, or should I just throw something together?" Her expression didn't change. Either she didn't recognize him, or she wasn't impressed by his fame enough to comment.

That was puzzling. Everybody knew who Adam Nash was. He cocked his head to look at her more closely. She didn't look stupid. She didn't sound like someone who wasn't in touch with reality. Why wouldn't she recognize him, and if she did, why didn't she act like she cared that he was in her little shop?

"I don't know." He looked around the room. "I've never actually been inside one of these places. I thought all flowers came from some phone number in cyber space."

"I understand." She laughed, a sexy throaty laugh that sunk through his clothes and into his skin. "Why don't you tell me the occasion, and I can give you some suggestions."

She turned to walk back toward the counter, and Adam was left admiring her round little derriere. *Very nice.* He'd barely snapped his attention back above her waist when she

turned to face him and he realized she had expected him to follow. He did, on feet that suddenly seemed very large and heavy. Good God, he was acting like a bumbling idiot!

She was smiling at him again. Or still. With the color of her hair, he expected to see tons of freckles on her skin, but it was flawless. Smooth and clear. Oh wait, there was a dusting of freckles on the bridge of her nose. That's cute. Most women he knew would slather on a thick coat of makeup to cover those. Come to think of it, she wasn't wearing lipstick either. He let his mind wander into thoughts of what those lips might taste like. When was the last time he'd kissed a woman who wasn't made up to walk down the red carpet?

"Birthday? Anniversary?" Her voice shook him back into the present.

"What?" Why was his heart pounding?

"The flowers. Is there an occasion, or did you just want to surprise her for no reason?"

Ah, so that's why she didn't show any interest. She didn't want to move in on another woman's territory. He didn't pause to think about how her lack of recognition fell into second place behind the fact that she wasn't attracted. "How do you know I'm buying them for a woman?" He raised an eyebrow in that sexy way video directors loved.

Her smile faltered for only a second. "I'm ... sorry, I didn't mean to assume." She covered his fingers on the counter with her soft hand, and gave them a quick pat. "Does your boyfriend have a favorite flower?"

"No ... oh God ... that didn't..." *What's wrong with you Nash?* "No, I'm not gay. The flowers are for a woman, I was

just trying ... futilely ... to give you a hard time." He tried the smile again. Maybe she'd recognize him if he threw in a wink. That trademark wink made the audience on Oprah scream wildly.

Nothing. Nothing except another pat on the hand, which was nice...

"How about lilies? She probably gets enough roses." The statement ended more like a question.

Damn. In the years he'd been in the public eye, this had to be the first time a woman didn't fall all over herself to either flirt with him, or barrage him with questions about one song or another. Hadn't he wondered what it would be like to walk into a public place and be treated like every other Joe Schmoe off the street? Well, here it was, and now he couldn't actually decide whether he liked it or not.

The electronic tones announced another customer walking through the door. Adam glanced over his shoulder and saw Tyrell step inside. Adam gave him a pointed look, and used only his eyes to gesture for him to leave. Tyrell knew his stuff. He gave one barely perceptible nod, and left as quietly as he'd come in.

Adam watched him stand against the door, folding his arms in his typical bodyguard stance.

"Well, that was weird."

Adam turned back to the woman, whose eyes were narrowed on Tyrell's outline on the glass.

"Kind of creepy," she continued. "Maybe I should call..."

"Nah, he's probably just looking for someone." He couldn't help smiling. Was this woman for real? How could she not

recognize Tyrell for what he was ... a big bald black guy, wearing a dark suit, opaque sunglasses, and arms crossed over his huge chest, as he practically blocked the shop door?

"I think I'd like to see those lilies," he said quickly. He wanted more time alone with her. A part of him wanted to enjoy the anonymity, and another part wanted to see her face when she finally recognized him.

"Alright." She smiled again. "Let me put something together, I'll be right back." She cast another glance at Tyrell before pushing through the louvered doors and out of his sight.

Adam crossed to the door in three strides. He couldn't open it to speak to Tyrell, or he'd trip the motion detector. He knocked on the window to get Tyrell's attention, and waved him away. He barely made it back to the counter before she emerged.

Her smile was beautiful. "What do you think?" She had a crystal vase filled with a half dozen white lilies and three lavender-tipped pink roses. The blossoms were interspersed with thick dark green leaves.

"Did you ... just do that?" He didn't know anything about floral arrangements, but it looked damn good to him.

"Well, no, I was working on this when you walked in. I've been trying to fill the cooler all morning."

"It's perfect. I'll take it."

She seemed pleased. "And the teddy bear?"

"The wha ... oh." Clenched in his hand was the teddy bear he'd been straightening. "Yeah I guess the teddy bear too." She typed into the aging register, which sounded like it was

on its last leg. It even had a shrill bell when she hit the total button and read him the amount.

He pulled out his wallet. Did he give her a credit card? She'd recognize the name ... or would she? No. This was too fun. He had to keep playing this up. He handed her cash, and purposefully brushed his fingers against hers during the transfer. Was it her skin that tingled against his, or did his tingle against hers? Adam figured she felt it too, because she pulled her hand away immediately.

"Are you always here alone?"

She glanced at the door, and he noticed a fleeting look of relief when she saw that Tyrell wasn't still standing there.

"I'm not alone; I've got help in the back room."

She was lying, but he didn't blame her.

Oh yes, he was coming back. The next time he saw her, he knew she'd figure out who he was, and she'd be embarrassed for today...

"Thank you for your help, Miss..."

She looked at his outstretched hand for just a second, then back to meet his eye. "Jade," she said softly, and laid her hand in his.

Her fingers were cool, probably from working with refrigerated flowers and water. Cool, soft and ... tingly.

"I'll be back, Jade." He scooped up his purchases and walked to the door.

"Please do. You'll be a pro before you know it."

He threw another wink over his shoulder, one last attempt at recognition, but it was futile. She'd busied herself with a stack of receipts by the register.

He closed the door behind him, and saw a small crowd around his limousine.

Damn. He didn't want a scene, especially in front of that florist.

"What took so long?" Tyrell was beside him in an instant. "Shit, man, the vultures are circling."

Adam shoved the flowers and teddy bear into Tyrell's arms. "Pick me up on the other side of the alley."

"But..."

"Just do it. They only want to see who's going to get into the car. Just get in and pick me up." He slid on a pair of dark glasses and walked down the alley.

His heels clicked on the pavement and echoed off the tall buildings around him. When was the last time he'd walked down an alley? Alone? His manager would kill him if he knew. He was surprised Tyrell gave in so easily. By the time he reached the other end of the block, Tyrell was standing outside the open limo door.

It wasn't until they were both safely buckled in that the car rolled back into traffic. Adam smiled when he saw the vase which was propped in a corner of the seat facing him. Tyrell had wrapped a seatbelt around the vase, and the teddy bear's back end stuck out from underneath the crystal. He laughed, and was about to comment when Tyrell spoke.

"You wanna tell me what the fuck that was about?" The man's voice was never raised. He always maintained the coarse decibel just above a whisper. The depth of Tyrell's voice was what made him even sound dangerous.

"You don't like the teddy bear?" Adam grinned.

"What the fuck was that all about, Adam?"

"I didn't want to get in the car with the crowd, that's all."

Tyrell nodded slowly. "That part I got. I don't like you running down the alleys of the city, but I know where you're coming from." He unbuttoned his suit jacket, but didn't loosen his tie. Adam had never seen the man in anything but a dark suit and white shirt. Never, in the three years he'd been in Adam's employ, had Tyrell even loosened his tie. "I'm talking about the shop. Why didn't you want me in there?"

"What are you, paranoid? You think we were talking about you?"

Tyrell gave him the lazy annoyed look that told Adam his questions didn't merit a response. "The woman didn't recognize me."

Tyrell narrowed his eyes in confusion. "You're shitting me."

"I'm serious. She stood there talking to me the whole time. Not a flicker."

Tyrell leaned back, and stared at Adam, as if he was trying to see if he looked any different today than he did two months ago at the Country Music Award Ceremony. "Maybe she's ... not all there."

Adam shook his head. "She's perfectly sane. Intelligent." He shrugged. "The only thing I can think of is that maybe the thought of Adam Nash coming into her little flower shop was too outlandish to believe."

Tyrell considered this. "You know, not everyone in the world is a country music fan. There are even country music fans that wouldn't know you. It's not like you're Tom Cruise or anything."

Adam ignored him. "It was weird, you know? Remember how I wished I could just go somewhere normal without being Adam Nash—superstar?"

"Uh huh."

Adam raised his hands. "This was it. She didn't even ask my name."

"So was it all you thought it would be?" Tyrell grinned, his white teeth shining bright against his dark skin.

Adam didn't answer right away. He'd be lying if he said he liked it. It was different, that was for sure.

"I think it bothered you more because it was a beautiful woman."

Adam glanced up at Tyrell. He was all but laughing at his boss. Adam thought about it, and realized he was right. If it had been a man, he wouldn't have thought anything about it. It wasn't as if he gave her his name and she was unimpressed. Maybe she was just busy. Distracted. Yeah, that's it.

The rest of the ride back to his mansion on the hill was made in silence. Adam couldn't help wondering if giving her his name would have made a difference. Wouldn't that be the ultimate blow to his ego if she didn't even recognize it?

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Chapter Two

"Good morning, Earth Scents."

"Is this Jade?" Adam smiled. He recognized her voice, of course it was her.

"It is. Who is this?"

"My name is Adam. You sold me some lilies last week."

His grin only widened at the pause. Probably as soon as he walked out of her shop that day, she figured out who he was. He'd just given her his first name, and now she was too flustered to speak.

"I apologize, sir, but I sell a lot of lilies, and I couldn't possibly remember each order. Was there a problem with your bouquet?"

You've got to be kidding. So he really was going to have to go through with this charade. On to plan B. "No Jade. Nothing was wrong with the flowers. She especially liked the teddy bear."

She laughed. Adam could almost see the bright smile through the phone. "I'm glad she liked them. Is ... was there ... I'm sorry ... Adam. Your name just doesn't ring a bell."

"I don't think I gave you my name, I apologize." *And you didn't ask*, he added silently. Seriously, this was getting a little ridiculous.

"Well, I appreciate the call sir. I hope you'll think of us the next time you need to spread a little sunshine."

Was she brushing him off? He stifled a laugh. "I assure you I will, but that's not why I called." Jesus she was making him

work for this, wasn't she? He purposefully waited to continue, just to irritate her a bit. "The lilies were such a hit, I wanted to take the florist out to celebrate."

"Well now, if they were that big of a hit, she probably wouldn't want you to celebrate with the florist."

"I doubt my secretary would mind if I took you to dinner."

"Oh," she laughed. "I see. That's ah..." Her voice faded.

He hadn't been turned down by a female since seventh grade, but he had the feeling that was what was coming.

"When do you close Earth Scents?"

"Mr... uh Adam, I haven't agreed to dinner with you."

Was he scaring her? "No, but you haven't hung up on me yet either."

"I'm at a disadvantage, here. When did you come in?"

Was he that forgettable? Even if his face wasn't plastered all over every tabloid in the supermarket checkout line, he liked to think he was a fairly good-looking guy. "I'm trying very hard not to be offended that you don't remember me. Maybe it was just because it was my first time in a flower shop."

Another pause. "Oh! Yes, I remember now. I embarrassed myself when I assumed you were gay."

Adam laughed. "That was me."

"No, you didn't give me your name."

"Well, now you have it. Can I pick you up at home, or would you rather I stop by Earth Scents?"

"I don't remember you as being this tenacious when you were in my shop."

"You don't remember me at all, so that's not saying much." Is this what the average man has to go through?
"Look, it's just dinner. I'll even spring for dessert."

He couldn't believe he was bouncing his leg impatiently. Who cares if she turns him down? There was always that supermodel who gave him her phone number last week. Though at this particular moment he couldn't remember her name. *Really Adam. Who cares if she turns you down?*

He cared. Probably just out of pride, but he cared.

"I'm not really dressed for a dinner date. I'm afraid I got in a fight with some foliage this afternoon and I'm covered in soil. By the time I get home and change..."

Okay, Plan C. "We can save the dress-up thing for another time. All I had in mind tonight was a greasy burger at a family restaurant, maybe a beer or two. No one will notice a little bit of dirt." At her continued reluctance, he couldn't believe he actually added, "Please?"

It worked. She laughed, and gave in. "Alright. I close the shop at six, should I meet you somewhere?"

"What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't pick you up?"

"Oh, so you're a *gentleman*?" He could actually hear her smile in her words. Why that pleased him so much, he didn't know.

"You bet your ass! Oh ... oops." He tried to sound contrite, and was rewarded with another throaty laugh in his ear. Damn it was sexy.

"Well, kind sir, I have a customer so I have to bid you farewell. I'll see you at six."

"Good bye Jade."

"Good bye Adam."

He waited until the phone went dead before he hung up his phone. Well, Carley's office phone. He didn't want to give too much away. Not yet.

He grinned. This was going to be good. "Change of plans Carley," he yelled through the open door. "Buster's instead. Let the others know." He'd let Carley tell Tyrell. That man hated any change in his organized schedule.

Carley walked back into the office, her footsteps muted on the plush grey carpet, but she couldn't hide the stumble in her step. "Buster's? You're taking a woman to a ... chain restaurant?" Carley's voice told him she was shocked, the look she gave him from behind those grandmotherly eyeglasses hinted at her question of his sanity.

"Is that a problem?"

"I ... I don't know." She patted the tight coiffure of silver curls, and adjusted her glasses. "I've never worked with them..."

"How hard can it be?" Adam leaned back in Carley's coveted chair, folded his hands behind his head and shot her the cocky look that he knew irritated her to no end. Just for fun, he propped his crossed ankles on her desk. "They should jump at the offer. I'm bringing in fifteen tables, and I've been told I'm a pretty good tipper." Maybe he'd have to add a family to his cast of players. Damn. There wasn't time.

"That's not it and you know it." Carley stormed over and knocked his feet to the floor. "Marc's restaurant is used to

you high and mighty types. I'm not sure Buster's is willing to close its doors for an hour so you can dine in peace."

Adam stood, framed her lined face in his hands, kissed each cheek, and then sat her down in her chair that he'd just vacated so she could get to work on his project. "I trust you to work your magic. Buster's off Huntington Drive at six." He crossed the room, surprised when she didn't bluster after him. "And Carley?" He turned in the doorway. "I'll need at least three."

He couldn't decipher her grumblings, but he would put money on swear words. "Three what?"

"Three hours." He winked, and then took off down the hallway before his words registered, and a stapler could fly at his head.

Why was everyone buying flowers *today*?

Jade tucked a stray piece of hair back behind her ear, and rang up yet another customer. She wasn't complaining ... business was great. Thank god Dean was here, or she would really be in a bind.

"Miss? This card says that this is a dahlia." One woman rudely called Jade's attention away from her register transaction, but Jade could only smile. "But what is it really?"

Jade handed her current customer her change and a receipt, and thanked her with a smile before turning her attention to the woman speaking, whose jowls dragged her cheeks down into a permanent frown. "That is an Aurora's Kiss Dahlia, quite unlike any other for sure." *Kindly purchase it.* Jade liked to add that silent suggestion at the end of every conversation with a customer. Alfred always told her to add a

positive ending silently to the end of every conversation with another, and it would show through her eyes. Jade wasn't sure he meant for her to use her powers of suggestion to perpetuate sales, but she'd been doing it for so long, it was now just part of how she was.

"I absolutely love it," the bulldog lady said with what must be a smile behind those ruddy cheeks. "I'm going to need five hundred of these for my Gala in December."

Thank you Alfred. As she wrote up the order, Dean squeezed by to assist the other customers. Good God, this would be a record-breaking day, Jade smiled. It wouldn't take much to shatter that ceiling. They'd only been in business six months. Perhaps the word of mouth advertizing was panning out. Three more hours of this, and she'd be tempted to call Adam and cancel their date. If she had his phone number. And as if she really would.

"Your corsage will be ready by noon on Saturday," she told her last customer, a young man of about fourteen who was accompanied by what looked to be an older sister. "If I don't see you, have a good time at your dance."

"Thanks." He grinned, showing a mouthful of braces.

"Come on. Now's the fun part ... shoes." The sister all but dragged the poor boy behind her, and Jade leaned over the counter smiling after them. The door was held for the couple by another man walking in.

So much for a break. She stood upright and wiped off the counter before facing him.

It was him. Adam. She checked her watch. Five minutes until six. She looked back up, and he stepped away from the

glare of the early evening sun behind him. It was him alright. Even with the dark sunglasses on, she remembered him. He wore roomy blue jeans, not baggy like the kids were wearing, but certainly not tight—enough—and a plain white collared shirt, tucked in but unbuttoned at his neck, and rolled up at his sleeves. One of his eyebrows arched higher than the other, and the irregularity gave him a teasing air. She had described his hair as brown to Dean, but now she could tell that the intentionally messy thick strands were a multitude of shades of dark blond. Oh yeah, this was the same man she daydreamed about last week, down to the sexy smile that she remembered.

He pulled off his dark glasses. "Hello Jade." The greeting was innocent enough, but he had a way of speaking with that well-modulated voice that made her think of phone sex. His dark blue eyes seemed to be as busy as hers. "Remember me now?"

"Hello." Her response was breathy and a bit embarrassing. She cleared her throat. "Yes, I remember you Adam. I guess I just didn't recognize your voice. I'm ... sorry ... I'm not quite ready."

"I'm a little early." He walked toward the counter. He looked at her like a starving man would eye a five-course meal.

"Let me ... get my purse and ... I'll be right back."

Come on, Jade. Pull yourself together. It's just a man, and this is just a dinner date. Her brain knew the score, but her internal organs seemed to pay no mind. Who knew they could vibrate like that? She fanned herself, and stopped by the tiny

cubicle that dared to call itself a restroom to fix her hair, and wash any earthy remnants from her hands. Her nipples poked through her shirt. She might as well hold a neon sign up to her chest advertizing her aroused state. She pressed her palms against them to force them back into submission. That didn't really help. Like naughty children, they only enjoyed the attention she gave them, and hungered for more. She studied her reflection. The slipping barrette was easily fixed, and she ran her fingers through her waves, making a face at their unruliness. What she would give for straight hair like the models wore these days. A spritz of perfume, and oh, the smudged eyeliner ... there. Not bad. It was just too late for drastic changes. Her blue jeans and Earth Scents polo shirt would have to do. She'd warned him, right? She picked up her purse from the tiny office behind the bathroom, then worked her way down the narrow hallway to the back room, where she took off her green apron and hung it on a hook by the door.

"Dean, I'm heading out. I'll flip the sign and lock up behind me."

Dean was elbows deep in roses. "Alright beautiful." He winked. "Your date is here?" His wavy black hair fell over his brow, proving he had been just as busy as she. Rarely did Dean let a strand of hair fall out of place.

She nodded, but put a hand up to stop him when he shook his hands off, and made toward the door to the sales floor behind her. "Dean don't."

"Don't what?" He picked up a towel and continued walking.

"I don't think the poor guy is ready to meet the family."

"I'm hardly family."

Jade blocked the doorway with two stiff arms on the doorjamb. She raised an eyebrow meaningfully.

"Oh, I get it. Family. Very funny Jade."

"Let me at least have dinner with the guy before you have the chance to turn his head, okay?" she teased, keeping her voice low. This Adam guy would be Dean's dream come true. He always was a sucker for tall-blond-and-handsome.

"That good?" Dean's mouth all but watered. His brown eyes glittered in interest and he craned his neck, as if he could see through the dark hallway into the shop.

"That good, but not gay, remember? Get over it Dean. Some of the good ones belong to us women you know."

"Only the scared ones." He winked, which earned him a solid punch in his arm. "Fine. Don't share." He smiled mischievously. "Unless you think he might go for that...?" He laughed at her scowl, and sidestepped another slug. "Go on then ... sneak away with your hottie. But don't forget the code."

"How could I forget the code?" Jade kissed Dean's cheek. Ever since meeting Dean she'd had to excuse herself from her date in order to text him the address where she was, a freakiness rating between one and ten, a turn-on rating, and any request to be rescued. Jade's last nightmare date was four months ago, and her "1543 Central Ave, 10, 0, omg please!" text brought Dean to the movie theater with an affected jealous rage. Everyone should have a friend like Dean Chambers.

"Thank you big brother." She dusted her jeans once more before emerging to the showroom. Adam ... *what was his last name? Hmm, well ... anyway*, Adam was staring out the front window at the traffic beyond.

"I'm ready." She reached the door, and flipped the old-fashioned "closed" sign over on its suction cup.

Adam turned to face her, and pulled his hands out of his pockets to open the door. "So you really do have someone in the back room."

Jade glanced up at him curiously before locking the door with her key behind them. "What do you mean?"

He put one of those strong lean hands on her shoulder and led her down the sidewalk. "I thought you were making up your help that day. To be cautious."

"Oh, well I have help on most days, and a delivery driver every day of the week, but there are times it's just me. I guess I'll leave you to wonder if I was making it up that day." When Adam showed up that day she was alone. Ella only worked a few hours that morning, and since it was so slow, Jade had sent her home about an hour before he walked in. Jade remembered wishing Dean were there to see the Adonis of a man who she assumed was gay. Dean snickered about that for days afterward, and even bought her replacement batteries for her "gaydar". She laughed inwardly at the memory.

Adam opened the door of a silver sedan parked on the street. He politely held the door for her and closed it after her. The car smelled of cleaning chemicals, like it had just been detailed. She smothered a smile at the thought of a man

cleaning out his car before a date. He walked around the hood of the car, but paused to type into his cell phone. By the time he got in the driver's seat, he'd put on those opaque glasses and flashed her a toothy grin. "Buckled in?"

"Oh ... right." She fumbled for the seatbelt.

He snapped his belt, then pulled the car into traffic. Jade was entranced by his shoes. Strange, she'd never thought of herself as having a foot fetish, but even this man's shoes were sexy. Nothing fancy, just brown leather, square-toed things, but she had an irrational desire to see his bare feet. *Good lord, Jade. Get a hold of yourself!*

"Looks like you had a busy day at Earth Scents, if your empty coolers are any indication."

Jade pulled her eyes away from her first foot-crush, and swallowed. "It was. I'm so glad Dean was there today, or I would have lost it on some poor unsuspecting customer."

"Dean?"

"My business partner. We both studied plant science at Berkeley. He even went with me to Colombia where we spent the last six years studying and collecting rare plants for development in the States."

"Oh, that explains it." Adam nodded slowly.

Jade replayed the last few seconds of their conversation, but couldn't see what she missed. "That explains what?"

Adam shot a sideways glance at her, almost as if he was embarrassed at speaking aloud. "I ... just thought that you were pretty smart. I should have known you had a college degree."

She didn't believe for one second that was what he meant, but couldn't pursue it. She didn't know this man from Adam ... *oh that's funny.*

"So is this Dean guy a ... boyfriend or something?" His eyes were on the road, but she couldn't read anything anyway behind those dark glasses.

"Dean is my best friend," she said honestly. She was always up front about Dean with the men she dated. Not that she'd dated a lot. Or even seriously, but whoever wanted even a small part in Jade Graham's life had to take Dean with it. "But he's not my boyfriend. I'm not his type."

"I can't believe that." Adam faced her seriously for a small moment, before returning his attention back to traffic. "You're every man's type."

Jade's blood thickened with his words. Thickened and simmered. She felt the heat in her cheeks, and looked away before he saw her embarrassing blush.

"Well, thank you ... but I'm definitely not Dean's type." She waited until her face was back to a normal temperature before facing him again. He stopped at a red light. "But you certainly would be." She smiled naughtily.

He returned her smile with one equally mischievous. "Oh. I see. I'm ... uh ... flattered, but uninterested."

"Well that's good. You just saved me from asking the awkward 'are you gay' question that inevitably pops up during dinner."

He laughed. Out loud. The sound was so unexpected, and so full and rich, that Jade's breath caught. She was still

reeling from its effect on her when he pulled into the parking lot of Buster's.

"Is this okay?" He unbuckled his seatbelt and checked the view from each tinted window.

"This is just fine." She wasn't sure he heard her; he scanned the parking lot one more time, even turning in his seat to look behind them before opening his door and stepping out. Jade lifted an eyebrow curiously. What he was looking for, she didn't know, but she found herself looking as well. He waited on the sidewalk to offer his hand.

Somewhat surprised, she placed her hand in his, and he blessed her with another one of those sexy smiles. If only he would take off those dark glasses.

"Welcome to Buster's!" A cheerful twenty-something blonde greeted them. This girl looked practically giddy with excitement, and couldn't take her eyes off either Adam or Jade. Well, mostly Adam. What a perfect person for the hostess job. She led them through the dim restaurant to a corner booth, below a wall collage of memorabilia in tribute to Elvis. The chatter from a sportscast reached their table from the television hanging near the bar in the center of the floor. Adam waited for Jade to sit down before he slid into the booth across from her.

"I'm really glad you chose Buster's tonight. We've got some great specials. We've got a fifteen-ounce house steak..."

Jade couldn't concentrate on the specials. She was too enthralled by watching the hostess. She'd bent over just enough to give him a view of her cleavage. Subtlety was a

lost art. Jade laughed, she couldn't help it. Maybe Adam was used to the treatment, being the way-too-adorable man he was. She watched him carefully, to see how he would handle it.

He gave the girl a smile, thanked her, and then dismissed her by leaning across the table and speaking to Jade with a grin. "I hope you're hungry. I hear they've got a great cheesecake."

It was a little rude, but the hostess, without having a reason to stay, walked away with a long backward glance.

"I think you have an admirer." Jade leaned over the table.

"So it seems." Adam looked around the restaurant. His eyes stopped at each tableful of customers. The restaurant was filled to about half-capacity, but no one seemed to notice the newest customers in the corner booth.

"Do you get that kind of attention wherever you go?" she teased, hoping to draw him back out of the pensive mood he now seemed to be in. He didn't answer her, but he did lift his dark eyebrows and relax just a bit. He even leaned against the wall, and bent one leg, propping a foot on the booth. His body language said casual, but his eyes remained busy. Maybe he was studying the veritable flea market nailed to every exposed surface. Wasn't The Beatles' *White Album* cover too precious to be affixed to a restaurant wall? Jade shrugged. What did she know?

She shifted in order to match his position on her bench. "So ... Adam. I don't even know your last name."

That got his attention. His eyes snapped to hers, and he smiled. "I don't think I got yours either."

Before she could respond, a server approached the table. "Hello, I'm Tina." She too looked long and hard at Adam, and barely swept her eyes over Jade. "Can I start you off with an appetizer?"

"Jade?" Adam asked.

"Not tonight, thank you Tina."

At least Tina was able to rein in her hormones enough to do her job, Jade smirked. After ordering a glass of water and a chardonnay, Jade opened her menu.

The code! Jade wasn't able to excuse herself until after Tina returned to take their order. She wended her way through the tables and into the bathroom to type in a quick text message to Dean.

"Buster's on Huntington. 1, 10, don't u dare."

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Chapter Three

"Where are you?" Adam hissed.

"Nash," Tyrell's amusement came through the phone. "You looked right at me in the parking lot. I followed you in..."

"Whatever. Did you see the hostess?"

"Yes, I talked to her. She's going to be busy in the kitchen from now on, but only because I promised her an autographed copy of your new CD. She showed me her tattoo in your honor, and she even has "Taking it Easy" as her ringtone. Give her a break, she can't help a few jitters."

Adam ran his free hand down his face. "She almost blew it."

"Big deal. Your woman's gonna figure it out sooner or later. You can't live some double life." He chuckled. "You're making it worse by acting like a damn fool. No wonder she took off to the bathroom like she did. She's probably calling someone to come rescue her."

Damn. The only one acting suspicious was him. The other patrons were playing their parts well. He didn't catch even one of them glancing his way.

"I hate it when you're right." Even though Adam knew that Tyrell was in the restaurant somewhere, hell he must be fairly close in order to see the way Adam had been acting, he still couldn't find him. Not at any table, not behind plants. "Where are you?"

"Would you fucking relax, Nash? I'm here. She just left the bathroom. If you're lucky she'll come back to the table."

Adam didn't bother with a goodbye, he just shoved his phone back in his pocket before she caught him. He took a long drink of his beer, and pretended to watch the baseball game.

"Dodgers fan?" She slid back into the booth, and propped her back against the wall like he had, so they were both facing the television.

She came back to the table. Don't screw it up. "Not unless they stayed in Brooklyn." He winked at her. "I'm a New York fan deep down and always."

"Is that right? Mets or Yankees?"

"You like baseball?"

"Not so much on television, but I love to watch one from the park." She took a dainty sip of her water.

Her mouth fascinated him, so did the drop of water that clung to her lower lip. When her pink tongue darted out to whisk it away, he could practically feel it against his own lip.
Baseball, Adam.

"That goes without saying. I think I'd rather watch small-town tee ball in person than Dodgers on ESPN."

She stretched both legs out on the booth, and crossed her ankles, leaving the top one to wag playfully as she watched some unknown batter strike out. He was pleased to see she was comfortable with him. The only other time Adam had dated a woman who wasn't in The Industry, she had been so nervous, she'd all but spilled her drink from shaking. He was so irritated, he had thrown a handful of bills on the table and walked away from her right where she sat. He remembered Tyrell shaking his head for hours after. Well, not this woman.

She looked like she considered herself one of the guys. A friend.

"What brings you to California, if you're such a New Yorker?" She drew a pattern in the condensation on her water glass.

"Work." He hoped a vague answer would satisfy her, but he didn't hold his breath.

"Oh? What do you do?"

"I'm in the entertainment industry." He kept his voice passive, and even watched a wild pitch get by the catcher. Her giggle brought his attention back to her.

"I think ninety percent of the population in L.A. is either in the entertainment industry or aspires to be."

He took another drink from his beer bottle. "That's so true," he agreed.

"So what exactly do you do? Are you in front of the camera, or a behind the scenes kind of guy?"

He wasn't about to tell her. He'd thought up some great things to say when she asked, because he knew the subject would come up. The best way to gauge her reaction would be a game. "Think you can guess?"

She studied him, even pursing those soft-looking lips in thought. "You direct documentaries about the plight of northern Hawaiian chimpanzees?"

Oh she was good. Now she was putting *him* at ease! He laughed, and she joined him. That sexy giggle that he tried to commit to memory for a visit later.

The smart thing to do would be to explain everything right now. Get it over with. He even took a deep breath to speak the words, but stopped before they formed.

Adam Nash, you're a pussy. What do you plan to do? Lie to her? He scoffed. For some reason, flat out lying to this woman wasn't an option. "I've directed a few things, but no documentaries." That was the truth. He got the chance to try his hand at directing on his last video. As much fun as it was, he wasn't going to do it again. The entire video production process was more stressful, and to this day, he couldn't look at that video without picking it apart.

He could also use his music video experience to truthfully say he was an actor. Being here with her like this was almost like he was playing a role. In this noisy family restaurant surrounded by extras.

She thought another minute, then slapped the table with her epiphany, "Stunt man."

"Nope."

Tina and another server brought out their meals, and broke his focus on Jade. He couldn't have asked for better timing.

Jade unwrapped the napkin from around her cutlery, and laid it on her lap. Her hands were slender and delicate, her fingernails trimmed and buffed to a shine. She put the spoon on the left side of her plate, and the knife on the right. She picked up the fork and speared a piece of broccoli before he even realized he was staring.

"What about you? Are you one of the ninety percent?"

She waved her hand and almost choked on a bite. "Oh God no. I pity anyone in the spotlight like that."

"You do?"

She nodded, and touched her lips with a napkin. "I suppose some people crave attention like that, but there isn't any way I could live that way. I value my privacy too much. That's why I boycott tabloids and talk shows. I figure I'll do my part and be one less crazed fan out there."

Adam drained his bottle of beer.

"I wouldn't even be in California if it weren't for my mentor Alfred." She chewed a dainty bite, swallowed. Adam's mouth went dry just from watching hers. That didn't last, because just the thought of tasting her made him drool like a cartoon wolf. She laid her fork down, then dabbed the napkin against her lips again before continuing. "He passed away three months ago. He left Dean and me a house here." She smiled with the memory. "We followed Alfred around for years, learning everything we could about botany from him. He was a genius about plant science, but he refused to understand why Dean and I weren't going to settle down together and have children."

She took another bite. Adam watched the fork disappear into her mouth, and reappear from between her closed lips. He was going to kiss her tonight. Now to figure out when. "Didn't Alfred know that Dean is gay?"

"We told him on a daily basis at least. I guess Alfred just thought it was some phase that Dean would grow out of if he and I got married." She shook her head in exasperation. "He left us the house and Earth Scents with the condition that we

live here together for a year before we could do whatever we wanted with them." She cut another piece of chicken, and Adam realized he hadn't even touched his meal.

He dug into his own meal with far less precision than she.

"I was a little surprised he didn't leave a wedding dress in the closet for me. He was just an adorably romantic old man." Her voice dropped. "I miss him terribly."

"I suppose he's up there right now cursing me for taking you out tonight." Adam winked, then took a bite of his sloppy burger.

"If that's so, he had to be confused about Dean's latest fling." She explained how last month Dean had dated two men simultaneously, and his attempt to get them both to agree to an open relationship. The way she talked about Dean, it was obvious she cared a great deal for the guy. How many men were scared off by her relationship with her roommate? He hated to admit it, but as confident and sometimes arrogant as he was, even Adam Nash recognized the threat the hazy boundaries of Jade and Dean's friendship had. As she continued with stories of Dean, Adam realized all he had to do was think of Dean as this woman's best friend, not her male roommate.

When she pushed her plate away, Tina offered Jade another glass of wine, along with another bottle of beer for him. Jade agreed, and he smothered a grin, glad to see she wasn't in any hurry to end their date. His gaze followed the waitress back up to the bar, and only then did he see Tyrell sitting there, partially hidden behind a dark wooden column. There was a huge plate of wings in front of him, half were

now bones picked clean. He wore his napkin like a bib, tucked into his collar. Adam could barely contain his mirth.

"Dessert tonight?" Tina reappeared with their drinks and a dessert menu.

At his questioning gaze, Jade shook her head, and gestured towards her wine glass. "This will be enough for me."

Tina laid down the ticket, thanked them for their visit, then her eyes swept over Adam once more before attending her other tables.

"I didn't realize how hungry I was until I'd started eating. I guess I forgot to eat lunch today." She resumed her position against the Elvis wall, the hand with her wine glass hovering near her mouth as she spoke.

"Then I'm glad I called when I did. I wouldn't want you to drop."

She looked at him then, her eyes shining. Either his words pleased her, or the wine had gone to her head. "I'm glad too."

"Maybe you should give me your cell phone number," he winked, "so I can call you tomorrow and remind you to eat lunch."

She wrinkled her nose when she smiled. *Damn, that's cute.*

"I'll give you my phone number as soon as you give me your last name." She briefly covered his hand on the table with hers. The same short-lived caress she'd graced him with that first day across the counter of Earth Scents. Why the hell that was sexier than a pair of tits rubbing suggestively

against his arm in a night club, he didn't know. His gaze snapped to her chest. This woman probably never rubbed those against a man in a dark corner. They probably didn't have an ounce of silicone in them. She was a different breed, that was for sure.

He tore his eyes away. For some reason he felt like a pervert when he ogled her. This woman wouldn't appreciate his pawing. He mentally slapped himself, and faced her again.

"I'll give you my last name as soon as you give me yours." He grinned.

"Jade Colleen Graham." She announced, challenging him.

Damn. Adam stiffened. He had one last out. If she took it. "Would you like my professional name, or the one I used growing up?"

"You have a professional name?" She set her wineglass down to give him another curious look.

"Sure. It's kind of like a rite of passage in this business you know."

"Well ... what does your mother call you?"

Thank God. She took it. "Adam Joseph Herlihey. Especially when I'm in trouble."

"Irish?" She stuck a hand out.

"Damn proud." He took her hand, and held on longer than polite, but she didn't pull back either.

Finally, she narrowed her eyes on him. "I can always do an internet search on your name and find out all kinds of dirt."

"That's true. Just hold off for a few days."

"Why?"

He rubbed his thumb across the inside of her wrist. Her skin was soft and cool like a soothing balm on his thirsty skin. "Because I want to take you out again before you read all those horrible things about me."

"That bad, huh?"

He clasped her hand in both of his, and gave her a direct look. "Just don't believe everything you read."

She laughed. She thought he was kidding. If only she knew. The last story he'd seen on the tabloids was about his secret love child with that movie star's wife. Henry, his manager, wanted to blast them, and force a retraction. Adam knew the more attention he gave these stories, the more interest they would generate. The fact was, he couldn't really remember if he'd slept with that woman. There were some weeks where he couldn't remember a damn thing. He liked to think that he was careful, but accidents could always happen. Still, if he went public to denounce one rumor, there would be ten new ones the next day. He didn't have time for that kind of clean up, and he refused to live like that.

This woman was different. She wasn't afraid to look him in the eye. She didn't gush or simper, or talk endlessly about herself, or her powerful friends and industry contacts. Jade Graham was most definitely a cool drink of water. Adam couldn't stop himself from bringing her hands to his lips, where they rested against the soft skin of her knuckles as he inhaled.

The noise from the restaurant faded into the background. Even the Dodger fans seemed to go quiet. Adam couldn't look away from her, and she seemed to be equally hypnotized by

their clasped hands against his mouth. She added her free hand to cover his. When she maintained eye contact, Adam was aware of an electric current looping through them, and sparking the distance between their eyes.

The tip of her pink tongue swiped along her lower lip, in a gesture that was so innocent, it was erotic as hell. His cock surged behind his fly, intensely enough to send a jerk through his body. He imagined those lips at various places along his body, and now kissing her wasn't the only thing he wanted to do with that succulent mouth. "So ... uh ... are you going to tell me your professional name?"

"No."

She blinked a few times, and he saw her shock. When he felt her attempt to pull her hands away, he gripped them tighter and continued. "Not yet. You should be flattered, I usually don't give people my real name." That seemed to work, especially when he smiled. "Just call me Adam."

She watched his thumb move across her hands. "You aren't really in the porn industry are you?"

"No." He winked.

"But you won't tell me what you do for a living..."

Okay. That did make him sound like a creep. "I told you I'm in the entertainment industry. I can't tell you all my secrets at once; what would make you want to go out with me again?"

"Oh, the mysterious approach, I get it."

"Is it working?"

She cocked her head to one side and gave him a long look. That was dangerous. He wasn't ready to be found out. Not

yet. He wanted more time as Adam "Joe Schmoe" Herlihey. He knew she'd start acting differently around him once his true identity was revealed. Hell, with the type of woman he thought she was, he wouldn't be surprised if she had nothing to do with him. Not after learning about his playboy lifestyle.

Would he blame her?

They watched the Dodgers win their game. Well, she did. Adam just stared at her for twenty minutes, and asked her questions about her career as a florist. Before she could turn the conversation back to him, he finished his second beer, and tossed his napkin on the table.

"Ready to go?" He slid out of the booth, pulled a fifty from his wallet, and tossed it on the table, before again offering her his hand. Her eyes bounced from the currency back to him. Either she was going to tell him it was too much, or she was going to offer to pay her own way. He didn't wait for whatever she had to say, he just reached for her hand and pulled her from the booth. On the way out, he slid his hand down her back, guiding her to the exit.

Tyrell was on his feet and wiping his hands on a wet-nap, watching their departure. Damn the man was good. Adam put on his dark glasses and made it back to the car without incident.

He waited until she was buckled in before and he tapped a quick text message to Tyrell. Adam didn't know where Tyrell had parked, but he'd insist on following them.

She gave him directions to her house, and even apologized about making him drive her all the way home. As if it bothered him to take her home, he smiled.

Well, it worked. Other than the little episode with the hostess, Adam's little production went off without a hitch. He would have to make another visit to Buster's in the near future just to be seen. That might boost their business a bit as a thank you. Of course he couldn't have done it without Carley and Tyrell. Carley told him how she had to promise Buster's management he'd have no more than two alcoholic drinks before they gave in to his request. What a big-ass bitter pill to swallow.

"Thank you for dinner."

He had walked her up the stairs of her house just as the sun dipped behind the trees. The dying rays only highlighted the red in her hair, making it all but crackle with life. It begged for his attention.

Adam wasn't used to restraining himself; he was accustomed to taking whatever he wanted. Of course he rarely had to fight for it either. Especially for the favors of a woman. He'd already put one hand against her neck, and buried his fingers in that luscious hair before he remembered that he wanted to go slow with this one.

She held her breath at his touch. Had he blown it? He didn't want to scare her, but for the life of him, he couldn't step away. In fact, as he warred with himself, he actually moved a step closer. Near enough to fill his lungs with her floral scent. Close enough that she had to tilt her head back to continue looking at him with those gorgeous green eyes. The movement spotlighted her long slender neck, and his mouth watered at the prospect of tasting her flesh.

"You're very beautiful," he whispered, holding her head steady with one hand, while the other snaked around her waist. As much as he wanted to bury himself in her softness, he merely brought their bodies close enough for their clothes to brush. He felt her breasts against his chest. Through the layers of clothing he felt the pebbly evidence of her desire.

"Thank you." She tilted her head, an invitation to kiss her neck. "You're pretty easy on the eyes as well." Her arms found their way over his shoulders.

He growled, and pressed his lips against the tender skin beneath her ear. God, she smelled good, and tasted even better. He swiped his tongue along the tendon in her neck, and was rewarded with a shiver.

"I want to kiss you, but I don't want to scare you away." His heart was pounding so hard, he was sure she could feel it against hers. "Tell me I won't." He looked at her, hoping she'd say what he wanted to hear.

She shook her head. "I'm not afraid of you Adam."

Beautiful. His name on her mouth looked ... well, beautiful. He traced her lips with the tip of his middle finger. From the bow on the top, to one corner, and across the fullness of the lower one. Just as he finished the course, her tongue peeked out to trace his path. His breath caught when her tongue met his fingertip and held. Her lips closed around his digit, and all went black. All but the pulsing warm light he could feel inside him. She sucked, drawing him deeper inside her warm mouth, and a strangled gurgle came from nowhere, loud enough to pull him back into awareness. He blinked, now

realizing he'd pinched his eyes closed, and the sound had come from his own throat.

What the hell was that? He searched her face for answers, but she looked up at him with an innocent desire, her pupils dilated, his finger still resting against her soft mouth. He only moved his hand when his mouth descended, and covered hers.

He couldn't get enough of how she tasted. Wine. Cool wine and crisp summer sunshine. Never before had he actually tasted a kiss. Except the few times where the taste of cigarette tobacco made him cut a kiss short, he figured all kisses tasted the same. He was wrong.

He sent his tongue deeper into her mouth, searching for every hidden secret. When her tongue rubbed against his, he experienced the same warmth as before. All thoughts of scaring her were abandoned, and he enveloped her in his arms. She stepped impossibly closer to him, flattening her breasts against his chest. The insane heat from that connection flooded him. He could still feel her nipples through their layers of clothing, teasing his skin. When she adjusted her body, he had to consciously restrain his hands from seeking out the pleasure those breasts promised. She had to feel his erection against her hip, but there was no way he could hide it. After a small sound escaped her, she moved against his rigid flesh, pulling another moan from his gut.

He angled his head, deepening the kiss, his mind working on the logistics of getting inside this woman. Now. Through the haze of desire, he saw a wide wooden porch swing, hanging from the ceiling on thick chains. Potted plants ... he'd

have to navigate around them. Her jeans ... they'd have to at least get one leg free, his could just drop below his hips.

"Jade?" The deep voice came through the heavy oak door. Adam reluctantly pulled away from her just as she opened heavy lids. "Is that you?"

"Give me a minute Dean." The huskiness in her voice sent another spasm to Adam's cock. She wanted him. Maybe as much as he wanted her.

But not now. Not on her porch. *Jesus, Adam. Get a hold of yourself. You're a grown man, not some horny fifteen-year-old.* He opened his mouth to apologize, but stopped. She didn't know where his mind was taking him.

"I need your phone number," he said instead.

She fumbled through her purse for a pen, but rather than writing on a piece of paper, or an old gum wrapper as he'd expected, she took his hand in hers, inked the numbers on his palm, and sealed it with a long kiss.

"That was sexy."

"I don't want you to use the excuse that you lost it." She replaced the pen, then opened the screen door. "And now you'll have to call me before you wash it off." She sent him a mischievous wink before she disappeared into the house.

And he let her go.

God damn, what was wrong with him? Thirty seconds ago, Adam Nash had a woman in his arms, and now he was going home alone? Adam curled his hands into fists. His entire being ached with the need to follow her inside and into her bedroom. Hell, into any available room with a horizontal surface.

Even that was negotiable.

He staggered back to Henry's wife's car, and sat in the driver's seat. His cock tented his jeans, begging for attention. He reached to press it down, and caught sight of her phone number. He pulled his cell phone out and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Now you have my number too."

She chuckled, and his dick jerked. "I promise I won't take advantage."

"Call me anytime." He grinned into the phone. "Lunch tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid I can't." He heard the sounds of fabric rustling near the phone. Was she undressing? Damn, he covered his erection with his free hand, trying to press it into submission. "It's Dean's day off, and I can't leave Ella alone."

He leaned his head back against the head rest, and closed his eyes to concentrate. "Friday?"

"Friday's are pretty busy. We usually don't even get to sit down."

"Dinner tomorrow then." More rustling in his ear, and his stiff cock refused to behave.

"You don't have to feed me, you know."

He bit off the words forming on his tongue. He'd like to feed her alright. He saved that mental image for later. "I don't want you to forget to eat lunch again."

"You bought dinner tonight. It's my turn to treat. A movie maybe?"

He tried not to laugh out loud. She really had no idea. He almost burst with the need to tell her. Tell her everything.

Maybe she'd rush out to his car and screw him in the driver's seat. *Damn it, Nash. You're a fucking animal. For once in your life, act like a normal man.* He took a deep breath. "A movie theater won't work. I want to be able to sit and stare at you."

She barked a short laugh. "Oh, well..."

"Jade?"

"Yes?"

"I enjoyed your company tonight."

"And I yours. Even if you are stingy with your personal information."

"I don't want to scare you away before I've had a chance to thoroughly impress you with my wit and wisdom."

"I'm already impressed," she whispered.

He gripped his cock through his jeans, reminding himself who he was, and what sort of trouble he could get into if he got caught masturbating in a borrowed car while parked in a residential neighborhood. He could just see the headlines.

"I'll pick you up at six tomorrow then. Sleep well, Jade."

"Good night Adam."

What was it about the way she said his name that sent a jolt through his system? He entered her number into his contacts. Now this woman had his real name and his personal cell phone number, but she had yet to know what he did for a living.

Damn it, taking things slow was going to kill him. Here he had dinner with a woman, drank only two beers, then walked her to her door, and settled for a kiss. One kiss.

One hell of a kiss.

No wonder his body was confused. He never stopped at one kiss. Women he regularly kissed never stopped at one kiss. Not that it bothered him. Hell, what man wouldn't enjoy overzealous women throwing themselves at his feet? Meaningless sex can get a man through many a cold night on tour. There was a cliché about things were better if you waited ... something like that. Maybe there was some truth to it. Maybe now he was ready for something different.

Adam took the long way back to Henry's house to retrieve his own car. He listened to the public radio station. Some shit about making soap, but he had to get his hormones under control before facing his manager, his manager's wife, and their three teenage daughters.

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Chapter Four

"That good, huh?"

Dean's feet were propped up on the coffee table. He wore the same old sweats every night. One of these days Jade swore she would take scissors to those ugly things and put them out of their misery, but until the threadbare knees turned to outright holes, Dean wouldn't part with his U.C. Berkeley ash grey sweatpants. The sweatshirt hadn't made it through his four years of college, but these pants were still hanging on.

"What do you mean?"

He turned the volume down on the credits of the detective show he was watching. "You're wearing your lacy nightie instead of flannel sleep pants. That means it was a good date." He scratched his bare chest and winked.

She rolled her eyes and smothered a smile. Dean knew her way too well. "It was good. Nothing fancy, just dinner at Buster's."

"A hell of a kiss, though."

Jade landed on the couch beside him, and picked up a green suede decorative pillow to fan herself, only half in jest. "Even that is an understatement."

"Not much of a view from the peephole, but I thought the front door was going to combust." Dean slipped his arm over her shoulders, and she leaned against him, loving the peace and security she found in his arms. "Why didn't you bring him inside? Still afraid to introduce me?"

"No, not at all. Maybe if he hadn't kissed me until my toes curled I would have invited him in, but I didn't want to do something rash."

"Must be nice to have only one head to do the thinking."

She elbowed him in the ribs. "Another reason I couldn't bring him in. I know you; you'd have your eyes trained on his crotch and you'd embarrass yourself."

"Impressive?"

"From what I could tell."

"I believe I might be jealous."

"After the male model that left our house in the wee hours this morning? One of these days I'm going to hide behind your curtains for a front row seat."

"You'd like that wouldn't you. Maybe if I find one that will stick around I'll work on convincing him to let us put on a show for you." Dean pulled her hair back to twist it at her nape with one hand, and flipped through the channels with the remote in the other.

"Maybe if you didn't send them packing at three a.m., they'd be willing to come back."

"He snored!" As if that was reason enough, and Jade knew in Dean's mind, it probably was. He was terribly picky about his lovers.

Jade smiled. "One of these days, Dean Chambers, a man is going to come along and knock you on your ass. He'll probably snore too."

"I doubt it."

"And he'll like his steak well done," she continued, picking out all of Dean's pet peeves. "He'll chew on his fingernails."

He'll watch old musicals on the classic movie channel ... he'll wear tube socks with dress shoes. He's going to have a tiny dick..." Dean tried to cover her mouth, but she pulled his hand away and continued through a laugh. "He'll buy you a new pair of sweats, and *you'll wear them!*"

"Never!" Dean shoved her onto her back against the leather couch and pinned her down, tickling her until she couldn't speak. "Any man who loves me, will love my sweatpants. We're a package deal." Dean dodged her flailing arms and legs, and continued torturing her.

Only when she screamed "uncle" did he let her up, but she couldn't resist a final slug in his arm before they returned to their original position on the couch while Dean searched through the channels. There wasn't anything on.

"So tell me about him. Should I trust him with my best friend?"

"I think so..." She tried not to sound uncertain, and damn if Dean didn't pick up on it.

"You *think so*? What does he do for a living?" Big brother was back.

"I'm not exactly sure..."

"Didn't you ask? Didn't he volunteer that information?"

"He was a little ... um ... hesitant to talk about his job. He said he works in the entertainment industry, and he has a professional name..."

"Which is?" Dean pulled away from her, obviously serious about his concern now.

"Well, he didn't exactly..."

"Jade..."

"It's not bad! At least, I don't think it's bad..." She chewed on her lip.

"But he's hiding something. That isn't good."

Leave it to Dean to get down to the brass tacks. Jade knew it, but she didn't want to analyze his mysteriousness. Now she scrambled to defend him to Dean. "Maybe he's a struggling actor, and he's too embarrassed to tell me that he hasn't had a part in years, or maybe he's a back-up singer in a garage band."

"Maybe. But maybe he just got out of prison for luring beautiful young women to his sleazy motel room with promises of a big break, when really he rapes and murders them, chopping them into..."

"Dean!" Another elbow to the ribs shut him up. "He said he's directed some ... maybe he wants to move from directing into acting?"

"Maybe he's a porn star."

Jade smiled. "I asked him about that. He says no."

"Married."

Her mouth dropped open. She hadn't thought of that. That would explain why he wouldn't give her his last name! Her mind whirled.

"Jesus, Jade. That freaks you out, but you laugh at the serial murderer scenario." Dean ruffled her hair.

"He gave me his cell phone number. He told me I could call him anytime. That doesn't sound like a married man, does it?"

"No it doesn't. Relax. I'm sure it is as you say, and he's just struggling to make a name for himself."

"He must be doing okay," Jade relaxed again. "He was able to pay for dinner, and he has a decent car. He was dressed nicely. Very nice. And he smelled good, not like cheap cologne."

"Don't forget his impressive cock."

"I'll reserve judgment."

"Let me know."

"Get your own impressive cock, Dean."

Dean grinned, turning the television off, and using the same remote to start up the CD player. "I've got one, thanks. My problem is I need to have another impressive cock to make the damn thing work."

Jade opened a bottle of wine, and spent the next four hours filling Dean in on her two hours with Adam Herlihey.

He stood her up.

Jade flipped the sign on the door, and locked herself inside Earth Scents. She peered through the window, hoping to see his silver sedan, and hating the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. All day she'd been thinking about him, watching the clock until closing time, getting more and more anxious as time went by, which made the letdown at his absence even more painful.

She turned off the lights in each of the floral coolers and picked up after some of today's more rambunctious customers. Ella had already gone through the place once before she left that afternoon.

Jade laughed, remembering how Ella grilled her on her upcoming date with the mystery man. "You need to snap some covert pictures with your cell phone or something." Ella

adjusted the ball cap atop her head. It was a staple in the college girl's wardrobe. If it weren't for the two long brunette braids behind her ears, Jade might have wondered if Ella were hiding a bald spot. "I'm starting to think you're making the guy up so I stop bugging you about getting laid." Jade glared, and popped the huge pink bubble that Ella blew with her gum.

"I'm not sleeping with him."

"Yet. Geez Jade, don't string the guy on too long, he'll find another florist to play with."

Now, pacing the sales floor, Jade stopped to straighten another shelf full of vases to stall leaving. *Well, I would need to see him in order to string him along*, Jade chewed on her bottom lip.

Maybe he was confused. She replayed their telephone conversation. Maybe *she* was confused. Dinner on Friday? Movie? Jade continued on her way through the shop, closing down the cash register, and cranking off the helium tank.

Ten after six. She searched through her apron pockets for her phone. He said she could call anytime, right?

Where the hell was her phone? She turned lights off on her way to the back room. Just as she dug her phone out of her purse, there was a sharp knock coming from the sales floor.

Since she was alone, she allowed herself to squeal like a little girl. Even her attempts at calming herself down on the way back out front made her laugh.

It was him. He had his sunglasses in one hand, and both hands were cupped around his eyes. His forehead was

pressed against the door, and his smile when he saw her made her want to leap into the air.

He wore jeans again, baggy in the thighs, but cinched around his hips as though they were made for him. A grey cotton Henley shirt was tight enough on his broad chest to draw attention to his well-formed muscles. He had pulled up the sleeves exposing sinewy forearms that exuded warmth and strength. She knew how hard his body was beneath those clothes. She ached to touch him again, to rub up against him like some cat in heat.

She let him inside, and locked up behind him. It took a couple of tries, since her hands were shaky.

"Sorry I'm late." He steered her away from the huge windows with one arm around her before he bent over her body in an all encompassing embrace. She slid her hands around his waist, and breathed in his scent. How odd was it that she felt completely comfortable with this man so close, after that one kiss on her porch. Of course there were the many that followed in her dreams.

"I was a little concerned, but you aren't that late."

"I called your cell phone, but you didn't answer." He leaned away from her and his eyes drifted across her upturned face. "You know, if you had anywhere near as rough a night as I did, you have no right looking this good today."

Her face grew warm. "A rough night? I hope it wasn't something you ate."

"No." He brought one hand around to brush the backs of his fingers along her flushed cheeks. "But I know the perfect cure. Open your mouth."

She wrinkled her brow, "Wha...?"

"Thanks." He kissed her. And just like its predecessor, this kiss worked its way through her body, warming her blood and weakening her muscles. Thank God he had such a tight hold on her; she was sure she would have melted into a steaming puddle on the tile floor without it. Her sex clenched in a pleading spasm, and she whimpered in need.

She gripped the thin shirt beneath her hands, entranced by the taut muscles hidden by the soft cotton. He tasted of coffee. A sweet vanilla-flavored coffee. His lips closed around her tongue, drawing it deeper into his mouth. Two strong hands brought her even closer.

She sucked his scent into her lungs, learning his spicy citrusy essence. If she knew what cologne he wore, she'd buy a bottle of it just to sprinkle on her pillowcases. Maybe not. She'd never get any sleep that way.

"I've been thinking about that all day," he whispered into her mouth.

Jade brushed her lips against his as he spoke. "Me too."

He pulled her lower lip with his teeth. "Are you finished here?"

"Huh uh. I'm not finished." She brought her arms up to tangle her fingers in the thick tawny hair that brushed his nape, and pulled him back down to her mouth.

He chuckled, and walked her backwards and into the dark hallway, their lips locked together hungrily. It was a good thing he did, because she had forgotten that anyone who happened to walk by Earth Scents would be able to clearly see the proprietor in a clinch with a man.

Adam pushed her against the hallway wall, leaned against her, and pressed each hard muscle into her corresponding softness. Jade couldn't seem to catch her breath. Her heart was pounding to keep sending oxygen through her veins, and her head started spinning. She was drowning in this man; he was sucking the life from her lungs, yet she was struggling to give him more.

She tilted her hips against his, and moisture gathered along the folds of her sex thanks to the rock-hard erection pressing against her pelvis. A strangled cry gurgled in her throat, and she trailed one hand down his back and gripped his thigh, right where it met his ass, grinding him against her.

In one movement, he pulled his mouth from hers, and sucked in a deep breath through his flared nostrils. When she blinked him into focus, he gave her a slanted grin. "Hungry?"

Wasn't it obvious? "Very."

"I packed a picnic. I thought we could find a quiet spot in a park somewhere." She squeezed his thigh as he spoke, and his voice cracked. "Unless you keep that up, in which case I'll have to show you what else I've been thinking about all day."

She grinned. "Did it involve a florist and a dark hallway?"

"Definitely a florist." His wandering hands finally settled on the curves of her derriere and held her hips against his. His hard-on fit perfectly in the notch of her thighs. "It's obvious how much I want you. Maybe one day I'll take you up against the wall..." he moved his hips suggestively, "but not today."

She could feel each of his ten fingers gripping her hips, holding her steady and caressing her at the same time. At this point, she didn't care that they were in the narrow dank

hallway, surrounded by bulletin boards and order forms. She slipped her hands into the waistband of his jeans, then around his hips to meet at his fly. She shouldn't be doing this. Not here, not now. She barely knew him for Christ's sake. She laid her forehead against his chest, and breathed in that clean scent. She took his harsh breathing as a good sign. "Why not today?" Feeling uncharacteristically bold, she wiggled her fingers, searching for the treasure the dark denim hid.

He groaned, pressing his cheek against hers. His breath came through his mouth in a strangled rhythm. "I don't want to rush ... scare you away..."

"I told you I'm not afraid." The tips of her middle fingers found the head of his cock, still covered in cotton underwear, but a bead of moisture leaked through, moistening the fabric and somehow turning her on even more.

"Damn." He circled each of her wrists with a strong grip, brought both hands out of his pants, and threaded his fingers with hers. He held her hands against his thighs, but he continued the sensuous pressure of his body against hers. She loved the shiver that shook his body. This man, with the body and face of either an angel or the devil, depending on how you looked at it, wanted her.

Her. Little Jade Graham from a one-stoplight town in New Mexico. The same girl who took her best girlfriend to the prom, because all of the boys in school were spoken for. This man wanted *her*.

"I don't want to rush anything with you." His words were filtered by her hair. "I want this to last." He kissed her gently

on the top of her cheekbone, his breath stirring her eyelashes.

"That's very ... um..." his kisses muddled her mind, "...honorable of you."

"Told you I'm a gentleman."

"Not always, I hope."

The grin he gave her was anything but gentlemanly. It was roguish and playful, and the glint in his eye hinted at the carnal direction of his thoughts. "You're hell on a gentleman's control."

"I'm sorry." No she wasn't, and the way her lower body ground against his proved it.

"Don't be." He pulled back, then gave her a playful shove toward the back room. "I plan on taking full advantage soon."

Jade tried to think straight, really she did. The most important task was locking the cash till in the safe. Other than that, if she forgot another one of her closing tasks, it wouldn't be the end of the world. She did remember to lock the front door behind them.

Jade couldn't believe the amount of food that erupted from the wicker basket. She pulled out a bottle of wine, two glasses, and containers filled with cheese, crackers, cold cuts and cubed fruit and vegetables. "You packed all this?" She spread it out on the thick blanket. "Is someone joining us?"

"Oh no. This is a private party. Just you and me." Adam lay on his side, his ankles crossed, his torso propped up on an elbow. The spot they found was secluded enough to be private, shielded by lush green bushes and a cove of trees. Shadows from the leaves overhead flickered over them,

offering a slight respite from the heat of a Southern California spring evening. He watched her unpack the picnic with an indulgent smile.

She raised an eyebrow. "Did you do this yourself?"

"Would it earn me points?"

"You don't need any more points." She opened the square plastic container that held plump red grapes, and popped one in her mouth, then stretched out to face him. "But this reeks of a woman's touch." She put a grape against his lips. He took the fruit into his mouth, and kissed her fingers at the same time.

"You're right. I had help." He painted her lips with the juice of a sliced strawberry before he fed it to her, and kissed the moisture from her lips.

Her heart kicked up a beat. Irrationally, she thought if that occurred with every kiss, she'd be dead from a heart attack before nightfall. She tried to steer her wandering thoughts away from where his kisses were leading. "Please don't tell me you live with your mother."

He laughed. "No, my parents still live in Utica, New York, where I grew up. My assistant Carley helped me with this. Don't be surprised if you find a condom or two in that basket. She has a ... sense of humor."

"And she likes lilies. I think I want to meet this woman." She fed him another grape, then poured them each a half glass of white wine and stretched out beside him. "It feels good to relax."

"Another busy day?"

"Not too busy, just a steady stream of customers. I did have time for lunch." She sipped her wine. "What about you? Busy day?"

"A meeting at three, otherwise I had the day to myself. Mm, pass the meat."

She put the container with the meat rolls between them near his chest, and took some roast beef for herself.

"Meeting?" Out of work actors had meetings?

"Maybe meeting is the wrong word. Some guys and I got together." He popped a roll into his mouth, but swallowed before continuing. Another point for him, she smirked. Jade couldn't stand a person speaking around food. "I think you need another employee."

Both statements made no sense when put together, which gave her the distinct feeling he was steering the conversation away from his meeting, but she let him. "I'd love to have more help, but we can't afford anyone just yet."

"How am I supposed to take you out of town for a weekend?" He brushed a curling strand of hair away from her eye, and tucked it behind her ear.

"I'd have to sweet-talk Dean into working alone with our part-timer on a Saturday, I suppose. We're closed Sundays."

"I'd like to take you out on my boat."

Jade tried to picture what kind of boat he might have. A fishing boat with an outboard motor? "You need my help rowing?"

He smiled. That crooked grin that spoke of an inside joke. "I think I can get the motor to work, but I'll bring some oars just in case. What do you think?"

"I'll talk to Dean."

"Mm, good. We'll leave tomorrow after you close the store."

Jade pulled back to look at him. "Tomorrow?"

He shrugged. "Tomorrow's Friday, right?"

"Yes, but..."

He arched his eyebrow; a silent dare.

Her mouth worked around words she couldn't voice. He didn't give her much notice, but did she really need any? She closed her mouth without a sound.

He grunted, that satisfied sound a man makes when he knows he's gotten his way. "That's what I thought."

She rolled her eyes, and smothered a grin before settling back beside him. He fed her a piece of cheese. There was something very intimate about eating from this man's hand. Her skin sizzled, but only partly due to the waning humid heat. "I want to learn all about you. Tell me everything."

"Not much to tell. I had a pretty standard childhood." She described growing up in rural America, the baby sister of four older brothers. Adam teased her about what it must have been like bringing boyfriends home, and she laughingly told him about the sad lack of available boys her age in her hometown. "What about you? Any brothers or sisters at home in New York?"

"I have one sister, Catherine. She's sixteen years older than me, so she's more like a favorite aunt."

"Sixteen years! So you must have been a ... um..."

"Surprise."

"Yes." She giggled, and fed him another bite of a rolled turkey slice. "And spoiled, I bet."

"What makes you say that?" He captured her hand, and took the last of the meat from her fingers.

"I'm not sure. Something about you gives me this strange feeling that you're used to getting whatever you want."

"There's one way to find out. Right now I want to kiss you."

She put both of their wineglasses on top of the picnic basket, moved the containers of food out of the way, and scooted up against him. He didn't move a muscle as she wrapped a hand around his neck and kissed him. He remained still until she slipped her tongue behind his teeth, when with a groan, he pushed her onto her back, and covered both of her legs with one of his. He turned his head to deepen the kiss. His mouth was warm. Firm and moist. She closed her lips around his tongue. So that's what they meant about being kissed breathless.

"Just as I thought ... spoiled rotten," she breathed, lying beneath him, feeling frail and feminine under his hard muscled masculinity. Their eyes met and held. He slipped his fingers beneath the sleeve of her blue Earth Scents polo shirt and cupped her shoulder.

"I could spoil you too. If you let me."

"You'll give me whatever I want?" Her mind flew to the kiss in the hallway, and the hard ridge of flesh. What would he do if she asked for that? She gave him a naughty grin.

"Anything." He tunneled five fingers through her hair, and gripped her scalp. When the plastic claw that held her hair got

in the way, he deftly opened it, and tossed it away. Her breath caught. She imagined him undressing her, beginning with that hair restraint.

The top two buttons on his shirt lay open, revealing an inch below his collarbone. She reached for that wedge of skin before she even knew she had moved. The heat from his body sank into her fingertips.

"You're so hot." She raised her head to press her lips against his heated skin.

"That's your fault," he growled, the sound humming through her mouth. "You're so damn beautiful. I get hot just looking at you."

She opened her mouth to speak, but the vibration against her thigh made her jump.

He dug into his front pocket for his phone. "Sorry..." He looked at the readout. "Fuck." He opened his phone. "What is it?"

Jade could tell it was a male voice on the other end, but she couldn't make out the words. Adam hadn't moved from his position half on top of her, and his eyes held hers, pinning her to the blanket.

"Where?" His body grew hard and tense along hers as he listened. "How many?"

Jade tried to scoot out from underneath him, but he held her firmly. Holding her gaze, he shook his head.

"Can you take care of it, or do we need to leave?"

Uh oh. Sounded like an emergency. She didn't like the way his mouth stiffened.

"Okay, we'll hold tight. Call me as soon as it's handled." He snapped his phone closed, but held it in his hand which he brought around to cage her beneath him, blocking everything from view except his looming face, and with the irritated look carved onto it, she suddenly felt a sliver of fear.

"Is ... everything okay?"

"Something came up," he said tightly. "And I need you to lie very still."

Her eyes widened. *What the hell?* "Why? What's going on?" Like some bad movie script, clouds obscured the sun at that moment, casting them in a dark shadow.

He took a long moment to scan the area, then looked back into her eyes, a gentle expression replaced the tense one that was there seconds before. Oh yeah, he had to be an actor. Who else could go from aggravated to teasing in less than two seconds?

"I just want to stare at you for a few minutes."

"Oh no you don't." She shook her head, adrenaline pumping through her veins. "Something is going on, and if it involves me, you'd better explain it to me right now." She put both hands on his chest, intent on pushing him away, but he wouldn't budge.

"Jade, I didn't mean to scare you." He hovered over her, silhouetted against the sky. He released a deep breath which she felt against her neck. "That was Tyrell. He works ... with me." His voice was calm and reassuring. At his soothing tone, Jade relaxed muscles she hadn't known she'd tensed. "He's come across a small problem. If he can't handle it, I'll have to go. So, just in case," he settled closer, "...I want you to lie

very still, because I'm going to stare at you for a few minutes."

Whatever bothered him a moment ago was gone. Only tenderness remained in his eyes. Maybe he was just upset that the phone call interrupted them. That makes sense. It wasn't any of her business anyway.

"Alright. I suppose I can do that." She moved her hands from his chest down to slip underneath his shirt, then up against the smoothest hardest chest she'd ever touched. Lord how she wanted to see what her hands were caressing. "How still?"

"Just don't block my view."

"You *are* spoiled!" She grinned.

He rested his weight on two bent arms on either side of her head. "Feed me," he ordered, but softened the commandment with a wink.

She fumbled for the first container she could find. Silently, they put a big dent in the massive amount of food, one bite at a time, and around steamy stares and gentle kisses. She still was under the impression that he was shielding her, rather than keeping her prisoner of his attentions, but she tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. She rather liked having his unwavering focus. When he said he was going to stare at her, he wasn't kidding. The only time his dark blue eyes didn't hold hers was when he lowered his body enough to cover her mouth in a warm kiss.

Even when his phone buzzed again he didn't look away, he just opened it and barked, "Yeah?"

Jade still couldn't hear what Tyrell said, though she tried ... as wrong as it might be, but his face lost some of the tightness. The clouds grew thicker, and the unmistakable scent of looming rain whispered across the grass.

"Any ... uh ... documentation?" He kissed the tip of her nose.

He was good at distracting her, that was for sure.

"Good job, Ty. I owe you a beer." She heard a loud chuckle come through the earpiece, but couldn't make out the words that followed. Adam's answering smile gave her a little thrill. "Yeah you say that knowing I can't reply the way I normally would. There's a lady present." He closed his phone with a decisive snap, then kissed her again. His tongue probed through her mouth in a dance as old as time. She was vaguely aware of her questions about the phone call fluttering from her mind like leaves in the wind. "If you and I are eating the same meal, how is it you taste so damn good?" He stroked her cheek in a reverent caress.

"Maybe you're still hungry." She gave him her best bedroom-eyed look, then turned her face toward his fingers.

"I think I'm ready for dessert."

"I might be able to find something that would satisfy your sweet tooth."

"Damn."

She reached for his hand, pressed her thumb into his palm, and directed his middle finger further into her mouth. She closed her lips around it, and painted it with her tongue. With his impeccable appearance, she'd expected to feel a smooth manicured fingertip. What she encountered was

rough and callused. She pulled his hand away to study that particular finger.

"What happened to your fingers?"

"No self-respecting guitar player would be without a handful of nasty calluses." He turned his hand over to see them for himself.

"Oh! You play? I'd like to hear something. And they aren't nasty..." She took his hand again, and loved those calluses with her lips.

"What kind of music do you like?"

As close to him as she was, Jade could feel his voice rumble through his chest, and the air move on her cheeks with each word he spoke. "A little bit of everything. It depends on my mood. Growing up where I did, I have an affinity for Country Western, but I have everything from opera to acid rock on my MP3 player."

His eyes flashed, like the reflection of a candle's flickering flame in his irises. "I think I could play some country western for you sometime. Maybe I'll bring my guitar on the boat."

"I still have to clear it with Dean."

"He'll say yes. No human male could say no to you."

"If you want to play the sex card, maybe *you* should ask him." She bobbed her eyebrows.

They laughed together, enjoying the simple togetherness of the evening. Eventually he snapped the food containers closed and handed them to her to re-pack. She carried the blanket while he took the picnic basket back to the car, holding her free hand. They barely made it to his car before the first raindrops hit.

"That was close." The sky was full of dark rainclouds. This storm was going to be long and wet.

Adam typed into his phone at the same time as he fastened his seatbelt. "You're right." He pocketed his phone and started the engine. "Although I bet you look pretty cute soaked to the bone."

She laughed. Her nipples speared through her shirt as it was, and the thought of standing in a shower with him only made them harder. "You'll never know," she teased.

"Never say never." He raised one eyebrow before searching the dashboard and steering column. "Where the hell are the wipers on this thing?"

"You don't know where your wipers are?" She laughed. "Haven't you ever driven in the rain?"

His head snapped up. He looked like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I ... uh, this isn't exactly my car."

"Not exactly?" She bit her tongue. She wouldn't ask. Shoot, the guy didn't have a car! "Why don't you let me pick you up next time?"

"Nah, I should be able to drive mine again soon." He found the wipers, and pulled into traffic.

"Are you too macho to let a woman drive?" she teased.

"No." He took her hand, laid it on his thigh, and smoothed her fingers down the long hard muscles. "Just spoiled."

She'd never wanted a bench seat more than she did at this moment.

Adam took her back to Earth Scents, where her car was parked in the back lot. "Talk to Dean tonight and then call me." He pulled her across the console as much as he could.

She had to stop herself from crawling across it and onto his lap. He'd hooked his hand around her neck in a hold that was as forceful as it was tender. Even the calluses felt good on her skin. "I can't wait to get you on my boat."

His boat. Tomorrow. Yes, that would be perfect. Alone in the middle of the ocean. She squirmed in her seat. The anticipation of feeling him deep inside her was almost too much. With his lips against hers, she took his hand away from her neck, and led it to an aching breast. He pulled back and speared her with his gaze. Those blue eyes, so filled with lust, sent her heartbeat into an even more frantic rhythm.

"Touch me, Adam."

"Fuck."

That made her smile, but the slow progress of his hand sent spiraling warmth through her torso, and she felt her smile disappear. Adam leaned closer again, only their foreheads and the tips of their noses touched. His breath came hard through his nose. He circled his palm over her erect nipple. Even through two layers of fabric, electric tingles curled from her breast down to her drenched core.

Jade moved her legs, rubbing them together restlessly. When she opened her eyes, she saw him in a blur, watching every movement. With a frustrated cry, she pulled up the hem of her shirt, and guided him beneath it. Damn it ... why wouldn't this man make a move?

"Oh Jesus. Jade you feel so good ... so soft." He learned her shape and texture beneath her knit top, touching every inch like a blind man. "So warm."

"Hmm, that's your fault." She was doing her own exploring. She wasn't about to wait for permission, she just dipped beneath his shirt and touched the taut warm abdomen.

The rain pounded on the roof of the car, drowning out her hammering heartbeat and their combined heavy breathing.

She was about to wedge her hand beneath his belted jeans when a car turned into the alley, shining headlights all too brightly in the windshield.

They pulled apart guiltily, and she laughed. "We're acting like hormonal teenagers."

He watched the car disappear around the corner at the end of the block before facing her. "I'm sorry. I can't seem to keep my hands off you."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he stopped her with two fingers across her lips, and a serious set to his mouth.

"No. I'm not going to feel you up in the *fucking back alley*." God, his voice. When he dropped it to that low growl, it all but sent her over the edge. "I'm going to control myself, even if it kills me." He narrowed his eyes, and in the dark car they seemed to glow. "My boat. Tomorrow night. Be ready to go when I pick you up here at six."

So he *can* take charge. She tried to assimilate all of that information while half her mind was still centered on reaching down his pants.

"Jade..."

She blinked a few times, bringing his indulgent smile into focus.

"Did you hear what I said?" He moved those two fingers away so she could speak, but she just nodded. "Call me after you talk to Dean, alright?"

She nodded again. She was a little surprised she had control of her muscles, with the amount of hot energy pumping through her veins.

"Good night, Jade." He gave her a smile that was filled with promise.

Tomorrow. "Good night, Adam. I loved the picnic."

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Chapter Five

"There's no way I'm letting you go off for a weekend with some guy I've never even met." Dean dipped the ice-cream scoop in a bowl of hot water before digging out another helping from the gallon tub. Jade's bowl was already in front of her, with two perfectly round vanilla balls drizzled with just the right amount of chocolate syrup.

"You can meet him tomorrow," she conceded. "He's picking me up from Earth Scents." Dean scowled, so she didn't say anything else until he put the rest of the ice cream back in the freezer and sat down on the stool across from her at the kitchen bar.

"He's hiding something, Jade. It bugs the shit out of me." He jammed his spoon into one ice-cream scoop, mangling it before taking a big bite. Why take the time to sculpt the scoop in the first place? Jade smothered a smile. "You know what else bothers me..." he pointed at her with his spoon, "...is the fact that it *doesn't* bug the shit out of *you*."

Jade groaned, "Dean if he was going to take advantage of me, don't you think he would have done it by now?"

"Scam artists never look like they're scamming. This guy's up to something, and you're not going anywhere with him until I find out what it is."

Jade's spoon froze on the way to her mouth. "You've got to be kidding."

"Nope." He took another bite. "If I don't feel right after meeting him, you aren't going."

She laughed. "You can't stop me."

He shrugged. "I can beat the hell out of him. He can't pull his shit from a hospital room."

"Dean!"

"Don't think I won't. This isn't a joke. Don't you watch the news?" His scowl deepened.

She opened her mouth to remind him that she had enough big brothers, but shoved in a spoonful of ice cream instead.

Dean hunched over his bowl in an uncharacteristic feral position, and she fumed at being treated like a little girl. The rain pattered on the kitchen window, and their spoons clacked against their ice-cream bowls, otherwise the silence was thick. Jade tried to think objectively. If she heard the story on the evening news, would she think "I'm glad I'm not stupid enough to fall for that"?

By the time her bowl was empty, Jade came to the conclusion that Dean was right. An unbiased opinion about Adam Herlihey wouldn't hurt. Still irritated, she cocked her head and finally spoke. "So I can be ready to go, but I have to wait for your approval tomorrow?"

"Don't get your hopes up." He wiped his mouth with a napkin and continued glaring at his bowl. "I don't put much stock in first impressions."

Jade squealed, all anger forgotten. She ran around the island with her arms open, and hugged his back where he sat. "I know you'll like him. He's polite and smart and ... oh, he plays guitar..."

"And he's cute too. I know, I know. But so was the Hillside Strangler."

"Oh, Dean. You take such good care of me." She kissed his cheek, even though he was still pouting. "Maybe Alfred is right. I think I'm falling for you."

"Too bad, toots. You're missing some vital parts. Just ... *fuck* ... go pack your things. I have to see about getting myself a three-day date for next weekend. You're paying me back for this."

She was almost to her bedroom when she heard him yell down the hallway after her. "That's *if* you go!"

She called Adam as soon as she threw the first bikini into her duffle bag.

"Good news?"

She loved his voice. The baritone had a smooth whiskey fullness that surrounded her. "Mostly. He wants to meet you first."

"Oh."

When he didn't continue, she giggled. "Don't tell me you're scared."

"That all depends. What does he bench?"

She held a tank top up and studied her reflection in the mirror. "I'm not sure ... he's a really huge guy, six-five, maybe four hundred pounds, so maybe three fifty?" Actually Dean pressed two ninety. He bragged about it the other day.

"He's pretty protective of you, isn't he?" It wasn't a question.

"Yeah, he has nothing better to do. Once I get him settled in some nice guy's arms, he'll back off."

"I've got a few single friends, should I bring one along with me tomorrow?"

"Dean is the pickiest man I've ever met. Don't waste your time."

"I'm not worried. You just be ready to go."

"I'm packing right now. Anything special on the agenda, or should I just pack the basic shorts and tee shirts?"

"Hmm, what would you say if I told you not to bother packing clothes at all?"

Her stomach fluttered. "I'd say we'd better be far off shore, and I should pack extra sunscreen."

"Don't worry too much. The boat is stocked with the essentials. We won't be roughing it by any means."

She sighed. "I can't wait." She finished packing with the phone at her ear, and the silly grin on her face. Once the duffle bag was zipped, she threw herself onto her bed.

They talked for over an hour. When he asked about her six years in Colombia, he seemed genuinely interested. "It wasn't like in the movies. We had a very nice modern hotel to come home to every night, clean water, good food. It was like a six year vacation. I came home every four months for a week, and then three weeks at Christmas." When she thought she was boring him, she tried to steer the conversation away from herself, Dean and Alfred, but he would surprise her with another insightful question about her calling.

"It's no wonder you and Dean are so close. I don't think I know many brothers and sisters who've spent as much time together as you two."

"That's probably true. Of course growing up with four brothers made me a little bit of a tomboy. I relate to men pretty easily due to that."

"I'm so glad your parents tried one more time."

His comment warmed her blood, and curiously gave her goose bumps at the same time. "And I'm glad your parents got a surprise."

He chuckled. "Well, I'd better stop by a little early tomorrow for my interview with The Warden."

"Good idea." She rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. If she concentrated, she could imagine him lying next to her rather than speaking on the phone.

"Jade?" Oh yeah. The intimate way he spoke her name could have easily been coming from across the pillow.

"Yes?"

"What are you wearing?"

She laughed. Again. Damn, she'd been laughing a lot recently. "I'm in my jammies. Why?"

"I was kinda hoping you were getting ready for a shower or something."

"Would it turn you on if we had a conversation naked?"

He growled in her ear. "Hell yeah. I'd love to hear you describe your body to me."

"Adam? I think ... I just figured out what you do for a living."

"You did?" His tone turned empty.

"Yes. I recognize it in your voice." She pulled her comforter over her shoulders, and snuggled deep into the plush bedding. The rain still beat a hypnotic rhythm on the roof, and she yawned.

"You do?"

She heard the anguish, and smiled sleepily. "Mm hm. You're one of those phone-sex men."

A noisy sigh. "Damn it, you got me. You see why I had to keep you in the dark? Now I'm going to have to start charging you for this call." His phone-sex voice washed over her like a warm Swedish massage.

"Mm, okay."

"And you don't get your money back if you fall asleep," he teased. "Go to bed, Jade. I'll see you tomorrow."

"No ... don't hang up. I want to pretend you're here with me."

"Oh God, I'd love to hold you right now. Breathe in your hair ... wrap my legs around yours..."

"Mm..."

"I'd kiss your beautiful lips, stroke the soft skin on your back..."

The last thing she remembered was his promise to rock her to sleep in his arms.

Quarter after five. Jade grinned.

"You should have played with your little toy last night." Dean shook his head. He must have noticed her checking her watch. Or maybe he saw the way she kept one eye on the front door of Earth Scents.

"What are you talking about?" She knew what he was talking about, and her blush had to have told him so.

"Jesus, Jade. At this point you'll have his pants around his ankles before the door alarm goes off."

Damn it Dean. The visual of Adam standing just inside the door with his pants down was enough to send a throbbing

warmth through her loins. "Oh shut up." She stuck her tongue out at him. "I'm just excited to get away from your cranky ass for a few days."

"*Maybe*. I might not let you go, remember? That was our deal." He cut open a box of blue glass vases that came in today's shipment, and started unwrapping the bubble wrap from each one. "I don't care how horny you are."

"Be nice to him." She took the first vase from him and put it on the shelf they'd cleared earlier.

"I'm not promising anything." He handed her another.

"You know ... I don't give you a hard time with your boys."

"I told you, I don't..."

"Date boys. I know. Except that one ... what was his name?" She straightened the glassware before adding another to the shelf.

"Geoff."

"Geoff, that's right, 'Geoff with a G.E.O'." she mimicked. "Like anyone cares how to spell his name. Tell me when I'm writing your name down, Geoff, otherwise who cares?"

"You're right. He was a boy. A cute boy..."

"Was he even legal?"

He rolled his eyes. "Shut up."

"He wasn't, was he! Oh Dean you bad, bad ... uh, man!"

The last vase was shoved into her hand. "We've been through this before. He was in the Navy, so I know he had to be over eighteen."

"No wonder you can't find a man to please you, you're cruising the high schools."

Jade squealed when Dean stood, toppling the now empty box in his attempt to get at her. "Don't! Dean!"

No matter how much she zigzagged across the store to get out of his reach, he was able to grab the cartilage part of her ear, just like he always did. Damned if that didn't hurt, and he knew she would stop struggling. It only hurt worse if she moved.

"Are you sorry?"

"Me? I'm not the one sleeping with boys. You're the one who should be ... oh oh! Okay!" She winced. "I'm sorry for making fun of your taste in younger men, okay?" She wasn't surprised when Dean continued twisting her ear with malice. Her knees buckled, and she opened her mouth to cry uncle when the door opened, setting off the notification tone. They jumped apart guiltily.

Adam stood stock still on the threshold, wearing long khaki shorts and a black tee shirt with a silver design of some sort. She'd never seen him in a hat, but today he wore a ball cap that looked like it had been run over three or four times. One hand gripped his sunglasses where they sat on his nose, the other on the door handle.

"Adam!" She all but ran across the room, but stopped just short of throwing herself in his arms. He aimed an animalistic snarl at Dean. When he looked at her, he slowly finished taking his glasses off, and his expression softened until he opened his arms.

"Well don't stop there." He took another step inside, and she did what she had been thinking about doing since about noon. Well, until Dean put that other picture in her head, but

that would have to wait. She stepped into his embrace with a small hum of approval as his strong, hard arms went around to engulf her completely. "I'm going to assume that man is Dean, and he wasn't hurting you," he whispered.

"And you'd be right," she whispered back. "I'll explain later."

"You lied. No way he benches three fifty. I can take this guy."

Jade laughed. "Well then, flex those sexy muscles, and let me introduce you." She took him by the hand and led him across the room, where Dean stood by the teddy bear display. His eyes were wide, coasting down then back up Adam's body in a fascinated awestruck movement that gave Jade a little surge of pride. She knew Adam was gorgeous. She knew Dean would agree, and now she knew she was going to be on Adam's boat for the weekend.

"Adam, this is my friend Dean Chambers. Dean, Adam Herlihey."

Adam put his hand out, and Dean automatically reached for it, but his mouth opened for a second, then closed with a snap. His eyes went down then back up. "Adam..."

"Herlihey," Adam finished. "Thanks for covering for Jade tomorrow."

Jade attached herself onto Adam's arm as she watched Dean interact with this new man in her life. "Uh, yeah of course," Dean stammered. "It sounds like you'll have a ... uh..." Dean shook his head. "I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"

"Geez Dean. His name is Adam and you know it!" Jade harrumphed. "Now, give me your keys. I'm going to get my bag from your car."

Dean dug in his front pocket without tearing his eyes away from Adam. At least he didn't check out Adam's package, Jade rolled her eyes and snatched the keys from his hand. "I'll be right back."

Dean didn't stop her, so she took that as her permission to go. She grinned all the way through the stockroom and out the back door.

"Shit. You know who I am, don't you." Adam ran one hand through his hair, and turned away from the other man. Dean Chambers could easily blow this whole thing in the next five minutes. He knew there was a possibility of recognition, but he had hoped Dean would be just as much out of the loop as Jade. They were in the middle of nowhere for six years, for Christ's sake.

"You're Adam Nash." Dean said it the same way he'd heard those words for years. Like he was surprised Adam Nash was a real live human being. Like Adam Nash didn't walk around in shorts and a tee shirt. Like Adam Nash would have to be crazy to pretend to be anything other than Adam Nash.

Adam faced the other man, resigned to the impending discussion. "Yes I am."

"You're *the* Adam Nash? *Looking Glass ... Friends Before Lovers ... Karina...*?"

Dean knew his CD titles? Adam couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, that's me."

"You're fucking kidding me."

"Look ... Jade..."

"Has no idea." Dean laughed. "Oh this is great. She told me you played guitar. She said you were in the entertainment business."

"I haven't lied to her," Adam pointed out. "I just haven't..." *told her the truth*, he finished silently. That would make him sound like a bastard, wouldn't it?

"Herlihey?" Dean asked pointedly.

"That isn't a lie ... I was born Adam Herlihey."

"But ... why? Why haven't you told her who you are?" Dean leaned against the teddy bear shelves, then crossed his arms in front of his chest.

Here comes the big brother act. Dean must have been wowed long enough. "Because with her I *am* just Adam Herlihey. I don't have to be anyone else." Dean lifted his chin in understanding. "I want to get to know her, and I want her to get to know the real me. Not what *Opinion Magazine* tells her; not what the tabloids write about me. Understand?"

Dean looked at him long and hard. "Yeah, I get it." His eyes narrowed, and for the first time, Adam thought he might find out the validity of Dean's strength. "You've got a hell of a reputation."

"Yeah, I know I do."

"You gonna tell me it's all a lie?"

He'd like to. He could pretend that person wasn't him. He wanted to be the kind of guy Jade could see herself dating. The kind of guy her warden here would approve of. Jesus, he hadn't been drunk for over three months, and he was still talking like a sap. "Don't believe everything you read."

"You mess with her, and you'll find yourself in a world of hurt. I don't care who you are. She's got people who care a lot about her."

"I'm not going to mess with her; I don't want to hurt her either," he said honestly.

"Just being who you are can hurt her. Your track record with women sucks. Only an idiot would let someone they care about go anywhere near you."

Adam really couldn't argue that. "This is different. I won't hurt Jade. Give me this weekend. I'll tell her everything, and she can decide for herself. I'm not the man you read about in the papers." *Any more*, Adam added silently, just to be honest.

"I don't know." Dean thought long and hard, and Adam actually started to worry that he wouldn't give his blessing. Not that he gave a shit what this guy said, but Jade did. Dean looked Adam up and down. "Alright. I'll give you one chance. Just one. I won't tell her who you are, but she's gonna kick your ass when she finds out. She loves your music."

"She does?" Adam couldn't believe how happy that made him. He hadn't realized how much he worried about that. One constrictive band snapped from around his heart, and it beat just a little more wholly.

"Yeah, but her favorite song is 'Strawberries and Sunshine', and your picture isn't on that CD cover."

His hair was a lot longer on the pictures inside the *Looking Glass* CD jacket too. Adam took a deep breath, and ran a hand down his face. "I'm gonna tell her." He leaned against

the counter beside Dean. "I just want one weekend, then I'll tell her. I promise."

"I won't let on that I know," Dean lifted one eyebrow, and gave Adam a pointed look, "but you'd better tell her by the end of the weekend, or both our asses'll be in a sling."

Adam nodded, then they both looked through the shop, and out onto the sidewalk, where the five o'clock pedestrian crowd had dwindled to almost nothing. No one bothered to look inside to find the hottest country music star having a casual conversation with a botanist. Still, Adam was always on alert, especially without Tyrell around. Crowds had a way of getting dangerous in a hurry.

"Well, I guess I don't have to worry about you doing something fucked-up with her. You've got cameras on you all the time." Dean shook his head. "Man, I'm still surprised you've kept it secret this long. How'd you do it?" He was now as comfortable with Adam as Jade was. Adam found it refreshing, and he relaxed even more.

"I've been avoiding the general public for the most part. And I told her to stay off the internet." Adam joined Dean's laughter. "Shit, you don't even want to know what I went through for dinner that first night. I made my assistant call..."

"I'm ready." Jade emerged from the back hallway. Adam closed his mouth with a snap. *Fuck, that was close. Goddamn.*

He tried not to look too relieved when he approached her to slip the strap of her duffle bag from her shoulder and onto his.

"Did you and Dean have a nice little chat?" Her eyes bounced from one man to the other.

Dean pushed away from the counter and joined them. "Yeah we did. He's alright I guess. Don't call me to come and get you when you get seasick all over the poor guy."

Jade's eyes sparkled when she smiled. Dean's approval must mean a lot to her. Adam put his arm around her shoulders, pulled her against his side, and kissed the top of her head to hide his silly grin.

"I owe you, man." Adam shook the other man's hand, and they exchanged a meaningful look. "Thanks a lot."

"Don't make me that idiot, Adam." Dean's eyes blazed, and Adam understood.

Jade grabbed Dean's head and pulled him down for a kiss on his cheek. "Yes, thanks, Dean. I owe you too."

"Oh I know it," he winked, "and I'm not afraid to collect either." He ruffled her hair. "Alright kids. No one likes long goodbyes. Get the hell out of here, so I can close the place down."

Adam kept his arm around her shoulders until they reached the taxi which he'd kept waiting. Once her bag was stowed in the trunk, and they were both in the back seat, Adam cupped her chin in one hand and kissed her.

"Dean seems like a good guy."

"I hoped you two would get along. He didn't say anything embarrassing did he?" The way she looked up into his eyes made him jealous of everything else she laid her eyes upon.

"Nothing too bad. I'm glad he takes such good care of you."

"You know," she huffed, "I can take care of myself, I'm a grown woman."

Adam's gaze dropped to take in her curves. Another polo shirt, today's version was a lemon yellow with a green Earth Scents logo. "Yes, I see that you're all grown up."

By the time they reached Marina del Rey Jade was slipping off the seat, and Adam had all but climbed on top of her. He looked down and shook his head.

"Jade, why do you let me manhandle you like that?"

"Do I look like I mind?"

No, actually she didn't. Her pupils had dilated, her cheeks were flushed, and those luscious lips were now swollen and moist from their kiss. "You look damn sexy, if you ask me." He licked her lips, then used his teeth to pull on the bottom one enough to let him inside.

"Meter's runnin' mister."

Adam pulled back only far enough to see her blush. *Damn, that's cute.* "Can you blame me, man? She's sexy as hell, don't you think?" He laughed when she slugged him off her.

Jade scrambled out the door before the unimpressed driver could answer while Adam paid the fare. He retrieved her bag from the trunk, and he led her down toward his boat.

"That's it ... up to the right. Her name's *Aquadesiac*."

"Oh my God." She stumbled, and he tightened his hold on her hand to steady her. "It's ... huge!"

Adam tried to look at his boat through her eyes. It was a forty-five-foot craft, white with navy blue pinstripes on the molding. He had the same graphic artist who designed the cover for *Looking Glass* paint the boat name on the stern.

Each curving blue letter looked like a three dimensional body of water. The chrome rail that surrounded the deck was gleaming in the sun. "No," he laughed, "if it was huge, it would be called a yacht. This is a *cabin cruiser*."

"Adam, I've lived in apartments that were smaller than this." She faced him, and narrowed her eyes. "How can a man who doesn't even own a car have a boat like this?"

He laughed, hoping it didn't sound too nervous, took her hand and helped her step on deck. "I told you I have my own car. The reason I borrowed Henry's sedan for the last few days is just a long story, and I won't bore you with it. As far as the boat," he followed her aboard, "when I first moved out here, I bought this instead of leasing an apartment."

"You lived on board?"

He glanced around the marina. The clusters of people didn't seem to pay them any mind, but he could be recognized any minute. He tugged his cap lower over his forehead. "For a while, yeah. You know what they say about boys and their toys."

"Oh. That ... almost makes sense. Probably lower payments than rent around here."

"Yeah, but I grew out of it pretty fast. Let me show you around." He switched her bag to the other shoulder.

"I've never been on a boat like this. It's beautiful." He followed her down the stairs below deck to the living area. The L-shaped sofa looked out over the narrow windows, and just beyond that room was the tiny kitchen.

He stuck his sunglasses on top of the visor of his hat. "I've got the refrigerator stocked with drinks and snacks, so help

yourself to anything at any time." At least he assumed those orders were carried out. He waved toward the kitchen, walked through it to point out the head, then he opened the door to the stateroom. Carley had sent a cleaning crew in this morning, and he could still smell the lemony scent of furniture polish. He watched her reaction carefully. There was only one bed, of course. A queen-sized thing that took up most of the room. He hoped she wouldn't be uncomfortable about the implied sleeping arrangements.

Sleeping? Hell. His cock twitched when she stepped across the threshold into the bedroom and laid one long slender hand on the foot of the bed. There wasn't a hint of unease in the smile she gave him.

"It's a very nice ... boat Adam."

Fuck. When she spoke in that low sexy voice, it went straight through him to center in his loins, which already began swelling with need. Still, he didn't want to assume anything. He dropped her bag near the bedside, and took her shoulders in his hands.

"You know I didn't bring you here expecting anything from you, Jade. I can easily sleep on that couch."

Her brow wrinkled, and those luscious lips pursed. "I don't think we'll both fit on that couch, it looks pretty narrow. We'd better stick to the bed."

He groaned, pulling her against his body in one movement. "Jade, it's happening fast, I know."

"You need to quit treating me like some vestal virgin." She took a bite of the skin by his neck, making him jump in

surprise. Damn, that was hot. "If I was worried about spending the night with you, I wouldn't be here."

"Ah, that's good to know." He didn't even have to take a kiss, she offered it to him first. He loved the way she tasted. Like a rich creamy dessert he was only allowed to sample on rare occasions. She sure as hell didn't kiss like a vestal virgin. Although he didn't really want to know who taught her how to move her tongue inside his mouth like that. The thought of her with any other man twisted his gut.

Where the hell had that come from? He had no claim on her, or she on him ... maybe.

Maybe this weekend would change all that. This weekend might change a helluva lot in his life. He'd be damned if he screwed it up. He nipped her lips gently. "I left the top drawer empty for you. Why don't you unpack your things, and pour us each a drink. I'll get this puppy out to sea."

He deserved a goddamned medal for walking away from her, where she stood almost boneless at the foot of his fucking bed.

He took the stairs in two leaps, replaced his sunglasses out of habit, and jumped back onto the dock to release the dock lines, hoping no one walked up to talk to him now. His erection was an obvious outline behind his khaki board shorts.

It was a good thing the guy from the marina already checked *Aquadesiac* that morning, but he'd still have to go through his little checklist. He tried to concentrate, but he was so damned ready to be out in the middle of nowhere with Jade underneath him.

Falling Star
by Olivia Brynn

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Chapter Six

Not a whisper of wind. He'd never seen a more perfect night for boating. There was just enough of a gentle rise and fall of the ocean to soothe his sea-hungry soul. About fifteen nautical miles out, he shut off the motor, allowing the craft to coast to a stop. He dropped anchor, reversed a bit to allow it to take hold, then he secured the helm and left the wheelhouse to find Jade.

He hoped she wasn't in the head vomiting with seasickness.

She wasn't. She was sitting in the horseshoe-shaped dining booth on deck, two bottles of beer in front of her, secured in the swinging cup holders near the table. She'd changed into a pair of denim shorts and a pink tank top. She grinned up at him from behind a pair of amber sunglasses.

"I didn't want to interrupt your concentration, so I got started without you."

His eyes took another sweep down her body. Her feet were bare. There was something extremely intimate about those bare toes, each one tipped with a shade of pink polish that made him want to lick on them like ten pieces of strawberry candy.

He could easily have sat down across from her, where there was so much room, but instead he sat beside her, trapping her in the booth. He took one of the bottles and took a long draw.

"Damn, that tastes good. Nothing like a cold beer on deck."

"That was mine." Her face pinched in a playful glare.

"Oh ... sorry." He put the bottle back, picked up the other, and took three large swallows. "Damn, that tastes good."

She laughed, and he put his free arm around her shoulders.

"So you have an alcohol problem. I knew you were too good to be true." She tilted her now half-empty bottle to her lips and drank.

Ouch. An alcohol problem. That hit a little too close to home. The innocent comment from her made him see how stupid he'd been acting. Stupid was the word, too. He couldn't blame addiction, because he hadn't had any withdrawals. He drank to get stupid. He *used to* drink to get stupid.

"To tell the truth, I used to drink. A lot. I did some pretty stupid things in my life. I'd like to think I got all of that out of my system now." He was surprised at how good that felt to say. He dropped his hand from her shoulders to the curve of her waist. "Too good to be true, huh?" he teased.

"Yes. Besides your obvious good looks, you aren't cocky or conceited ... you are intelligent enough to hold a conversation, Dean likes you ... you play guitar ... which by the way I found stored in the closet, so you'll have to play something for me."

He smiled against her temple. He'd been complimented before. He wasn't shy by any means, but coming from her those words meant a hell of a lot more. His heart kicked up to a staccato. "Anything else?"

"Hmm." She turned toward him and put those cool juicy lips on his cheek. "I changed my mind. Maybe you are a little cocky."

"And don't forget that I'm a gentleman, or I'd make a dirty comment on your choice of words instead of offering you a meal."

She laughed, and he realized that he made it a point to make her laugh. Her laughter made him happy. And hot. "Come on. You can keep me company while I get dinner on the table." He helped her out of the booth and only released her hand to put both of their beer bottles on the kitchen counter, and he lifted her up to sit beside them.

"You really want me to just sit and watch you cook?" She held on to his shoulders for balance, and he couldn't seem to release his hold on her waist. His thumbs caressed her ribs through the thin cotton of her shirt. Without thinking, he stepped between her knees. Her position on the counter put her face at his level.

"You're my guest. I can't have you skipping a meal."

She removed his sunglasses, and then hers. She set them both aside, then peeled off his hat.

He went still. He'd never been so naked in his life. Her green eyes saw right through every pretense he'd ever put on. Right now it was just Adam Joseph Herlihey and Jade Colleen Graham. All that made him the man he was lay exposed for her to see, but rather than looking away, Adam indulged in the exchange, drawing everything he possibly could from those windows to her soul. God, he was afraid to

blink and sever the electric connection. He stared at her so long, the flecks of brown in her eyes started to blur together.

"What ... did you say?" She sounded as confused about the experience as he.

"I don't remember." The current drew him closer, and in a rush he kissed her. She opened to him eagerly. The sound that bubbled from her throat went straight to the tip of his cock, and shimmied down to his balls.

She wiggled to the edge of the counter, hooked her ankles around his thighs, and drew him closer to her. Oh God, he was so hard it hurt. He adjusted himself against her, but damn ... she ground along the fly of his shorts, teasing him with her heat. Smooth warm legs circled him. He could barely think straight with her hands grasping his back and scalp in a hungry hold.

"I'm glad you're here."

"Mm, me too."

"Jade..." She should stop him here. He wanted her to push him away. He needed some space before he took her on the kitchen counter.

"Please, Adam." Her voice was breathy and warm in his ear.

"But dinner..."

"Can wait. Please Adam."

Yes. Now. Fuck. He cupped her ass and carried her from the kitchen and into the cramped stateroom. He crawled with her into the center of the bed, then dropped down to cover her. Their combined sighs of pleasure echoed off the walls.

He reached under her shirt and the softest skin met his fingers. He broke away from her mouth; he had to feel that skin on his tongue.

"Adam ... oh that feels good."

With his mouth planted on her abdomen, her goose bumps came in a wave, tickling his lips. The sight of her, the way her shorts rode below her navel, the way he'd hiked up her tank, baring the fucking sexiest torso, drove him wild with lust.

"Oh God." He growled, guiding her shirt over her head and tossing it away. She wore an all but transparent scrap of pink fabric in place of a bra. Her nipples poked through the lacy thing, their dusky shadows like a virgin smiling behind a veil. He cupped one full mound with both hands, and sucked her entire areola into his mouth.

The fabric was softer than it looked. It molded around her erect nipple when wet. He fumbled for the front clasp, cursing his clumsiness. Finally he was able to tear the contraption away and look his fill.

"Jesus, Jade you're beautiful. Your body is ... perfect."

Her hands tore at his shirt. He had to stop looking at her perfect body when she peeled it over his head.

"I like this." She ran her fingers over his skin, light enough to make every nerve ending in his chest stand at attention. She lifted off the bed to plant her lips against his shoulder. "Let me feel you against me."

He kissed her hard, and rubbed their chests together. Her breasts, cool now from his mouth, scraped across him. He was so turned on, he was afraid to take his shorts off for fear

that he'd come as soon as she touched him. He had to slow down.

He rolled them to their sides. She curled a leg over his to keep him close, and he twined his between her smooth thighs.

"I just want to look at you for a minute." Her clear skin looked almost like it was made out of porcelain. He stroked her cheek with a thumb. Cool and soft. The strawberry blond curls tangled his fingers in a silky prison. He was torn. As much as he wanted to spend the next few hours just staring at her, memorizing every freckle on her nose, cataloguing every color that streaked through her hair, he had to kiss her too, and he couldn't do both. He studied her until he had to taste her. A trail of kisses over her cheeks and neck, then he'd pull back to look his fill. He continued the pattern until she writhed on the bed with a hungry moan.

"You're driving me crazy, Adam."

"Fair's fair. I can't even think about you without going a little bit nuts." He worked his way back to her breasts, loving the way she arched off the bed. While he suckled her like a babe, he worked on the fastener of her shorts. He barely got the zipper down before slipping his hand beneath her spread fly and panties.

"Oh God, Jade. You're so ready for me." So fucking hot and wet. Any control he strived to maintain almost snapped at that point. He sucked air into his lungs. His fingers slid along her crease, slipping and swirling in her cream. Her nub was swollen and hard. He pinched it gently, pulled it, rolled it in time with the gyrations of her hips.

With a strangled groan, she shoved her shorts and panties together down her legs and kicked them away. Adam rolled back in order to see what she revealed.

Straight from the hottest wet dream he could remember, this woman lying beside him made his chest burn with lust. She was trim, but not too skinny. His hands moved almost of their own accord, feeling the curve of her waist, the softest skin where her thighs met.

She kept her pubic hair trimmed and shaved into a thin triangle, more like the point of a reddish gold arrow, showing him the way to ultimate pleasure. He traced the shape, and the silky strands tickled his coarse fingers, sending spasms of desire through his hand, up his arm and into his soul. The tip of that arrow hovered over her clit, which jutted out and glistened with moisture. Sliding his finger further down, to those shaved lips below, he released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding, and it hissed through his teeth. When touching wasn't enough, he moved down and his tongue followed the path forged by his hand.

She shivered when he traced the triangle, moaned when he swirled around her clit, and shouted his name when he French kissed her. She tasted so sweet. He should have known. As sweet as her mouth was, her cream was like the cinnamon icing on a warm dessert.

Licking her was almost enough for him. He could continue all night, but he was already precariously close to his own orgasm. He hadn't been with a woman in months. He hadn't been with a woman sober in a hell of a long time. He barely slid two fingers inside her heat before she jerked, then

swelled. Her shuddering humming sound rolled over him, and her slick channel clenched his fingers in ecstasy. He kissed her, suckling her clit through each contraction, riding it out with her, prolonging her pleasure and his.

"Come to me ... Adam..."

He didn't need to be asked twice. He scrambled out of his shorts, and dropped wet kisses on his way up her body. She surprised him when she took his face in her hands and kissed him. The taste of her mingled with the sweetness of her mouth, sending another explosion of pure lust through his veins.

She nibbled his lips, she sucked on his tongue, and oh God, she trailed those delicate fingers down his front until they found his cock. Hard, ready, and weeping with pre-cum.

"My turn." She winked, pushing him onto his back and crawling down his legs.

"No ... no Jade ... I can't." He shoved her hand away with his own, and stiff-armed her with the other on her shoulder. "I'll come as soon as you touch me, and I don't want that." He swallowed hard, then pulled his balls away from his body to keep the rushing orgasm away. *Jesus, you're going to embarrass yourself.*

"Condom?" Her voice was low, husky.

He gestured toward the built-in bedside table, breathing like a fish out of water. He thought about the complicated riff in his latest number-one song. The lyrics to the work in progress that he just couldn't get right. By the time he had regained some semblance of control, she was again hovering over him with the rubber in her hand.

"God, you turn me on like no other." He shook his head with a self-depreciating chuckle. "Kiss me Jade."

The grin she gave him was as naughty as it could be. Lust danced behind her eyes when she straddled his hips and leaned on one bent arm to do his bidding.

Her cool, refreshing tongue stroked his, whirling around like an exotic dancer on a pole. With her free hand, she rolled the condom down his stiff dick, and he was pretty proud of the fact that he didn't lose it right there, with the tight circle of her fingers sliding down his length. She sat back on her heels to study her handiwork, his cock pulsed and bobbed between them.

Her legs looked so smooth and white against the roughness of his dark hands. He wedged his hands between her thighs and his hips, then up to where her wet center hovered over his balls.

"I love the way you touch me." He barely heard her whisper, but he felt the words deep in his chest.

"I love to touch you."

He measured his breathing, three counts in, three out. He wasn't sure if he could clear his head, with her balanced over him the way she was, but he had to try if he wanted to last more than one stroke inside her walls.

When he rubbed her clit between his thumb and forefinger, she shot up, then dropped on all fours with another one of those breathy moans that made him glad he was a man.

"You like that...?"

"You're ... going to make me come again." Her head was bent, and she watched every movement he made. God, that was sexy.

"I want you to. Over and over." He lifted his shoulders to reach her mouth with his. "I love your mouth Jade." He dropped back onto the pillow and slipped his middle finger as deep inside her as he could.

She hiccupped.

He smiled.

He curled that finger up, found the ridged spongy patch and rubbed a circle around it, recognizing the catch in her breath for what it was. She said he wasn't conceited, but the rush of male pride at bringing her such pleasure was hard to deny. It drove him crazy that he took her to such heights.

She held his hand inside her, curling her fingers against his where they lay against her clit. "Ah, Adam ... I want you inside me..." She sat upright, and looked deep into his eyes. Then she took him in her slender hand, angled his erection up and rose to her knees. When his cock slid along his knuckle where it was seated in her hot channel, he barked some inhuman noise, and his hips jerked up, sending him deeper.

He didn't know what words he used, but he was aware of a string of nonsensical noises erupting from his throat.

The most incredible warmth enveloped him when she sandwiched his hand between her pubic bone and his. When he regained some sanity, he wiggled his finger against her G-spot each time she slid down him in an agonizingly slow rhythm.

When she lowered herself to rest, with his cock and digit buried as deep as possible inside her, she opened heavy lids to meet his gaze. Her stillness paralyzed him, and he could only stare into those liquid green eyes. Then, without warning, and still without moving a muscle, her eyes drifted closed in supreme pleasure, and she came hard.

"Fuck ... Jesus ... Jade..." He grabbed her hip, holding her tight against him. He felt each clamping contraction as she squeezed the life out of him. She flushed, the sexy blush coloring even her breasts with a rosy glow.

The combination of his dick and finger inside her, feeling her orgasm in two ways was enough to send him over the edge. He pinched his eyes closed, and bared his teeth. His balls tightened, and shot his seed in wave after wave up and out his staff. Each pulsing release was a miniature orgasm, and they added up to one hell of a finale. A thin sheen of sweat covered him, sending a shiver down his body. This pleasure he had never known even curled his toes.

When he had no more to give, he peeled open his eyes to find her looking down at him, the sultry expression of a woman well pleased. She took his hand, slid his finger from within her, and cupped his fist in her hands. She brought it to her lips, and kissed his knuckles.

He closed his eyes again, and sighed, indulging in the sexy aftermath of loving. His adrenaline was still pumping through his body, his heart was still racing out of control, so he just relaxed, and allowed her to bring him back to earth with her gentle ministrations.

Finally he felt like he'd regained enough control over his liquid muscles in order to open his eyes, and with the smile on her face, Adam Nash realized he would never again need a liquid high.

"Jade, that was..." He shook his head. There were no words that wouldn't sound cliché or trite.

"I know. For me too." She lay on top of his chest, blanketing him with warmth, and he wrapped his arms around her, committing every second to memory. He smoothed her hair away from her cheek. He tucked her head under his chin, and he smiled. Again.

He knew it would be good. Every kiss, every touch they'd shared had been leading up to this, and he'd be damned if it wasn't better than he could have ever expected.

He rolled them both to their sides, and he reached down to hold the condom as he pulled from her. "Don't move." He shot her a teasing glare, then rolled back over, sliding off the bed and into the head. He returned with a warm washcloth, and winked up at her.

Jade smiled. That wink was so sexy, so full of promises, and now she knew each promise this man made with his touches, kisses and ... winks ... were not empty ones.

He cleaned her with a gentle touch, then tossed the washcloth to the floor along with their clothes. He laid his head on her stomach, and wrapped his arms around her waist. The position was so tender and subservient, Jade took a shuddering breath to keep her emotions in check.

His thick hair tickled her ribs. She smoothed it against his skull, ruffling it where it still held an indentation of his ball cap.

After a while, she thought he might have gone to sleep; his breath came deep and even, and his weight was heavy on top of her. She closed her eyes. She could go for a nap. They could wake up later and have dinner then.

To her consternation, the mere thought of food sent her stomach rumbling. Adam's responding laughter made her blush.

He nuzzled her belly with his nose. "Sounds like I need to feed you."

"Not yet. I don't want to move."

"You don't have to move." He rose on his hands and knees. His sleepy blue eyes looked even sexier now.

"But..."

"Huh uh. Stay. This will just take a minute." He pulled his boxer shorts out from the pile of forgotten clothing at the foot of the bed, hiked them up over his hips, and went into the kitchen.

Jade lay there for only a moment before putting her panties back on, but opted for his black tee shirt to top them. The shirt fit Adam like a second skin, but it draped along Jade's curves, and hung down to mid-thigh. It smelled like him though, and that was enough reason to wear it.

She came up behind him where he stood staring into the refrigerator, and took him in her arms. His back was hot on her cheek.

"I told you to stay." He stroked her hand where it lay temptingly close to his nipple.

"I want to help."

"You can choose then." He twined his fingers through hers and held them against his heart. "We have chicken marsala, salisbury steak, or chicken stir fry."

She peered around him. In the fridge were three aluminum pans, each clearly marked with a bold black sharpie. "Carley?"

"No, I did this all by myself."

"You're kidding!" She let go of him, and pushed him aside to look beneath the foil lid of the first pan she found. Four chicken breasts topped with mushrooms and nestled in a bed of noodles. Broccoli, cauliflower and carrots in a separate foil cup in the corner of the pan. Even cold it smelled delicious, and her stomach grumbled again. "Oh no. This isn't good."

"It's not?"

"No. Damn you ... you cook too?" Now, if he volunteered at a children's hospital, she'd be a goner for sure. She set the chicken marsala on the stove top and turned to face him, shaking her head. She was in such trouble.

He closed the refrigerator and took her hands in his. "Actually, when I said I did it myself, what I meant was, I picked up the phone and called my friend who is a chef, and asked him to prepare three meals that could be reheated in my boat's oven. All by myself."

"Oh ... Adam, you little..."

"Hey, I picked them up from his restaurant by myself too ... I'm a pretty self sufficient guy, don't you think? Hey, watch

this. I'm going to get dinner ready." He reached behind her to switch on the oven. "Just call me MacGyver."

He dodged her playful slug.

While the scent of the Italian dish filled the space, Adam slipped his board shorts back on, but refused to allow her to change out of his tee shirt.

"I don't think I'll be able to wear it again without a raging hard-on after this." He rubbed circles into her back through the shirt. "But this will be worth it."

They joked and laughed through dinner. Forsaking plates, they just hunched over the big aluminum pan, fighting over bites of chicken or the juiciest looking carrots. He poured them each a glass of wine, and she watched the sunset from a most comfortable place on his lap where he sat on a fabric sling-backed deck chair.

"The boat isn't making you sick?" His breath tickled her eyelashes, and the rumble of his words sounded even more musical when she had her ear pressed against his chest.

Jade had his hand in hers, and she was tracing each line in his palm, wishing she knew how to read the story behind each crevice. "No, it's very soothing."

"You might change your mind if the wind picks up." He tightened his free hand around her waist and pressed another kiss on her forehead.

"I trust MacGyver to keep me safe." She felt his smile against her forehead.

"We're not that far out. If it gets too bad we can just head back in."

"Mm, then I'll pray for good weather." She kissed his palm, then ran her tongue along the deepest groove.

"Me too. I love having you all to myself like this."

"I won't want to go to work on Monday, that's for sure."

When he didn't respond, she again wondered about his profession. She adopted a casual tone, and tried something.

"How about you? Don't you just love Mondays?"

"The days of the week don't matter much to me.

Sometimes I'm at work at two in the morning on a Sunday."

She sighed. "Are you ever going to tell me what you do?" She hated the pouty words, but she hadn't tried this approach, maybe it would work. She stuck out her lower lip.

"I think you're going to figure it out pretty soon." He held her close. "I promised Dean I'd tell you before this weekend is over."

"Dean knows?" She sat up to face him. "And he didn't tell me?" It couldn't be bad, if Dean didn't try to stop her from spending the weekend with Adam. It couldn't be too exciting either, or Dean would have made it a point to tell her. "Wait a minute ... you told Dean before you told me?"

"I didn't tell him. He guessed."

She looked Adam over. Did she miss something? "How did he guess that fast?"

Adam shrugged. "Maybe he's just smarter than you."

"Adam!" She planted her fists on her hips. Oh he did *not* just say that.

With that sexy laugh, he pulled her back into his arms, her cheek against his nipple. "Jade, I'll tell you right now if you

want me to." He smelled good. "But I wanted to spend this weekend without worrying about it."

"I shouldn't be worried that you're hiding it from me?" She circled his nipple with a middle finger, watching it grow to a stiff peak before her eyes. "You know I won't care if you're a fast-food burger flipper, roadie, or key grip best boy ... or whatever they call it."

"That's good to know, but you aren't even close. You don't need to worry. What I do is legal, moral, ethical, and decent. It affects most aspects of my life—a big part of who I am, but I really do own my own car, and this boat, and even my own house." He sighed, and rubbed her bent arm. "But most people see my occupation as me, and vice versa. I just want you to know who I am before I throw that into the mix."

"I already know what kind of man you are."

"Yeah, you told me. Cocky was the word I think you used."

"Hmm, but now I know I was wrong about that." She averted her attention to his right nipple, and adjusted her hips in his lap.

"Oh?"

"Mm hm, I think I said you were 'a *little* cocky', which doesn't describe you well at all."

Typical man, his erection grew with her words. "Maybe if you left my nipples alone, my little cocky wouldn't misbehave."

"I think it's behaving quite nicely." She rubbed against him, and even politely reached down to adjust him.

Kisses are better when smiling.

Adam stood, lowering her to the polished deck, and without a word, led her down to the state room.

She woke sometime during the night, and was disturbed to find that Adam wasn't beside her. It was the first time during the night she couldn't feel his hard body wrapped around hers. After exhausting themselves with a slow session of lovemaking, Jade was surprised she hadn't slept until noon.

She sat upright and looked around. The sheets beside her were cool enough to prove that he had left a while ago.
Where would he...

And then she heard the music. Adam's guitar. One chord, and then another. A picked-out melody, strung through the harmony. The tune complemented the otherwise still and silent night, and then it stopped.

An irrational need to be close to him flooded her body, and she shoved her arms into Adam's shirt, and followed the sound up the stairs and out onto deck, all the way to the front, *bow*, Adam said, of the boat.

When she saw him, she stopped in her tracks. Adam was cross-legged on the wooden deck, a guitar in his lap. One tiny florescent lantern cast a small circle of blue light on the spiral notebook beneath one knee. There was a pencil behind an ear, and he wore only a pair of cotton boxers.

Those same chords, the same melody, then one or two additional notes, another pause, then back to the beginning. Adam lifted his face to the clear starry sky. From her position behind him, she couldn't tell if his eyes were open, but it was obvious he was lost in his music, concentrating on the flow of notes, and the direction they took him.

He stopped playing, took the pencil from his ear, wrote in the notebook, stuck the pencil back in place, and the process began again. As much as she wanted to stand there watching and listening, Jade didn't want to disturb his concentration, so she turned to tiptoe back to bed.

"Jade?"

His voice startled her, and she jumped a bit before turning back around to face him. "I'm sorry. I woke up and ... you weren't there, and ... I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"Come here." He laid his guitar aside, and held out a hand. Light from the moon and bluish lantern glow painted the area with a black-and-white old-movie feel.

She walked toward him, wending through the many balls of notebook paper, strewn like shrapnel after a weary battle. His beautiful features came into focus as she got closer. She took his outstretched hand, and he led her around and into his lap.

"I'm sorry I woke you. I forget how thin these walls are."

She didn't realize how chilly it was outside until his warm arms surrounded her. She snuggled back against his chest. "It was beautiful. I didn't want you to stop."

He buried his face in the curve of her neck. "If you give me a minute I'll continue." He sipped at her skin, licking and kissing. "But I needed a break, and you smell good. Like sex and sleep." He rubbed her arms, warming her.

"I wonder why." She yawned. "So you write music?"

He laughed. "I'm trying, but it isn't working out very well right now."

"It sounded good to me." She settled more comfortably on the deck in the cove of his thighs.

"The music is done. It's the lyrics that are giving me hell." He rested his chin on the top of her head, and together they watched the stars twinkle just like the lights of the distant California coast.

"Wait, so you write music?" Did she just figure out his big secret occupation? No wonder he was reluctant to share that with her. Working in a consignment sort of fashion can't be too stable.

"Yeah," he laughed, the sound rich in her ears.

"Well ... what ... why didn't you just say so?"

She pinched a few hairs on his leg and twisted. He yelped, and grabbed her wrist.

"You didn't ask if I wrote music. You asked if I was a stunt man or a porn star, but you..." She twisted further. "Damn, Jade ... that hurts!"

"Don't mess with a girl raised in the sticks with boys." She had unlimited knowledge of effective torture of a male body.

"I was going to play for you, but if you're gonna be mean..."

She released the knotted hair. "I'm sorry. I'll be good."

He rubbed the red spot on his thigh. "I bet you were a little brat growing up."

"I was an angel sent from heaven above," she recited.

He picked up his guitar, and put it in front of her, then hooked his chin on her shoulder to play, so his breath fanned her collarbone, and his words snaked into her ear like a forbidden whisper. "Well, Angel, it's a well-known fact that

there are four types of country music." He strummed a chord. "We've got Lovin', Livin', Leavin' and Cryin'. Every song in country music falls into one of these categories."

"Is that right?" There was something fascinating about having a guitar played in her lap. She could actually feel the notes through the back of the instrument where it rested against her breasts. She tucked her hands beneath his thighs to keep them out of the way.

"Yeah, a guy I know came up with this category system, and it's made sense. Anyway, this song is a type one: Lovin'." He tuned one string with a barely perceptible tweak to one tuning key. When it was satisfactory, he continued. "But the lyrics aren't coming to me quite yet, so just close your eyes for me. I'll play it, and you can just imagine the love story in the music."

Jade couldn't keep the grin from her face, but she closed her eyes, and leaned against his shoulder. "Okay."

And then he played.

The straining melody threaded through the strummed chords. She tried to picture a man singing to his lover. Immediately she placed her and Adam in her mind, and she knew she wore a goofy expression as the waves of melody drew her into the dance. Adam hummed along, and she heard his voice in her ear. Maybe she was still half asleep, but the song, with its minor chords and sorrowful tune, changed from being about love to the story of sadness. Adam's purring sent an ache of regret straight to her heart. Even without words, the music made her want to cry when it was all over.

"What do you think?" He continued strumming the chord progression, and spoke quietly into her ear.

"I loved it." She slid her hands down his, until she held the guitar through him. "Adam, it was just ... beautiful, but..." She bit her bottom lip. *Shut up Jade.*

"But what?" He stopped playing.

"Nothing. I loved it, I really did..."

"Tell me," he prodded.

"Well ... you said this was a love song, right? A type one?"

He laughed, and nibbled her ear. "Yeah, type one. Lovin'."

"And what were the other types?"

"Lovin', Livin', Leavin' and Cryin'."

She threaded her fingers in between his where they lay against the strings. "I don't know much about music or anything, and I wouldn't even attempt to understand what it's like to write a song..."

He sat still, and she worried she might offend him. "Go on," he prompted.

"I just thought it was more of a Leavin' or Cryin' song. Maybe a type three, three and a half ... uh ... maybe."

He was quiet for a few minutes, which really worried her. Then he laid the guitar aside, and enfolded her in his arms like before. "You really think so?"

"Well, you know ... without the words I mean. Maybe once you get the lyrics in there it will..."

"No ... no you're right." The animation in his words relieved her of any guilt at her big-mouthed opinion. "I wanted a love song, and I wrote this. In my mind it's just always been a love song." He clasped both her hands in his.

"I never actually stepped back and looked at it. Oh my God, Jade. You're right, it's not a love song!"

"Wait, Adam. Don't change it just because..."

He pushed her aside to cradle her in his left arm. He leaned over her with the biggest smile on his face. He didn't look like a man who'd had little or no sleep. His eyes shone, dancing with excitement. "Jade, I'm so glad I woke you up." He kissed her hard, but without desire. He was too keyed up with another joy.

Jade laughed at his enthusiasm. "Wake me up anytime Adam."

He reached for his notebook, and tore out the page he'd been writing on, crumpled it into a ball and threw it into the shadows with the others.

Jade climbed off his lap, sat on her heels and watched him. She could almost see the wheels turning. His eyes shifted across the paper, and he wrote in bold scrawling words. She leaned over, smoothed his sleep-mussed hair, and kissed his forehead with an indulgent smile.

He probably didn't even notice when she crept back to bed.

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Chapter Seven

Waking up in the arms of a sexy man has to be one of the greatest pleasures known to womankind. His legs were tangled with hers, one arm thrown across her waist, the other had to be numb, with her head lying on his bicep cutting off his circulation. Her nose was pressed against his chest, and his deep even breathing proved he was still asleep.

She didn't know when he had come back to bed; she had fallen asleep listening to him work on his music out on deck. From the fresh smell of clean male flesh in front of her, she realized he must have showered before joining her.

Too bad she missed that. She planted a kiss on his smooth pectoral muscle. Warm from sleep, and tasting deliciously masculine. He was beautiful to look at. He must pump a lot of iron to keep his body this rock hard. His nipples were a dark auburn, two flat circles of flesh that intrigued her. She knew he liked her touch on them, the way he cupped her head last night while she suckled and teased them erect. As tempted as she was to replay the evening before, she didn't want to wake him; he probably needed the sleep.

She looked up, past his square jaw, dusted as it was with blond stubble, across his chiseled cheek, and to his eyelids. His lashes were darker than the hair on his head, the thick crescents made her want to kiss them. He looked completely harmless and innocent in sleep.

Very carefully, she scooted up to align her face with his. She inhaled his breath like a vampire would feed on the blood

of his victim. The longer she stayed, the more her heart ached with the intimacy of sharing his essence as he simply slept. She was torn between hoping he'd awaken for her sake, and hoping he would continue to sleep for his.

Finally, with an airy kiss on the corner of his mouth, those lips that gave her such pleasure yesterday, she slipped from beneath his arm and adjusted the sheet over him before grabbing something to wear and sneaking out of the room.

After a few minutes, she figured out how to turn on the shower. It would be too small for them both, she thought with a naughty pout, but the water was nice and hot and after putting on her makeup, Jade peeked in to check on Adam. He hadn't moved from where she left him, his hand was even still stretched out as it had been curled over her waist. She indulged in another long staring session, until her body started asking for something more, and she had to leave him to rest.

She wandered along the boat, stopping on the way to lean against the chrome rail and watch the rise and fall of the dark blue ocean. She could count only five boats in sight, and none close enough to bother them. The green mountainous Southern California coast sat far in the distance. The ocean always made her feel lonely and insignificant, and the feeling was even more pronounced out here surrounded by nothing but water.

The cockpit fascinated her, and she carefully walked through it, studying the various dials, levers and switches. Good lord, how long must it take for one to learn how to drive a boat like this? Dean would have an aneurism.

It was almost eleven when she looked through the kitchen for something to eat. She scrambled some eggs and fried a few links of sausage. When brunch was ready she snuck two plates into the bedroom, set them on the bedside table, and snuggled against him.

"Mm, good morning Jade," he mumbled. "I smell breakfast."

"Are you too sleepy?"

"No..." He opened his eyes and rolled to hover over her. He studied her for a few minutes, tracing a line over each of her features with a reverent touch. "Has anyone ever told you that you look like a painting?"

"A painting?" She laughed, warmth rushing to her cheeks. "I don't think anyone has. I hope you aren't thinking Picasso or Dali."

"More like Botticelli." He smoothed her hair away from her face. "I love that you aren't starving yourself into a size two. You're so ... real. Real curves, real boobs..."

"That makes me wonder what kind of woman you're used to dating." And trying not to wonder how she measured up. *Size two plus six. That's how you measure up Jade.*

"It makes me realize all the others weren't women at all."

Oh God. The sincere way he was looking down at her, those sleepy blue eyes ... she was in such trouble. "Scrambled eggs and sausage. Keeps me in my *real* womanly figure. Come on, it's getting cold." She gave him a smacking kiss on his cheek and slipped free of his arms. She had to get out of there before he started looking too closely at her flaws. She poured two cups of coffee and returned to the bed, where

he was propped up against the wall, a sausage link skewered on his fork. They ate side by side, often sharing forkfuls and kisses. Again she was thankful for the calm waters, or they wouldn't have even attempted breakfast in bed.

She carried their dishes back to the kitchen, and when she returned, she stopped in the doorway. Adam slid back down in bed, his arms folded behind his head, and a very sexy smile on his face. She stuck a hip out, and folded her arms over her chest.

"I thought you were getting up." Too late, she realized what she'd said.

His smile grew on one side. "Oh I'm up."

She rolled her eyes and tried her best to look unimpressed. "I mean ... I thought you were going to get dressed."

"And I thought I told you not to pack any clothes." He crooked his finger, beckoning her to him. Like one hypnotized, she followed his silent direction. She crawled up his body, and he guided her the last few inches with two hands cupping her cheeks until she kissed him.

He tasted of coffee. His warm tongue stroked against hers with amazing skill. She tried not to think of the women before her, but the vision of a size-two, leggy, blonde supermodel with double D's wrapped around Adam in a carnal embrace almost made her growl.

"Have I told you I love your body?" he hummed in her ear. The words were musical, like the bass accompaniment in one of his love songs.

"You do?" She tore off her tank top, as he worked on her bra.

"I do. Smooth. Warm ... sexy ... God, baby. Bring those nipples to my mouth."

Any thought of another woman pleasing him left her mind, and her heart swelled with pleasure. She made some kitten-like mewl, and crawled further over him, until one breast was poised over his willing mouth.

He circled the stiff tip of his tongue around to outline her already erect nipple in a painfully slow drag. Then another circle further down onto the flushed skin of her breast. His breath was warm against her, but each ring of saliva he left chilled with the moving air. Another circle and her nipple nestled firmly inside his mouth. When he wrapped his lips around her flesh and sucked the tip in a long drag, Jade almost lost control and collapsed on him. The torture was too sweet though, and she braced herself for more, even while moisture leaked out to coat her sex.

He reached down to the button of her shorts, and made quick work pushing them down until she could kick free without moving from his mouth. Then he used his hands to stroke the skin of her back, down to her ass, even her thighs received the loving attention of his ten fingers.

"Okay, this one's done." He reached for her other breast, and began the torture all over again.

Jade threw her head back and moaned. "Adam..."

His wandering fingers found the arrow of her pubic hair, and played with it. "I love what you do here." He traced the

shape until he reached the point, and spent extra time where she was already moist and needy. "It's very sexy."

"Adam." She sucked a noisy breath in when he wiggled two fingers against her clit.

"What baby?" His words were muffled by her swaying breasts.

"That feels ... nice."

"It sure does. I love breakfast in bed."

When Jade's nipples were both wet and painfully stiff from Adam's talented tongue, Jade sat back, bringing her wet heat against his navel. He held her hips in his strong hands and she dropped back down and kissed him.

She could kiss him all day. It was never sloppy, never cold. But there was something she wanted to do, so she backed down his strong lean body, planting kisses along the way, nibbling each nipple to a sharp point before licking a line down his sternum and abdomen until she reached his navel.

"Jade..." He gathered her hair in one fist, clearing her path. Jade glanced up at him. His action was a clear invitation ... hell it was all but begging. She smiled, and wrapped one hand around the base of his erection, using only the lightest touch. She kissed the tight skin when it jumped in her hand. Kneeling between his thighs, she made herself comfortable, and with one hand splayed over his stomach, and the other around his cock, Jade gave the head of Adam's cock a long wet lick with the flat of her tongue.

Twirling and tracing the sloping rim, Jade's tongue learned him. When she dipped into his opening to sip out the leaking cream Adam moaned. She pushed him against the tight circle

she made with her lips, and sucked him deeper inside. With a tight grip on her hair, he mumbled a string of dirty words.

She hummed her own pleasure against the hot skin of his thick cock, and he pumped his hips against her hand. She found a good rhythm, with the twisting jerk of her hand, the sucking and the alternating licking from inside her mouth against the head of his staff. She only stopped her orchestrated play to take him deeper into her mouth for two or three deep strokes. She didn't pull back until the tip of his cock tickled the back of her throat where she would hold him still and contract her tonsils in a swallowing motion. Another twisting drag from her hand, and she'd pull her mouth up to again tease his head.

"Jesus fucking Christ Jade."

She looked up. He watched her with rapt attention. His eyes clear and focused on her. On everything she did. While he watched, she brought her free hand around and cupped his balls.

He stroked the skin of her arms, then returned to tangle in her hair, as if he couldn't find a suitable position for his hands.

She enjoyed seeing his pleasure. Tasting his musky salty cock in her mouth, and the occasional bursts of bitter ejaculate beads made her grind her pussy against her heels where she sat between his thighs. The firm centers of his balls felt so full in her hand. She rolled them inside his scrotum, dusted with a blond shroud, giving her fingers one more texture to learn.

He didn't look away until she traced a swirling pattern down the raised vein on his straining length, and only then because he'd rolled his eyes into the back of his head.

"Baby you have to stop ... condom..."

"Huh uh." She continued licking.

"Jade!" He reached down and literally pulled her off his cock, and fumbled for a condom. "That's too fucking good Jade." He tore open the foil square and rolled the rubber on in record time. "But I need to be inside you. Right now."

He took her by the shoulders and flipped them, until he had her pinned to the mattress. He looked down at her, his eyes glinting wildly. In one long thrust, he buried himself inside her. He filled her completely, from lips to womb, and all around inside, Jade knew every inch of her was holding him in the most primal of embraces, and her heart beat harder.

Adam lay on top of her, panting against her ear like he'd just run a mile, but he didn't stir inside her. "You're so tight. You hold on to me like the warmest glove. Like I belong here. I do, don't I?"

"Yes ... oh God Adam. Just right. Perfect."

And then he moved. Slowly at first, with thorough thrusts that took him from deep within her all the way out until the swollen tip of his penis stroked the sensitized tissue of her outer lips. She curled her arms under his and hooked her hands over his shoulders.

His weight against her, pressing her into the soft bed, left her feeling feminine and in need of protection. She reveled in the kisses he planted on her cheek and neck, and marveled at his ability to control his steady pace. She arched into him with

each thrust; each long drag against her tingling opening sent an answering sizzle through her legs and swirled in her womb.

She couldn't control the moans and whimpers that escaped her. He propped himself on his elbows, cradling her head in his hands.

"Look at me, Jade."

She blinked and looked up into his eyes.

"You feel so good surrounding me. I want to feel you come."

She nodded. She desperately wanted to come. The tingling in her loins turned into a full out burn, consuming her from within. "Kiss me Adam."

With the penetration of his tongue behind her teeth, Jade let go. Her sharp cry of pleasure entered his mouth, and he answered with his own. Imploding waves rolled down her uterus, and sent clamping spasms in her channel. Each one clasping his cock in a milking motion, and he stirred in perfect harmony, riding out the waves like a surfer would search for the sweet spot. Before she could recover, Adam released his seed, his cock swelled and spurted, prolonging her own orgasm.

He kissed her cheek, her eyelids, the corner of her mouth. "You're beautiful," he panted.

She'd never felt particularly beautiful until Adam. With every touch, kiss and look that spoke of his appreciation for her body. She no longer cared that she would feel inferior in a lineup of Adam's former lovers. She would enjoy every moment with him.

She washed the dishes while he shaved, then he gave her a beginners lesson in boating. He talked her through raising the anchor, and then laughed at her reluctance to take the wheel. "There isn't anything to run into out here. I'll stay right here with you."

And he did. Plastered against her back, and distracting her with kisses on her nape and wandering hands along her stomach.

They dropped anchor to eat a late lunch of simple sandwiches and chips. "Until now, the only boats I have been on were fishing boats with noisy motors, or the ferries down in South America." She licked the salt from her lips. "This is much more fun."

"We can do it again. Any time you want."

"I wonder how Dean is doing at the shop. Saturdays are usually pretty busy." Jade knew she'd hear about it when she got home if it was hell on him. "Of course, Ella's there. She'll probably stay late if he..."

Adam stuck a potato chip in her mouth to shut her up. "I'm sure Dean has everything under control. I must not be keeping you occupied enough if you're worrying about work."

She finished her can of lemon-lime soda. "Maybe I could use some distraction..." By swinging one leg over his, she was able to wedge herself between the booth and the tabletop to straddle his lap.

He really was good at distraction. He kissed her until she forgot all about Earth Scents. "I thought we could go snorkeling later."

"Yeah, later..." she agreed while nibbling on his ear. "Wait, isn't the water cold?"

He chuckled. "I've got dry suits. Are you chicken?"

"No." She reached down in between them and stroked his hardening flesh. "I'm just worried about shrinkage."

One minute they were seated in the tight dining area, and the next she was on the deck, his body pinning her down. His snarling growl would have been more effective if it wasn't peeking through his grin.

"With you around, shrinkage won't be a problem, lady."

They christened the deck, facing each other, and never releasing the other's gaze.

The water was cold. He wouldn't have even suggested it if it weren't for the neoprene suits that kept them all but cocooned from head to toe. Not only that, there really wasn't much to see, the water wasn't clear, and the depth of the ocean where they anchored turned the view of the bottom into that of a black hole. In the distance he pointed out a group of sea lions frolicking, which at least was something.

"They're all over Santa Barbara Island, which is further out that way." He pointed. "We'll have to save that trip for another weekend."

She didn't balk at another weekend with him, and he secretly cheered. He treaded water, watching her kick circles around him, the tip of the snorkel sticking out of the water. Even covered as she was, head to toe in black neoprene, her curves and delicate feminine movements were calling his base instincts to attention.

Shrinkage, he laughed. *Hardly*.

He nibbled her luscious ass as he followed her back up the ladder. "I'd love to share a shower with you, but that thing is way too small." On deck he peeled off her suit, baring a sexy pair of breasts. He couldn't help but cover them with his palms. "Promise me you'll spend the night at my place soon. I have a great shower with plenty of room."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

She laughed. "Yes, Adam. I promise."

He pressed his lips together. He might need to call her on that. He had one more night with her on his boat, and then he'd have to tell her the whole truth about his life. He tried to prepare himself for each possible reaction. Would she turn giddy and ask for his autograph? No, not her style. Would she quietly accept it, and move on like it was nothing? Not likely. If she accepted him, she would be accepting living in the spotlight with him. Without a doubt, her name and picture would be in the supermarket tabloids she so staunchly avoided. That's a lot for someone to deal with, especially someone who isn't used to the attention. She could always be angry, storm out of his life and have nothing to do with him.

Fuck. Why did that scenario seem the most likely?

"Adam? You're frowning." Jade reached up and smoothed the wrinkle in his brow. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." He pulled her cold wet body against his. "I just don't want this weekend to end." That was the truth.

Her nipples were hard from the cold, and he only tore himself away from her when she shivered. "Get in the

shower. I'll put dinner in the oven." He spun her around and gave her ass a playful pat.

God damn it. What was he going to do?

He didn't know which meal he threw in the oven. He grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and leaned against the hallway wall, listening to the sound of running water.

He was going to lose her. Sure as shit, she'd run. Did he blame her? Look at the extent he went through to pretend to be someone other than who he was, just for a chance at privacy. How could he ask her to willingly live the life of a celebrity?

They could do it. Together. If she was willing. Even if he had to buy out restaurants every once in a while to get out privately. Hell, it wasn't that hard. It was worth it for sure.

Out here, in the middle of the ocean no one bothered them. She seemed to be enjoying herself, but of course he had her as a captive audience. It wasn't like she could storm out and just go home.

That's it! He would tell her tonight. She'd be stuck listening to his pathetic explanations. He'd have time to make her see that they could work. After groveling sufficiently for keeping this little tidbit about himself a secret from her.

Now that he'd made up his mind, he was both relieved and terrified, but by the time she turned the shower over to him, he had a plan. He stood under the water until it turned cold going over every aspect. He could very easily screw up and ruin everything.

She had the table out on deck set with a chilled bottle of wine and platefuls of food. He couldn't help staring at her as

they ate, feeling like he was going to lose her in a matter of hours.

"I think I want to meet this chef friend of yours." She patted her bare stomach. She wore a green bikini top that matched her eyes, and a pair of frayed denim shorts. They were working on the second bottle of white wine that evening, but Adam swore he wasn't trying to ply her with alcohol in preparation for his bomb dropping.

But it couldn't hurt.

"Are you free on Friday?"

She smiled. God, he loved that smile. The way her eyes lit up her entire face. "I think so. I'll have to check my calendar."

He pulled his deck chair up against hers so they faced each other. He took her hand in his. "I need a commitment. Can I pick you up at seven? Friday night."

"Alright. It's a date." She squeezed his hand.

"Promise me."

She narrowed her eyes on him. Yes, he was acting like an idiot. "You're acting strange. Too much wine?"

No, not enough, but he needed to keep his head on straight. "Am I acting drunk?"

"No just ... distracted. Is it the song you're working on? Didn't you get further on it last night?"

"I finished. It practically wrote itself after you pointed me in the right direction. Would you like to hear it?"

She lit up like he had presented her with a diamond brooch. "Yes, I would love to."

Adam left to retrieve his guitar. Well, that set the ball rolling. Now, would he have the balls to follow through?

He returned to his seat beside her and tuned his guitar. "Before I start, I want you to kiss me."

"Mm, no problem." She leaned over his guitar and gave him her mouth. He tried to memorize her taste, the very unique way her tongue danced with his. This would be the last time she kissed him as Adam Herlihey. Hell, it might be the last time she kissed him at all. Adam pulled back, looked her deep in the eye, and took a deep breath.

Jade didn't know what to think of Adam's behavior. He had been staring at her a lot today, and while that didn't really bother her, the thoughtful expression on his face gave her a strange sense of foreboding. Something was on his mind. She hoped it had to do with music and not something she'd said or done.

She watched him tune his guitar, thinking he never looked sexier. He wore blue jeans, faded and worn, and she'd talked him into going without a shirt, which he did on the condition that she did as well.

"I hope you feel special; you're the first to hear this." He strummed.

She got more comfortable in her chair, inviting him to get on with it. "I do feel special."

"I've named it 'Always'. It's a type three and a half." He winked, and began to play. She recognized the tune from last night, and then he sang.

The day we wed, I vowed my soul.

When you needed a man, I played the role.

I promised my love, my care to give,
And for your smile, my life I'd give.
I swore I'd protect you, through all of life's pain.
But I've failed in my duty, now I'm going insane.

Adam sang with feeling. His voice was amazing. He brought her into the story, and the music cradled her. The lyrics brought tears to her eyes for the man who'd lost his wife, an American soldier who fought for freedom. She blinked tears away, and left her eyes closed for the remainder of the song.

He was a brilliant song writer. Jade felt every emotion he sang, down to the pain of loss, and the joy of remembered love. This song was going to be big. She could already hear it on the radio. Sung by Kenny Chesney. No ... better than that ... Adam Nash.

Oh yes, Adam would...

With that mental picture, her eyes snapped open. Jade's world shrank around her, and she thought she might faint. Pictures she'd seen of Adam Nash flashed through her mind. On stage, on the cover of her compact discs. "Adam?"

He smiled sadly, sighed then nodded.

"Adam ... Nash?" He nodded again, and all the blood in her body dropped to her toes. *Entertainment industry. Song writer ... career ... on stage ... entertainment ... country western...*

He set his guitar aside and reached for her.

"No!" She scrambled from her chair. She backed three steps away and looked at him where he sat, and suddenly he wasn't Adam Herlihey who shared the past passionate hours

with her. It was Adam Nash. The man who sang to her when she got dressed in the morning. The voice who accompanied hers in the car. *Oh my God ...* Adam Nash. *The* Adam Nash was standing in front of her. She always wondered what she would do if she met a celebrity, but she didn't ask for his autograph like she thought she would. She didn't tell him her favorite song off her favorite album. She didn't take his picture with her cell phone. Oh no ... screw the autograph, she'd just *slept with him*. She tangled her fingers together, and stared.

And then she realized a harsh fact. She'd lost Adam Herlihey. Just like that. The tears that began with his song now flowed down her cheeks unchecked.

"Oh no. No, Adam ... no."

He stood, and walked around the chairs toward her.
"Jade..."

"No..." She held up a hand and backed away. "Adam..."
Herlihey ... Nash ... Adam...

He didn't stop, and soon she was against the chrome rail. One hand clenched and pressed against her racing heart, and the other flailing wildly for a stronghold behind her.

"Adam ... Nash." She breathed.

"It's just a name. Jade I'm still the same Adam." He pulled her into his arms.

"Oh no, Adam. Oh God. I lost Adam..." She was too shocked to push him away.

"No Jade. I'm here. It's me. Tell me you know that."

She couldn't. She didn't know it. She didn't know anything anymore. Except ... this chest against her cheek. She knew

that. His arms were familiar. *Adam. This was Adam.* His scent, his voice ... she reached around him and held on tight. If she let go, the Adam she knew would disappear forever.

"Adam?"

"It's me. I'm right here Jade."

Her mind slowed down enough to assimilate the information. Adam wasn't gone, he was right here, holding her tight. Rocking her against his familiar body. Finally her heart stopped its pounding, and she looked up, and met his eyes. Those blue eyes that had looked down into hers with passion and mirth now studied her with an uncomfortable anxiety. She reached up to soothe him.

She touched his face, stroked his cheek, traced his lips. She angled up on her tiptoes to kiss him.

Adam growled, and met her lips eagerly. Yes, this was Adam. How silly to think he had changed. He was the same man she'd made love to hours earlier. Just because he was a...

"Why?" She pulled away from him abruptly, and her heart went right back to pounding, but now she was pissed.

"Jade..."

"No. Don't touch me." She put a hand on his sternum and stiff-armed him away. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

"I told you before." His voice was calm and soothing. He'd been expecting this talk, hadn't he? That just made her even angrier. "I wanted you to know me before learning about what I do."

She could barely see him through the red haze of fury. Her lips were almost numb, as tight as she held them.

"Please Jade."

"At first I thought you were unemployed, or you had some job you were embarrassed about." She shook her head. "But this ... this is kind of a big deal."

"I know." He ran a hand through his hair. "Please, can we sit down and talk? If you just try to understand..."

She released a nervous laugh, but it came out as a rush of air. "I can't ... talk to you right now. Just leave me ... alone for a few minutes. Let me ... I just need some time." She was stammering, but she didn't care. She backed out of his reach again, and fumbled for the cabin door.

Adam drained the last of the wine, drinking directly from the bottle. The sun had gone down, but he didn't bother turning on the exterior lighting. He actually hadn't bothered to get up from his deck chair, where he threw himself over two hours ago.

She asked for time, and that's what he'd give her. She didn't make a sound from inside. That had to be a good sign; at least she wasn't throwing things, or even crying.

He didn't know what he was so upset about; it had gone just as he expected. Half of him waited for her to emerge from behind that door and demand he take her home, the other half held on to the hope she'd come out and crawl onto his lap. He was too afraid of the former to push for the latter, so here he sat, alternating between staring at the door she'd all but closed in his face, to staring at her empty chair.

Damn it, he was out of wine. He knew there was a fully stocked bar inside, but the thought of drinking into a stupor didn't even appeal to him anymore. The only thing he wanted to get drunk on was somewhere behind that door.

He stood, stretched his cramped muscles, and took a long walk around the deck. He should have told her from the beginning.

No. If he told her from the beginning, she probably wouldn't be here with him now. If he'd identified himself when he bought Carley's lilies that day, she would have asked for an autograph, maybe a picture or two to prove she'd met Adam Nash, and he would have left Earth Scents, never to return.

Maybe. Maybe not. Something about Jade Graham intrigued him from that point on, and only part of it had to do with her not knowing who he was.

Her smile. When she crinkled her nose and flashed those teeth, Adam had to catch his breath. Her wit ... she made him laugh, and she put him at ease with her teasing sense of humor on more than one occasion. She was smart. Brilliant maybe. The work she'd done in South America was way beyond him, even though she tried to explain things in plain English.

Damn it, if he wasn't careful, he could end up falling hard for this woman. He was already halfway down that path.

Adam leaned over the rail, and stared into the inky water below. The rhythmic slapping sound against the hull was calming. He closed his eyes and cursed himself. "You won't

have to worry about that, Nash. You can't fall for a woman who won't speak to you."

Two months ago, Adam would have balked at spending more than one night with a woman, and now here he was thinking about a forever. He gripped his scalp with both hands, trying to screw his head on straight.

And then there was the sex. Good God, the sex was great. When he remembered the way her mouth closed around his cock, he immediately hardened. The sexy way she held his gaze while engulfing him in her mouth, and tickling the back of her throat with the head of his erection.

Jesus, Adam. Don't think about it. But he had to. It might be all he had to remember her by. He might never get the chance to touch her again, let alone come in her mouth. Damn.

After circling the deck twice, he ended up outside the door, warring with himself. When he'd called himself a pussy enough times, he had the courage to open it, but not without a discreet knock.

"Jade?"

He *was* a pussy, he decided, peering around the door as if she might blow up at the sight of him. She had turned on one lamp by the easy chair. The warm glow spotlighted her, where she lay fast asleep on the couch.

His heart dropped when he realized it wasn't an accident. She'd found sheets and a spare blanket, and made herself a bed for the night.

Fuck, there's your answer asshole. Plain as day, she couldn't have said it better with words. He stared at her for a

long time. The waves of her red hair curled over her ear, and cascaded down her graceful neck. Her lips were parted, her face peaceful in sleep. Before he knew what he was doing, he found himself standing in front of her, and his hand poised to touch her.

Leave her alone, Adam.

He went to bed, dragging his feet like a damn little boy. He fucked up. God only knew how he could fix it.

Jade woke up, and it took a minute to remember where she was. It was dark, but the digital controls from the kitchen appliances gave off enough green light to remember the previous evening.

Adam must have shut off the lamp.

Adam. Adam Nash. Her lover.

Somehow, it didn't sound as outlandish as it did before she fell asleep. For some reason, the two people, Adam Herlihey and Adam Nash, had now merged in her mind, and he was simply Adam. The man who made her smile, whose arms held such promise of security and strength. The same man who brought her to tears with sweet music, and brought her to completion with sweet kisses.

Her anger was spent. Could she really blame him for keeping his identity secret? Through the long hours alone, she couldn't think of one occasion where he lied to her. She probably would have done the same thing in his position.

She rolled off the couch, tiptoed down through the kitchen, and peeked through the wide open door of the stateroom. Sure enough, Adam was in bed, lying on his side, much like he had been when she was spooned up against him the night

before. The sheet was tangled around his waist, both bare feet stuck out from beneath.

God, he looked sexy. Bare-chested and mussed hair.

Her heart lurched with love. *Love? Get real, Jade. You barely know this man.* Her heart lurched with something, something good, because it made her smile.

She crawled in beside him, and snuggled under his arm. When he pulled her closer, she sighed. Yes, this was right. Adam was real and right and good.

"Jade?"

"I'm sorry, Adam."

He sucked a huge amount of air into his lungs. "Oh, God baby. Don't be sorry. It's me ... I'm sorry. I should have told you from the beginning. I hated keeping it from you..."

She stopped him with a kiss. "I understand now. I don't blame you. Just hold me. Let me feel you all around me. I don't feel right without you near me."

"My pleasure." He tangled their legs, crossed his arms over her back, and tucked her head against his throat. She had never felt so surrounded by a man as she did right now, and yet there wasn't a hint of suffocation. "Pinch me."

"Hmm?"

"Pinch me. I don't want to wake up and find you on that couch. You don't know how much I hated seeing you there."

She found the perfect place to pinch. First though, she teased his nipple into a point.

"Oh yeah baby. I'm not dreaming am I?"

"No more than I am. I still think this is some strange fantasy I've built. You know I love your music, Mr. Nash."

"You do?"

"I do. My favorite so far is..."

"'Strawberries and Sunshine'," he finished for her.

She thought back over their conversations. Did she mention that at some point? She didn't think so. "How did you know that?" She continued teasing his nipple and the taut skin around it.

"Dean told me."

"Oh. I'm going to have to kick his ass."

Adam laughed, and somehow held her even closer. "He told me that too."

"That I'd kick his ass?"

"Mm hm. And mine."

She sighed, breathing in the warm scent of his spicy musky cologne. "I just want to hold you right now. I'll kick your ass tomorrow."

"No problem." He kissed the top of her head. "Good night Jade."

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Chapter Eight

"Good morning Jade."

"Mm, breakfast?" She really didn't want to open her eyes, but she smelled toast and coffee, so she lifted one lid.

Adam was on all fours, staring down at her where she lay caged beneath him. "Well ... kinda."

"Kinda?"

"Yeah. I'm not much of a cook, but I tried to do what you did yesterday, and I ... um ... burned the rest of the eggs."

She laughed. God, he was adorable. "I suppose you have a cook at home, and you never have to get your hands dirty."

"Yeah I do. Her name is Elaine. She's gonna love you."

Jade's smile disappeared. She hadn't thought of meeting anyone in Adam Nash's ... entourage.

"What is it?" He pulled her upright, and sat her facing him in his lap.

"Just thinking."

He stretched one of her curls out, and let it spring back.

"You know, I wouldn't blame you for walking off this boat today, and never looking back." He kissed the tip of her nose. "I'd hate it, but I wouldn't blame you."

"Really?"

"Really. If you stay with me, you're practically giving up your private life. At least, that's how it feels most of the time. I'll go on tour, and they'll follow you around trying to catch you talking to a man, then it hits the tabloids that we broke

up. You wear something loose fitting, and the talk shows will be wondering if it's a 'baby bump'."

"Oh."

"And the same with me. They'll try to find any dirt, and when they can't they'll just make shit up. In the past year, I've had five or six illegitimate children, countless one night stands, my mother joined a gypsy tribe, my father has a secret family in the Alps, and my sister is really my mother."

"You're kidding." It sounded funny, but really it wasn't.

"I wish I was. Remember how you said you avoid the supermarket tabloids?" He waited for her nod. "I do the same thing. If I got worked up over every erroneous story, I'd never get anything done."

Jade curled her arms and legs around him, and laid her head on his chest. "I guess I have a lot to think about."

"Yes you do. But not on an empty stomach. I ... uh ... scraped off the burned parts of the toast."

She shook her head in mock disappointment. "Pathetic."

"I admit it." He lifted her out of his lap, as if she weighed nothing. "And then according to the weather guru, we're in for some rain this afternoon, so if you don't want to test your sea-legs, we'd better head back to land after lunch."

They had coffee on deck and watched the sea lions that had ventured out to investigate the *Aquadesiac*. Then he sat her down on the chair she'd stormed out of last night, and played her favorite song. Although "Strawberries and Sunshine" wasn't a love song, Jade couldn't help but drag him out of the chair and out of his shorts for a late morning session of hot sex below deck.

"This is the last condom," Adam grinned. She took it from him and put it on using only her mouth.

They put their last meal in the oven for a late lunch, but didn't eat much between the steamy stares and constant touches.

He held her against him in the cockpit. He used the pretense of helping her learn to drive, but he spent more time kissing her neck and touching every inch of her that wasn't covered by her bikini. When they were close enough to count individual boats, Adam sent her down below, and he slapped his ball cap on. "Get your things packed up. I'll come down for you when it's safe."

"Safe?"

"We'll take this slow, alright?" His warm arms were reassuring. "Let's just keep you hidden for the time being. I don't think I'm ready to share you with the public just yet."

She waited on the couch, her duffle bag beside her. When the boat slowed, she heard a different-sounding motor, and the boat angled and turned, she assumed he was docking. She heard Adam shouting to another man, telling him to secure the dock lines, and other chatter she didn't understand.

"Where's the car?" Adam's footsteps crossed the deck.

"In the parking lot, where did you think?" The deep voice answered.

"Come on, I want you to meet Jade."

"Oh I get to meet her? Do I need to sign some statement of confidentiality first?"

"Don't be such a smart-ass."

Both sets of feet came closer to the door, and Jade stood up. She didn't know who she would be meeting, but the African-American man in a dark suit that followed Adam filled the doorway, blocking the light from behind. Not an ounce of fat, this man was probably three hundred pounds of pure muscle.

Adam introduced her to Tyrell Jackson, his *Close Protection Officer*. Jade raised an eyebrow, and vowed to google that when she got home.

"Good to finally meet you, Miss Graham. I was beginning to get a complex when Nash kept you from us."

Jade smiled at Adam, who looked a little perturbed at Tyrell's words. "Please, call me Jade. I'm pleased to meet you too." Her hand was dwarfed by his. Tyrell's bicep was as big around as her thigh.

"Did he drive like a madman and make you sick?"

Adam put his arm around her, pulling her close. "No, Adam is a perfect gentleman." She smiled up at him.

Tyrell gave Adam a long look. "I thought you said you told her everything ... what's this 'gentleman' crap?"

"Don't I pay you to keep your mouth shut?"

Tyrell turned serious. "We've got eight 'lookie-loos' at the car. We'd better get moving before they multiply. I'll take her up first, then maybe they'll disperse."

"Right." Adam turned to Jade, and kissed her on the cheek. "Are you ready for this?"

"We're just going to the car, right?" Jade wasn't sure she was ready to leave Adam on the boat. He handed her the sunglasses and then her duffle bag. "Yeah, but you'll have to

carry this yourself, Tyrell needs his hands free, and ... well ... so will I. You go with him. I'll be right behind you."

She followed Tyrell, but not without a long look behind her. Adam smiled encouragingly, with a hint of pride behind those eyes.

Tyrell scanned the dock, then took her elbow in a grip that told her he was in charge. "Down the dock, turn right, we take the first staircase up to the parking lot, okay?"

"Okay." Adam wasn't kidding. His life was a lot different than the average person. She'd never been escorted to her car. Tyrell didn't say another word as he closely followed her, their footsteps clacked on the wooden boardwalk. She didn't have to ask which car. As she reached the top of the cement stairs, she saw the long black limousine with a small crowd facing it. There was a tall suited man standing by the rear door, obviously waiting for Tyrell and his charge, and ignoring the mob. He wore dark glasses like Tyrell and Adam, and the parts of his long face that showed were expressionless.

"Don't say anything. Just get in the car. They won't be able to see you from the outside, no matter what they do. Feel free to make faces at them, or flip them off if that's your style."

Jade wasn't sure how Tyrell spoke in a voice that went beneath any other sound, almost like he was speaking directly into her ear.

Tyrell gave the driver a nod, and took her duffle bag from her. The driver opened the door for her, and Jade was glad she had her sunglasses to hide behind as she walked through the small crowd.

"Who is she?" one man asked.

"She's that lady on the news."

"News ladies don't have limos," a woman chided.

She sat down in a seat that would put her back to the crowd, and the door closed firmly behind her, muting any other discussion about her fame. The driver moved in front of the door, and Tyrell put her duffle in the trunk before retracing his steps down toward the *Aquadesiac*.

Jade peeked over her shoulder, and from around the driver she saw the crowd craning their necks to see inside. One couple walked away, obviously disappointed that Jade wasn't important.

It was nice and cool inside the car, and she took advantage of her first time in a limousine to look around for gadgets like she was a little kid. She ran her hand across the tan leather seats, as soft as a baby's bottom. An oak roll top covered something to her right, taking up the entire rear, but she didn't have the nerve to scoot down there and open it for a peek. There was a small bench seat up against the interior window, and the seat she sat on ran perpendicular to that, facing a long window. It was luxurious, but not so much that she felt overwhelmed. Maybe she could get used to this.

There was a disturbance behind her, excited chatter from the crowd, and even a feminine squeal. Jade turned in her seat to look through the window that the driver wasn't blocking.

Adam and Tyrell barely cleared the steps, before they were surrounded. Jade watched, not quite believing that the man

causing such a stir was the same man who shared intimate hours with her.

He signed autographs, smiling and chatting the whole time, even while Tyrell scowled, sweeping the area and keeping Adam within reach. The last woman, who all but fell out of her bikini, offered her ample bosom for his signature, and when he was finished, she grabbed his head and kissed him full on the mouth.

Jade bristled, and waited for Adam to push her away. When he didn't, she looked to Tyrell. Finally, Adam lifted his head away from the buxom woman and they again walked toward the car, amidst cell phones shoved in his face and shouted declarations of biggest-fan status.

The car door opened, and Adam crawled in and plopped down beside her, but not before she heard someone ask, "Who's the new lady Adam?"

As soon as the door closed, he took off his sunglasses and grinned at her. The grin disappeared quickly though, when he saw her frown. "Was it that bad?"

"You have lipstick all over your mouth." She folded her arms across her chest.

In typical male fashion, he lifted the hem of his tee shirt to wipe his mouth. "Did I get it?"

"You kissed that woman!" Jade glowered.

"No I didn't. She kissed me. There's a difference. And then I walked away," Adam said seriously, giving his mouth another swipe. "Did they bother you?"

Jade waited for him to clean the rest of that woman's lipstick away before she unclenched her teeth. "No. They decided I wasn't important."

Adam took her hand, and the car backed out of the parking spot. "That's why we sent you ahead. Until your face is plastered on the news, they won't bother you much."

"Hmm, I wonder if I'll have men throwing themselves at my feet." She wasn't going to let it go, even though he was right. It wasn't as if he participated.

"Maybe if you walked with me they'd lay off." He nudged her with his elbow.

Jade could see herself walking hand in hand with Adam, and could even see herself scratching the eyes out of Big Boob Lady, which made her feel a little better.

"Mind if we have dinner at my place? Elaine apparently made some big feast for us."

Jade glanced down at her faded denim shorts and sleeveless camp shirt. "I'm not really dressed for dinner."

"We can run by your house, I thought we'd invite Dean." He kissed the back of her hand. "Unless you're ready to get rid of me."

"Not quite yet." She brushed up against him.

By the time the car pulled into her driveway, Jade's lips were wonderfully sore. She couldn't remember ever enjoying simply kissing a man.

Tyrell opened the door, and Adam led the way to her porch. Jade noticed Tyrell stood by the car, and the driver sat behind the wheel. She wasn't sure of the protocol or she would have invited them both inside.

"Dean? I'm back." When he didn't answer, Jade walked through the house and out back to the greenhouse. Dean had his earphones in, and was sprinkling some of the more thirsty plants with an extra shot from the hose. He saw her and put the hose away. By the time she and Adam reached the greenhouse entrance, Dean was leaving, dusting off his hands.

"Hey, beautiful. I wasn't expecting you for a few hours." He kissed her cheek, then offered his hand to Adam.

"Adam said there was a storm coming, so we came back a little early. I got to drive," she boasted.

Dean looked suspicious. "So did everything ... come out alright?" He gave Adam a pointed look.

"Everything came out. Eventually alright." Adam pulled Jade into his arms, and looked down at her meaningfully.

"That's good. Saves me an ass-whipping."

"That's what you think." Jade stuck her tongue out at her roommate. "I can always get you in your sleep. But for now I'm changing into something more suitable for dinner at Adam's. Want to join us?"

"Really?" Dean's brown eyes lit up. "That sounds great. I was just planning on a bowl of Cap'n Crunch."

Adam and Dean talked boats, and Jade hurried through a shower, knowing Adam's employees were waiting on them.

While Dean was in the shower, Adam sat on Jade's bed, watching her dress.

"I liked it better when you ate dinner in your bikini."

"You don't like my dress?" It wasn't anything fancy, just the little black staple to every woman's wardrobe. This one

was backless, so she had to forsake a bra. She finished pinning her hair up, keeping one eye on his hungry expression through his reflection in her mirror.

"I love your dress. Come here."

She put her hands on her hips and sauntered over, deliberately taking her time. When she stood between his knees, his hands immediately went to the hem of her skirt, then skimmed up her bare thighs. "Your tan got darker over the weekend."

"I did spend a lot of time in my bikini."

"And a fair amount of time out of it."

She held on to his shoulders, loving his touch. His thumbs met at her inner thighs, and slipped beneath her panties to discover her moist center. When they joined forces to send a jolt of pleasure from her clit straight to her heart, she almost crumpled onto the ground.

"How do you feel about playing with toys?"

She couldn't think very clearly. "You mean like..."

"Vibrators, dildos ... do you have any of those?" One thumb pressed tantalizing circles on her clit, the other slipped inside her folds.

"Oh! Adam..."

"Do you?"

"Yes ... Adam ... hmm..."

"I want to play with you. I want to buy you something, just for me to use on you. Would you let me?" His words were hot and moist on her cleavage.

"I would love that."

"You're beautiful when you come Jade. Your face gets a rosy flush, and the way your eyes almost close, but you still watch me ... and when your lips are swollen and wet from my kisses ... God, you have no idea how hot you are." He slipped two fingers inside her, and left his thumb to tease her erect nubbin.

Jade moved her feet apart, giving him room, but he was still hindered by her underwear. She laid her cheek against his, and breathed in his scent, now mingled with the salty air from the ocean. His shoulders were so muscular and hard, she held on to them for dear life.

"You're better than my toy," she whispered.

Apparently fed up with fighting his way around her undies, he hooked his fingers under the waistband, and dragged them down, and Jade stepped free, then put one knee next to his hip on the bed. Adam's long fingers played with her, discovering every dip and fold of her sex. She curled her arms around his head, and held his face to her breasts. She buried her own mouth in his hair. Her hips moved in a pagan dance against his hands until he stopped her with a tight grip on one thigh.

"Hold still. I don't want to mess you up ... you look beautiful. You smell great."

With her last rational thought, she was able to whisper, "I don't have any protection."

"This is all I want right now. To feel your pleasure in my hands. Let it go Jade. Relax and come for me."

His soothing voice did it for her. The same voice that seduced millions upon millions of radio listeners, put Jade

over the edge of sexual sanity. With two fingers stroking deep inside her, and two others giving a talented dance on her clit, Jade came in an undulating release.

"Oh yeah. That's it. That's beautiful baby." His slow strokes sent tiny tremors swimming upstream through the intense contractions working their way down from her womb.

"Mm, not very fair to you though," she panted against him.

"You can make it up to me later. I don't mind waiting."

Jade backed a step away. "Oh God, your car is outside..."

"I sent them on home. Dean said he'd drive."

She bent down to retrieve her underwear, but he took them out of her hand, and stuffed them in the front pocket of his shorts.

"Give those back!"

"Nope. You're going without tonight. Besides, I need a souvenir."

Did he know about his tee shirt in her duffle bag? "I can't go without underwear!"

"Why not? I'll be the only one who knows, and I won't risk my reputation as a gentleman by telling anyone." He stood, and lifted her chin, running his thumb across the bottom curve of her lip. She could smell herself on his hands, and she purred like a content jungle cat lying in the sunshine.

Dean drove, with Adam sitting in the passenger seat and Jade in the back.

"So how did he finally break the news? Did he have to get you drunk first?" Dean spoke to her through the rear-view mirror.

"He played a song."

"Ah, very slick." Dean gave Adam an approving nod before glancing again at Jade. "I'm betting you were pissed."

"She slept on the couch." Adam growled.

"Was she wearing flannel sleep pants, or a flimsy nightgown?"

"Dean!" Jade slapped her friend's shoulder.

"Sort of in between, she had flannel boxers and a tank top."

"Adam!"

Dean ignored her. "Oh, so after a few hours of pouting, she was alright?"

Jade's mouth dropped open. She was being discussed as if she weren't present, and Dean knew how much that bothered her. That earned him another slap on the shoulder which he didn't even acknowledge.

"You're right," Adam looked like he was enjoying Dean's little game. "How did you know?"

"Some people wear their emotions on their sleeves, Jade's emotions come through in her clothing, especially what she wears to bed. Take for example what she wore after your first date..."

"Dean, if you don't shut up right now, so help me..." Jade used the rear-view mirror to glare at Dean.

"Not flannel sleep pants I hope."

"Will you two knock it off?" She took three tiny hairs from Dean's nape, and pulled.

"Damn it Jade ... I'm trying to drive." He winced.

"Then mind your manners." She didn't release her hold.

"Yes ma'am."

Adam laughed, and Jade shot him a warning glare. "You too, mister."

"You can't threaten me, I know your secrets." He glanced at her lap meaningfully.

She wanted to slap that silly grin off his face before Dean could read anything into it. Jade quickly changed subjects.

"How was business Saturday?"

Dean filled her in on the weekend at Earth Scents in between Adam's directions to his house. When they pulled into a huge circular driveway, Adam handed Dean a key to the panel camouflaged by decorative stone, and the tall iron gate opened.

Jade had a hard time keeping her mouth closed. She'd seen television shows that showcased celebrity houses, and she could almost hear Robin Leach's voice pointing out amenities.

The dark brick driveway bordered the front lawn, which was neatly trimmed and surrounded by native trees and boulders. The botanist in her salivated at the well-maintained foliage, and couldn't wait to walk through the property and catalogue each species. A decorative fountain sat in the center of the drive, angels and birds of white marble directing water flow back into the basin.

Dean stopped the car in front of the door. The stoop was covered in a lush green vine, clematis, if she wasn't mistaken, and gave the entrance an inviting feel.

"You can just park here, unless you want it in the garage," Adam told Dean. Jade pressed her forehead against the car window to see the house in its entirety. It looked like two

stories of English Manor-style brick estate, with huge arching windows that emitted a warm yellow glow from the spacious rooms inside. The clematis climbed all the way to the roof, draping the grey and maroon brick with a lush green shroud.

Adam opened her door for her, and smiled at her expression.

"Do you like it?"

She nodded, trying not to look like a country bumpkin with her first look at indoor plumbing. "I suppose you already have a gardener..." Whoever landscaped the front lawn knew what they were doing. Jade spun around for a full look at the Eden-like setting.

"There's always room for one more..." Adam reached to pull her into his arms.

"Jade! It's *Tropaeolum majus*!" Dean was on his knees in front of a bricked-in enclosure between the driveway and the home. Jade rushed over and mindless of her attire, knelt beside him.

The plant was gorgeous, the bloom was a perfect red-orange specimen, opened to its full glory and releasing the distinctive perfume in the evening breeze. "It's amazing! But I can't tell if it's from the *T. moritzanum* or *T. peltophorum*, it has both characteristics."

"It must be a hybrid. Whoever planted this knew their stuff. Look how it's flourishing along with the *Trifolium*."

"You know," Adam said from behind them, "I've brought a lot of people to my place. This is the first time they've been on their knees in the grass discussing the landscaping."

"What a shame." Jade looked up at Adam, a little embarrassed at her exuberance, especially in her dress and heels, but she couldn't stop. "This *Tropaeolum majus* ... or Monk's Cress, is one of the species that Dean and I studied in Colombia. I think we could spend hours out here."

"I'd like to take credit, but this was all here when I moved in three years ago. All I know about plants can fit into a thimble, with room to spare. But I should get in the shower and make myself presentable. You two are welcome to look around out here, or come on inside."

Jade stood up and dusted her hands off. From the look on Dean's face, it was obvious he wanted to see what other treasures he could find in Adam's yard.

"If you don't mind, we'd love to snoop around your garden." Jade gripped both of Adam's hands. "But hurry back."

Adam kissed her cheek before leaving the two plant scientists to their discoveries. Jade watched Adam's retreat, her gaze focused on his ass, shaking her head at his baggy shorts.

"I'd ask how he was in bed, but the look on your face already told me."

"You know I wouldn't tell you even if you asked." Jade rolled her eyes, then took Dean's arm and they made their way around Adam Nash's property.

"I can tell by the way he moves that he knows what he's doing."

"Keep your mind out of his pants. That man is off limits to you."

"He's actually a nice guy. I thought all celebrities were stuck up."

"He is nice. I still can't believe he is who he is."

"And I can't believe you didn't recognize him right away."

"Who would have thought Adam Nash would show up at Earth Scents to buy lilies?"

She and Dean wandered through the yard, the recessed garden lights highlighting the showcase plants. "So you got a private concert, huh?"

"He played a few songs for me. Even one that he wrote while we were on the boat."

"Really?"

She gave him a rundown of her weekend, but without going into details about their bedroom activities, there wasn't a lot to tell.

The property had to be at least two acres. They walked around the house to the backyard, where there sat a long rectangular pool. It wasn't surrounded by tile and deck chairs, but lush grass. A deck area was close by, enclosed behind a knee-high brick wall. That patio was furnished with small tables, chairs, and a brick barbecue.

It was well lit and welcoming, bordered by potted Hydrangeas and Lavender plants, it was a gardener's dream come true. If there were neighbors, she couldn't tell. A wall of palm and oak trees shielded the yard from prying eyes.

"Damn, Jade. You hit the jackpot."

Jade ignored Dean. She didn't want to think about Adam's money. It made her uncomfortable.

There wasn't anything like this in Logan, New Mexico. Even crabby old-man Carson's yard, which he guarded with a wooden cane and a snarl, had nothing on Adam Nash's acreage.

They were crouched over a particularly vibrant Freesia plant when Adam strolled through his back patio door. Jade saw him instantly, and stood upright. Too fast, she'd realized, because either her blood hadn't had time to adjust to the movement, or just the sight of him almost knocked her on her ass.

Black slacks encased his long lean legs, and a grey silk shirt fit like it was made for him, and perhaps it was. His hair was still wet, and it looked like he used his fingers rather than a comb. The ruffled look was damn sexy when paired with the designer clothing. His eyes never left hers as he made his way across the lawn, looking like a black panther stalking a helpless bunny.

"Did you find anything interesting?" A teasing smile lifted one side of his mouth.

"Lots. You didn't tell me you lived in a veritable greenhouse." She walked quite naturally into his arms.

"I've kept a lot from you, but no more. I'm an open book now." The serious flare behind his eyes dared her to disbelieve him.

"Would you mind if I take a cutting of this Hydrangea?"

"Take whatever you want." Adam answered Dean without looking away from Jade. "But you'll have to get it after dinner. I think Elaine is about to have a coronary." He slipped

her hand into the crook of his elbow, and led them back toward the house.

As soon as she stepped over the threshold, Jade felt the first pang of insecurity. She had never been inside a home like this. The closest experience she'd had was the luxury hotel she'd been bumped to during a trip to Miami in college. She stood trying to take it all in, tall ceilings, marble tile, six-foot windows, and a curved floating staircase.

"Wow," she croaked, feeling way out of her league as Adam took them through a living area and into a formal dining room that looked like it was plucked straight from Versailles. Ornate plaster ceiling, dripping crystal chandelier, oak paneling, Persian rug ... it was gorgeous. She knew her eyes were as wide as Dean's.

The highly polished wood inlaid table was surrounded by twelve chairs, but they only used the three clustered around the head.

"Pardon the formality. Elaine about bit my head off when I suggested we eat on the patio."

No sooner had they all settled in than a woman no more than five feet tall wearing a crisp black uniform and tight white bun emerged through the wide doors, balancing three plates of shrimp pasta primavera. Adam introduced her to Jade and Dean as, "Elaine, the cook-slash-housekeeper, but I call her my House Manager. Elaine runs this place."

Elaine's long bony face flushed, and she waved off the compliment. "Only because he's never here to answer questions. Oh, Honey, I'm so glad he's brought guests home. He never lets me show off this dining room." She patted

Jade's hand. "Mr. Nash has chosen the wine for tonight, but if you hate it, just let me know, he's not that good at this sort of thing." She gave Dean's shoulder a conspiring tap. "I'll bring ice water out shortly, and ... oh! I forgot the rolls..." Elaine left the room as quickly as she'd entered.

Jade giggled, immediately at ease in her starched setting.

"I think she took the job thinking she'd get to plan parties every weekend." Adam poked a juicy shrimp with his fork. "I'm afraid she's disappointed."

"Disappointed doesn't even come close." Elaine burst through the doors with a bowl of bread that smelled like it just came out of the oven. "Disgusted is more like it. A big beautiful home, and you don't show it off to anyone." Elaine leaned down to Jade, and pointed at Adam with a bony finger. "Can you believe he didn't even put up a Christmas tree last year?"

"Adam!" Jade admonished.

"Elaine, I told you to put one up if you wanted to. I was in New York over Christmas, and spent a total of three days at home during those two months." He shook his head, and continued eating. "Quit trying to get me in trouble. Jade is on my side."

"You brought her home, that's all that matters. And I got to wear my black and white uniform." She turned to Jade again. "He lets me choose something for special occasions, and then he never has any." She pursed her thin lips in annoyance, and left the room again with a promise that she'd check on them soon.

Elaine was a good cook, Adam's wine choice was superb, and Jade told him so, which earned her a kiss on the back of her hand, and one of those sexy winks. Twice during the meal, Jade glanced up at Adam, who gave her lap a long hungry look. Jade crossed her legs, as if that would keep her nakedness more of a secret. He even licked his lips like a man starved, which made her adjust her thighs even more. It was a good thing Dean wasn't the type of man to notice how her nipples pointed out eagerly. The prudent thing to do would be to avoid Adam's lascivious hints, but her eyes would defy her direct orders, and find his again and again.

"Jade, we need one of these House Manager things." Dean leaned against the carved high-backed chair. "That was delicious."

When their plates were cleared, Adam took them on a tour of the house, with a promise to Elaine that they would have dessert and drinks in the game room.

The first stop was the nine-car garage. Dean pushed by her, and she turned to glare at Adam. "What was that about your car in the shop?"

"I never said my car was in the shop. I specifically remember saying 'I should be able to drive mine again soon'." He hooked his arm around her shoulders, and walked with her into the garage that could easily have housed a small family. "You must have just assumed the part about the shop. I've never lied to you."

Jade looked down the row of vehicles, one in each stall, and was reminded about her offer to drive him on their dates. She shook her head, and stepped into the pristine space. The

limousine they'd ridden in from the marina. Two motorcycles ... one Ducati and one Harley Davidson. A sleek black Porsche, a white Escalade... Good lord, this man liked cars!

Jade followed Dean through the luxury vehicle line-up, listening to his questions and answers by Adam about each car's specs. She almost ran into Dean's back when he stopped dead in his tracks. His excited chatter stopped.

She touched his forearm. "Dean? What is it?"

"It's a 1969 Camaro."

"Oh." *Men.*

Dean bent over to study the back panel.

"You like it?" Adam joined them by the glossy red muscle car.

"A Yenko?" Dean's mouth dropped open. Jade didn't know what a Yenko was, but the car was either in mint condition, or restored to its original luster.

Dean reached out to touch the fender, but pulled away, almost as if he didn't find himself worthy. In a trance, he walked around the vehicle, and peered into the driver's window. "Automatic? You know Yenko only made thirty of these?"

Adam nodded, then opened the door. "Have a seat."

Dean's eyes grew wide, and Jade thought he was about to faint. "Are you serious?"

"Of course," Adam laughed. "Go on, start her up."

How did Adam know what a muscle car aficionado Dean was? Maybe all men had the Camaro gene, but to Dean ... this had to be heaven.

The engine roared to life, then purred to a gentle rumble, filling the huge garage with a satisfying hum.

"I could die happy right now." Dean stroked the leather interior.

"But you haven't even taken it for a drive." Adam closed the door, leaving Dean to look at him with disbelief.

"You mean ... you want me to..."

"It's a car, man. Made to be driven, not just sit in a garage and look good." Adam reached through the window and pushed the garage door opener, then he backed away and slipped his arm around Jade's waist. "Make sure you take the interstate and let her loose, but I'm not paying for any speeding tickets. Keys to the front gate are on the key ring."

"I know you're just trying to get rid of me so you two can be alone, but I'm not about to argue." Trancelike, Dean fastened his seatbelt just as the garage door completely opened, and as if the darkness beyond beckoned him, the Camaro rolled out onto the driveway.

Before Dean even disappeared through the front gate, Adam took her hand and pulled her through the garage and into the house.

"Adam!" She stumbled to keep up with him, but she had high hopes he was taking her to his bedroom to try out that sinfully opulent bed.

As soon as the door closed behind them, he pushed her against the wall of a dark hallway, and hissed in her face, "Shut up."

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Chapter Nine

She didn't know where they were, but his harsh tone stilled her racing heart. "What..."

He clamped his right hand over her mouth, and leaned against her. The molding of the wainscoting dug into her back. "I told you to shut up, lady."

She squeaked from behind his hand, not sure if he was seriously assaulting her or not.

"You're in big trouble," he whispered against her cheek. "You know why?"

She shook her head, and reached up to move his hand. He deftly took both of her hands in his left and pinned them against the wall above her head. "You've been driving me fucking crazy all night. Don't try to deny it," he growled.

She tried to say his name, but his hand smothered any noise.

"Didn't I tell you to shut the fuck up?" He turned her head to the side to force her eyes away from his, her ear now flat against the wall, and she couldn't see anything but a long empty hallway.

Jade's heart hammered like a hummingbird's. Deep down she knew Adam would never hurt her, but his harsh words and restraining hands confused her.

"Now, I'm about to fuck you up against this wall. Right here in the hallway, and you're gonna like it. Understand?"

She nodded, breathing hard against his hand. Damn, she was turned on. His dominating treatment sent tingling desire

to her already dripping center. Her legs trembled, and if it weren't for his body holding hers up, she probably would have collapsed.

"I'm going to move my hand from your mouth, but you'd better not move a muscle or make a sound, unless you're begging me for more. Got it?"

She nodded again, and with her hands still pinned over her head, her body secured to the wall with his, and his harsh words, any thought of escape was stifled. He released her mouth, and she licked her lips, trying to get blood back into them. He kept her still with his forehead against her temple. Air rushed against her cheek as he breathed.

She heard the familiar crinkle of a condom wrapper, felt it against her cheek when he used his teeth to tear it open, and then the movement as he released his belt buckle, and pushed his slacks down past his hips. "You come to my house in that sexy dress ... flirting with me all through dinner... You didn't think I would try anything with your friend here. You were wrong, weren't you?"

She nodded, and tried to turn her head. She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to see him, reassure herself he wasn't deranged. He would have none of it. She was held immobile. Not only by his body against hers, but his words, his obvious desire, and her thickening blood all made it hard to even think about getting away.

"I told you, you don't move unless I tell you to," he hissed. "And you don't look at me. Keep your head turned, and your eyes closed."

She let her eyes drift shut. It was easy when passion coursed through her veins making her think of nothing else but Adam. She could smell his breath, the cologne that drove her wild, even the faint scent of male arousal tickled her nose, and she took a long greedy breath.

"Good girl." He let go of her hands, and passed the condom to her. "Put it on me, and do it fast."

While she fumbled to do his bidding, made more difficult with her eyes closed and around his shirt tails, he pulled the hem of her dress up to her waist.

"I knew it." He sunk a long finger inside her without so much as a gentle sweep. "You come to my house without panties, and you're asking for it. You knew that didn't you ... you knew this was coming." He kissed her jaw, and nibbled his way to her ear. "You knew someday I'd fuck you against a wall, but that didn't stop you ... shit, you're so wet baby." His voice dropped an octave, and he adjusted their clothing before taking her in a long thrust.

She squealed like a teenager on a rollercoaster.

He took both of her hands in his, and twined their fingers together, again drawing them over her head until she was one long graceful line.

"Waving that saucy ass in front of me all night..." he admonished in between thrusts. "Giving me those sexy eye-batting smiles. Damn you, you should have known what it would do to me. You knew you were making me hard as a fucking iron pipe. This is all your fault ... all your ... God, Jade."

She moaned, and moved her legs apart. She waited for him to reprimand her for her movement, but he must not have been paying attention; his thrusts only grew more frantic.

"Are you sorry?" He nipped the cartilage of her ear, hard enough to make her jump. "Promise you'll never do it again?"

She shook her head. She wasn't sorry; she was a woman drowning in fiery desire. She bit her lip to keep her words of lust from escaping.

"You'll do everything I say, Jade. I told you to fuck me in a hallway, and I told you to like it." His cock dragged along her channel, the friction spreading warmth through her loins. "Do you like it, Jade?"

She moaned, a long rumbling noise that sounded sinister in the dark wing of Adam's house.

"Damn it ... kiss me." He let go of her hands, and cupped her face in his. He kissed her with a hunger she'd never felt before. His tongue raped her mouth, darting, plundering, taking all she had to offer. The atmosphere in the hallway intensified, and Jade could feel sparks of passion zipping against her, and bouncing back to him. She used her permission to move to grind against the invasion of his erection inside her, tilting her hips to ride her clit against him with each long drag. When her pussy swelled, opening more to him, he swore into her mouth.

"Come, baby. Do it now, damn it." She smothered a smile when his words that were supposed to be a command came out in a begging whine. Still, always the obedient one, she took a hold of his bottom lip with her teeth, and succumbed

to a full-body orgasm, one that sent hot shards of pleasure through every vein. She humped against him, not caring how silly she must look, knowing only the need to milk his cock with her cream.

"Fuck ... Jade..." He swelled impossibly thicker, and she reveled in each one of his pulsating releases. He brought both arms around her, drawing her against his chest in a tender gesture. His kiss gentled, his tongue no longer forcing a presence in her mouth, but now thanking her for the visit.

She panted against him, her heart thudding loudly against his.

"Did I scare you?" For the first time, Adam looked her in the eye. His kind blue gaze filled with emotion.

Jade nodded, a shy smile creeping across her lips. "Yes, but in a good way. You make a good Dom."

He grinned, the old Adam was back. "I make a good Sub too. We'll have to try that some other time." In between kisses, he used his handkerchief to dispose of the condom and wipe her secretions from her thighs, then he hiked his slacks back up over his hips.

They waited for Dean in the spot where they stood before he left, like nothing happened. They managed to get in a few drawn-out kisses before the rumble of the Camaro's motor broke them apart.

"She drives like a dream," Dean announced through the window. "I don't know how you can own such a car and not drive over the speed limit."

Jade laughed, and pulled open the car door. "Get out of that thing before you make more of a fool out of yourself."

Dean raised his eyebrow, and looked her up and down, but he did step out of the car. "You're one to talk, with your well-kissed lips. Did you even break for air while I was gone?"

Jade slugged him, but didn't deny anything. How could she? Dean knew her way too well. She knew the scent of sex probably still wafted around her and Adam.

"Come on, Elaine made peach pie for dessert." Adam took them back into the house, but not down the hallway where she had just been ravaged.

Adam held Jade's hand and took them through his seven-bedroom, nine-bathroom home. He claimed to not spend much time here, but one could tell it was the home of a bachelor, and it was especially obvious in the game room.

"What can I make you two to drink?"

Dean asked for a whiskey and water, and Jade a glass of merlot.

"Oh, now this is nice." Dean sat on the sofa facing the huge wide-screen plasma television that was mounted into the wall. "What kind of sound system do you have in this thing?"

While Adam and Dean discussed amplifiers and receivers, Jade walked through the room. To the right, a marble fireplace, and to the left a curving bar, where Adam mixed their drinks. Behind him was the rest of the game room, featuring a pool table, dart board and a raised seating area.

Three walls were painted burgundy, and the vaulted ceiling housed dark stained wood beams. She sat beside Dean on the couch.

"Your house is beautiful, Adam."

"Thanks." He opened a can of cola, took a long drink, then sat next to her and whispered, "You haven't seen my shower..."

No, but she saw his bedroom which housed a king-sized four-poster bed. She snuggled closer, and placed one hand on his thigh and squeezed.

"So do you record here in L.A., or in Nashville?" Dean stirred his cocktail in the thick tumbler.

"I recorded my first two albums in Nashville, it's where my record label wanted me to go, but my producer has a studio in his basement now. We start on *Firestorm* in a few weeks."

Adam told them about the recording process, even how he had chosen twelve songs for the CD, but the producer cut two of them, and told him to come up with three others.

"The business part of the whole thing sucks. I thought those two songs he rejected meshed with the others well, but he has some formula he follows, so I'll save those for another album." Adam took a long drink. "Sometimes I miss just playing in honky-tonks in Small-Town America."

Jade hugged him tighter, and even Dean didn't have a response.

"Hey, Elaine should be on her way up with dessert, let's see if we can rattle the windows." Adam picked up a remote control the size of a magazine, with more buttons on it than the space shuttle, and he turned on a hip-hop CD, and found a good dance song.

The windows didn't rattle with the bass, but Jade's chest did. In a demonstration of the system's quality, the sound wasn't even distorted. Jade covered her ears and laughed.

Dean, who never could control himself when a good dance song came on, stood and let loose with a string of dance moves that never failed to impress Jade.

"Jesus, where'd he learn that?" Adam shouted.

"His sisters raised him on Michael Jackson videos."

When Dean heard that, he showed off a perfect moonwalk. Jade clapped and cheered.

Elaine came into the room and dropped the tray with three slices of pie and a silver coffee carafe onto the low table in front of the sofa.

"You're like a spoiled little kid," she all but yelled at Adam, whose devilish grin only proved her point. She left the room shaking her head.

Around midnight, Dean dragged Jade from the house, and even waited in the car while she and Adam kissed goodbye.

"Thank you for tonight." She held him close, rubbing her cheek against his soft silk shirt. "I think Dean had almost as much fun as I did."

"I'm glad." He sucked on her earlobe. "I'm going to miss you wrapped around me tonight."

Jade drank in his scent, hoping to get enough to make it through the night without him. How could she be so addicted to him in such a short time? She really didn't want to get in Dean's car, and it was even harder to close the door.

She stared at Adam through the window until the gate closed behind them, and the car accelerated.

"You two are pretty damn disgusting." Dean turned on the radio. "Didn't you get it all out of your system over the weekend?"

"No, I think this weekend was where he just crawled under my skin." Maybe that was why her skin felt itchy and strange when he wasn't with her. Jade sighed.

"Be careful, Jade."

She studied Dean, who switched lanes and sped through a yellow light. He wasn't teasing her now, she recognized the serious tone and the way the little muscle at the corner of his mouth ticked. "I don't want you to get hurt. While you were on that boat I researched him. He's been known to tie one on, and he's been through a shitload of women."

"I can imagine." Leggy blondes.

"He'll spend time on the road," Dean continued. "It would take a lot of trust to make a relationship work with a guy like that. Especially if he gets drunk all the time and does stupid shit. And then there's the publicity."

Jade hooked her left arm through Dean's right, and laid her cheek on his shoulder. "I know. I have a lot to think about."

At that moment, one of Adam's songs came on the radio. Jade wasn't sure if it was a good sign or a bad one, but she held on to Dean just a little bit tighter, and closed her eyes. Adam's songs now meant more to her, she realized. Now that she could picture him bare-chested and bare-footed singing on the deck of his boat with only her as the audience, even his voice sounded better than before. More personal.

Dean pulled into the driveway. "Just let me have another chance to drive that car before you dump him."

That night, Jade lay restlessly in bed, unable to sleep. Her pillow wasn't as firm as Adam's chest. Her bed didn't sway

with the ocean's movement, and her sheets didn't smell like Adam.

What was she going to do? If this wasn't going to work, she needed to end it now. Before she fell for the guy. A twisting pain in her gut told her it might be too late to avoid a broken heart.

She threw herself onto her stomach, and curled the pillow over her head. She could easily be another notch on his bedpost. Another conquest for the tabloids to blow out of proportion. She was a novelty—a woman who wasn't in "The Business". Now that his little secret was out, the newness would wear off, and he'd grow bored and restless.

Jade's heart argued with the memory of the past weekend, but her logical brain was adamant. *Don't get too close to this man, you're asking for pain.*

But, couldn't she enjoy it while it lasted? For God's sake, the sex was amazing. Would it hurt to work like hell to get tired of him before he found a new plaything?

Her laugh sounded loud in her dark bedroom. If it didn't work, at least she'd have a good time!

Around three in the morning, Jade pulled out her MP3 player, with her Adam Nash collection on shuffle, and finally fell asleep.

That next day, Adam brought her lunch. They ate fast food burgers and fries in the back room, among empty helium tanks, cases of balloons and floral trimmings.

"Don't forget, you promised me a date on Friday." Adam had brought his stool as close to hers as they possibly could get while eating.

Jade popped a French fry in her mouth. She *had* forgotten her promise. "I'll have to break my date with Keanu Reeves, but I guess that's alright."

"Playing me already?"

Jade stood and walked behind him, laid her hands on his strong shoulders, and kneaded those muscles. She waited until he groaned before speaking. "You don't like how I play with you?"

"Play *with* me all you want, I love it ... oh, that feels good ... but if you're dating other guys, I want to know."

"Up for a threesome?" She had to tease, or she'd read too much into his words.

"Huh uh. I don't share well." He captured her hand with his, and brought her around to face him. "I know it's too early to ask for a commitment, you barely found out who I am, and you have a lot to lose by walking into anything serious with me." He hugged her hips with his knees, brought both of her hands to his mouth, and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "I just want to have the chance to show you what you'd be walking away from before you make up your mind. I'm a monogamous guy, Jade. No matter what you read in the papers or what you see on the internet."

She pulled her hands away from his so she could hug him. "I don't even like Keanu."

"That's good. Honesty is all I ask, Jade. If you want to date other people, just let me know. I promise to do the same."

"What ... are you ... is that a commitment?"

"From me. I'm not asking anything of you. Take your time, I'm in no hurry ... yet."

Jade had to stop herself from pledging her heart to him right there. To keep her mouth shut, she plastered it onto his.

Damn, he was a good kisser. How many women did it take to get that good? She wondered if she'd seen any of his former girlfriends on television.

"Oh ... excuse me." Ella had come in from the back door, directly into the stock room. Adam dropped his hands, but Jade left hers where they were on his shoulders. "I'm sorry..."

"Ella, this is Adam. He brought me lunch."

Adam stood and faced Ella, who dropped her backpack and bike helmet near the door, and crossed the room.

"So you're the guy. She said you were cute." Ella winked at Jade and shook Adam's hand. "You know who you look like? That country singer ... what's his name?"

"George Strait?" Adam raised his eyebrow, and Jade giggled.

"No ... the young blond guy. He was on Letterman..." Ella's face screwed up in thought, and her jaw worked furiously on a wad of gum.

"Adam Nash?" Jade smiled proudly up at Adam.

"Yeah, that's it ... oh *shut up!*" Ella looked from Adam to Jade. "You're shitting me right?"

"I know. Hard to believe, right?" Jade stepped back into Adam's arms. "Adam Nash eats fast food and buys lilies."

"*Shut up!* I just bought *Karina*, and I never do that, I usually just download shit for my iPod, but I actually bought the hard copy ... will you sign it for me sometime?"

Adam smoothed his hand up and down Jade's back while giving Ella his attention. "Sure. I should be hanging out here a little bit, or give it to Jade."

"That's cool. So, God ... Paul McCartney was on *The Late Show* with you, did you get to talk to him?" Ella sat down on the stool where Jade had eaten lunch.

"Ella? Maybe you should get clocked in." Jade had a vision of the blonde who now sported Adam Nash's autograph on her big-ass boobs. Her possessiveness was uncalled for, especially knowing Ella the way she did. One more thing Jade had to work on if she wanted this thing with Adam to work.

"Oh, I see. Yeah I should. I'm sure I can find something around the register to do." She winked at Jade, snapped her gum and hopped off the stool. "Really cool to meet you, Mr. Nash. Love your shit."

She grabbed her apron from the hook by the door, and left them alone.

"I love your shit too." Jade trailed two fingers down his body and teased the fly of his jeans.

"Your shit isn't bad either." Adam sat back down, and she resumed her position in the notch of his thighs. "Are you working Thursday?"

"No, I took it off." She'd given Dean today and Tuesday, but she insisted on taking Thursday off before her Saturday alone.

"The band is coming over tonight to hear "Always". We'll get started on the layers on Thursday, and I'd like you to meet them."

She really couldn't deny him anything when he looked so deeply into her eyes. She pushed down her reluctance to meet more celebrities. "Okay," she whispered.

He smiled. "They're great guys. You'll like them. Why don't you just drive over after work on Wednesday? I'll get you a key so you can let yourself in." He stroked her cheek with two fingers.

She barely had time to assimilate his first comment when he continued.

"I missed you last night."

Now, how was she supposed to keep objective, when he said stuff like that? Without thinking, she responded honestly, "I missed you too."

"I kept thinking about you in the hallway, and I couldn't stop thinking about all the other things I want to do with you." His voice dropped to that smooth level, the one that reminded her of those late nights on his boat.

She closed her eyes, and held him against her until Ella called for her help. "Jade, the register is making that funky noise again. I swear she's gonna blow."

Jade groaned. "Someday I'm going to have to break down and buy a new register. I'm worried the old thing isn't going to make it much longer."

"Sounds like some day might be today." They could hear the whirring from the sales floor.

"I'll have to see what's in the budget."

"Wait long enough, and you'll have to work out of a tool box," he teased, yanking on one curl before tucking it behind her ear in that tender way that made her knees weak. "But I

should get going." Adam left a lingering kiss on her forehead. "I'll call as soon as I can kick the boys out."

She didn't want to let him go. "Thank you for bringing lunch."

He kissed her. His mouth mated with hers in the timeless ritual, and Jade couldn't get enough. She stroked his lips with her fingers even as hers were suctioned to them.

"Um..." Ella poked her head back through the doorway, "should I just pry open the drawer and count back change the old-fashioned way?" Those words finally gave her the strength to back out of his arms and wave like a little girl as he left through the back door.

She unplugged the register, knocked it in the sweet spot on the right side, plugged it back in, and it hummed back to life. The rest of the day passed without incident. When she wasn't busy with customers, she was fending off Ella's questions about Adam.

"Why didn't you tell me who you were sneaking around with?"

"I didn't even know until the other day." Jade bit her tongue, but it was too late.

"You didn't recognize him? Oh God, Jade, I would have just died from embarrassment. That's so funny."

Ella unfurled one braid, only to rewind it. This was a process that was repeated several times over the course of her shift. At times Jade thought Ella might have some sort of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Jade went through the emotions that went through her that night. Embarrassment wasn't one of them.

Until now.

"I wasn't embarrassed; I was pissed." She pulled off some wilting leaves from an African violet.

"Hmm, pissed at Adam Nash. Interesting." She blew another bubble. "So have you seen his house?"

Jade gave up on discretion, and helped Ella with the monthly maintenance on the rose cooler while she described Adam's house as well as she could. "And you should see the yard. Dean and I could spend hours in there."

"I'm so jealous. See if he has any single band members or something."

She usually sent Ella home before closing, just to save some payroll, but tonight, she asked her to stay and help her close. Jade didn't know if she just wanted to keep talking about Adam to a captive audience, or if she was afraid that if she was alone she'd think too much about him. Either way, they got out of the shop in record time.

Just as she walked in the front door of her house, she received a text message from Adam. *I've got your panties.*

She laughed, and typed a response. *I have your shirt.*

Dean came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dish towel. "Be impressed. I made dinner."

Jade was impressed; the house smelled like garlic and tomatoes. "Spaghetti?"

"Of course." It was all Dean really knew how to cook. "I wasn't sure if you had plans or not."

Put it on, came the text from Adam.

"Adam is practicing with his band." *Can't. Dinner with Dean,* she responded. "Do you need help?"

"Well ... no. I've invited a guest. He's bringing the salad."

"Oh." Jade opened the oven, and took a big whiff of garlic bread. "Just give me a plate, I'll eat in my room."

"You don't have to do that." Dean slapped her hand away from pinching off a chunk of bread.

"I don't mind. I'm going to bed early tonight anyway. I've kept crazy hours over the past few days." She happened to be staring at her phone hopefully when the next text came through. *Text me when you're in bed.*

"I thought Adam was practicing with his band?" Dean dipped a spoon in the marinara sauce and offered it to Jade while she typed. *I'm not sleepy.*

"Needs more oregano. He *is* practicing with his band."

"Then who are you texting with that look on your face?"

"What look?" Trying to arrange her features into an innocent smile was a lesson in futility. Her lovesick grin wasn't going anywhere, and Dean saw everything she felt. She ended up laughing.

I don't care.

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, that look."

"Maybe he's taking a break." *Shouldn't you be working?*

"When is your boy coming over?"

Dean folded his arms across his chest. "I'm going to ignore that, because once you see this *man*," he glared at her, "you'll be sorry enough. And he'll be here any minute."

Multitasking ;)

Jade couldn't believe Adam's emoticon wink was almost as sexy as his genuine version. *You're good at that :)*

Jade took a plate from the cupboard and loaded up a plate of noodles. "Who is this guy? I haven't heard you talk about anyone new."

"His name is Marco. I met him Saturday when he delivered my lunch."

"By bicycle or car?"

"Bike. Why?"

Jade took her plate and made her way to her room before throwing her last comment over her shoulder. "Just wondering if he has his driver's license yet."

Just as she knew he would, he took off after her. Good thing she had a lock on her door. She laughed when Dean jiggled the doorknob and cursed.

"You'll pay for that Jade!"

"I'm not afraid of you!" The doorbell rang. "Go answer the door, your play date is here!"

God, she loved Dean. With a female roommate she would have to deal with competition, cattiness and clothing theft. Dean was able to share her appreciation for men, but obviously not competing with her for the heterosexual type. She sat in the armchair near the window, ate Dean's spaghetti, and sent text messages back and forth to Adam.

They like your song.

My song?

Three and a half, remember?

Can't wait to hear the finished product.

We'll play it on Thursday for you.

You should get back to work.

I know. I'll call you when they leave. You should get ready for bed ;).

By the time she peeked into the living room an hour later, Dean and Marco were tangled together on the rug, both of them shirtless, and mouths fused in a violent-looking kiss.

She tiptoed back to her room. At least from what she saw of Marco, he wasn't a kid, he was a well-built Hispanic man.

Jade yawned. Again. Earth Scents was slow, which left her too much time to daydream. Ella was in the back room, arranging the afternoon deliveries for John, who was probably tapping his foot impatiently.

She and Adam had talked way too long last night. She was glad for the distraction though. She even turned up the television to drown out the sounds of passion coming from Dean's bedroom. Marco was still there the following morning, and he even cooked breakfast.

He was taller and lankier than she thought, and she was wrong about his heritage, Marco was an Italian, born and raised in Florence. He even came with the accent, and oozing hot-blooded Latin sexuality. He came to L.A. to go to school, so he was smart, and he must not be a snorer, or he wouldn't have made it all night in Dean's bed. Maybe her friend had met his match. By now they were probably in the throes of another session of hot sex.

Jade's nipples reacted to her daydream, remembering what Dean had told her about a front row seat. Of all of Dean's former lovers, this Marco would get her vote for most fun to watch.

Wednesday she got to spend the night in Adam's huge bed, though they didn't get much sleep.

"Tell me what I need to do before you let me inside you bare," he asked after disposing of yet another condom. He crawled back onto the bed beside her and stroked her hair, damp with perspiration, away from her face.

It took her a few seconds to catch her breath before she could answer him. "I'm already on the pill."

"Then I'll see my doctor. I really want to feel your wetness surround me."

She'd never had sex without a condom. She tried to imagine how it would feel. She moaned against his throat, and her sex clenched with need. "I'll see someone too. I'd love to feel you come inside me."

He trailed his rough fingers across her stomach, and whispered his adoration in her ear. When he touched her everywhere, teasing her with his restrained passion, she pushed him to his back and returned the favor.

He reached for another condom and rolled it on. "You make me so hot and hard. I swear I can never get enough of you."

Jade had never been with a man who recovered so quickly. It gave her a heady burst of pride to know that she affected him so.

They slept late, and spent the morning in bed, only leaving when the scent of fried chicken wafted from a tray Elaine had placed by the door around noon.

Dean was right, they needed a House Manager.

She met the members of his band, and true to his word, they were a cordial down-to-earth group. Thinking of Ella's request, she scoped out the men. Tim, one of the guitar players, and John, the bass player, were both married. Jason was a good-looking all-American blond, but the drummer was gay. Mick, the keyboard player was indeed single, and he even looked like Ella's type, with long black hair and heavily tattooed arms.

They all sat in Adam's music room, which was like a studio combined with a college dorm. There were musical instruments everywhere; digital recording equipment took up part of the space. The rest was filled with a side bar, easy chairs, beanbags, and a long sofa. They worked on the layers of "Always". Each band member took his turn playing his part solo, and took advice and changed a few things. The recording of one part would be played for the next layer, and so on. Soon, the parts all came together, and they played the song in its entirety. Jade sat out of the way, and was completely entranced. Although this wasn't a formal recording session, they all took their parts seriously. After playing a few other songs, with Jade as the only audience, they "threw some riffs around". They must have been playing together for quite some time, the way they could read where each other's minds were going. Even tempo changes sounded choreographed. Eventually they all made their way toward the bar, and started in on the snacks Elaine brought up.

Tim sat down beside Adam with another cold bottle of beer. "I figured Nash was hooked on some girl," he elbowed Adam without spilling from his longneck, "when he turned

down poker night." Tim had one of those interesting faces that reminded her of a football player—square, ruddy and a nose that looked like it had been broken at least twice.

Jade put on her appalled face, while secretly pleased that he preferred her company. "No! Not poker night!"

Adam just pulled her closer against his side. "I get enough of their ugly asses on tour. Besides, they never pay up."

"Bullshit!" Jason yelled out from his perch on the stool behind Adam's drum set, and pointed his bottle toward Adam. "You're the guy who always loses."

By the time the men filed out of Adam's house, Jade had phone numbers of the two band wives, and an invitation to a two-year-old's birthday party.

He took her to bed, and spent his time loving her thoroughly. Jade wasn't sure she'd ever had more than three orgasms, but under Adam's masterful touch, she surprised herself.

Fully satisfied, she lay beside him, listening to his heartbeat, wishing she had packed an overnight bag.

"Don't forget, tomorrow I'm taking you to Marc's restaurant." His after-sex voice was the sexiest. She almost wanted to tell him to use it when he sings, but she reminded herself that millions of fans fall in love with this man through his voice. This post-coital voice she'd keep for herself. "This will be your coming out, you know. We'll be seen. Together. Your face will be in the news after tomorrow night."

Jade did know that. She knew Adam had been shielding her since that first date. She also knew if she wanted a part in Adam's life, she would have to learn to live the life he did.

What if she took the leap, and was humiliated by a very public breakup down the road? Could she handle that kind of heartbreak? The only other option was to walk away from Adam right now, before the world knew who she was. One look into his blue eyes told her she would never be able to do that.

"Do you want to think about it some more? I can wait, Jade."

She looked him directly in the eye. "Should I dress up?"

He visibly and physically relaxed. A smile briefly tipped his mouth, then he smothered her with kisses. "It's a nice place, but you know I like you wearing anything," he licked a line down her jaw, "and nothing."

"You've seen my only dress." She laughed when he tickled her throat.

"I'll buy you something sexy."

"No. I don't want you to spend money on me."

He made his way down to her chest, and he nuzzled in between her breasts. "Do you want me to spend money on some other woman?"

She slapped him on the back of his head. "No, I just ... oh Adam ... I love it when you do that..."

He stopped sucking her nipple between his teeth to speak. "You just what?"

"I just wanted to warn you before you saw me in the same dress and ... I don't know how nice your friend's place ... ah that feels good."

"You're beautiful, Jade."

Friday morning, Jade stood on the sales floor of Earth Scents, watching two men install a brand-new touch-screen computerized cash register. She fought back tears. It was so like Adam, to give her such a gift. He knew she wasn't comfortable with his wealth, and wouldn't feel right about taking expensive or frivolous gifts from him.

"This thing will also track our inventory, Jade!" Dean was one of the few men who actually looked at an owner's manual, and he had already bookmarked several pages with torn-off pieces of paper. "I just have to install this software on our computer, and connect it with this Ethernet cable." He shook his head incredulously, and bent back over the thick book. "This is awesome."

"It is awesome." She pulled out her phone to send Adam a text. She knew he was busy with his producer today, so she couldn't call him like she wanted to. *You're wonderful. Thank you for the register.* It was installed and running before she got Adam's reply. *I don't like it when you worry.*

"You're not mad at him, are you?" Dean turned her around to face him.

"No, I'm not mad. I'll try to figure out a way to pay him back though." She had no idea how much this system cost, but she'd look it up and budget some kind of payment system.

"I'm sure there's some way you could pay him back that will make the man happy." Dean kissed her forehead, then moved her to one side. "But since you aren't mad, I'm supposed to give you this."

Dean reached underneath the counter, pulled out a thin white box, and laid it like a sacrifice before her.

She looked at it as though it might burst into flames if she touched it. "What is it?"

"Do you want me to tell you, or do you want to open it?"

She lifted the lid. Underneath the layers of white tissue lay a pool of sea green silk. She lifted it from the box, and it unfurled, revealing the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen.

"Oh my God." Her hands shook so badly that it showed off the shimmering iridescent finish of the fine fabric. "Dean ... did you see this?"

"Yeah I saw it. I get to take credit for picking it out. Adam said he didn't want to ask your size. He thought you'd be offended."

Before she dropped it on the floor, Jade carefully folded it back away, and threw herself into Dean's arms.

She'd never been so nervous in her life. Dean sent her home from work early so she could have her hair and nails done before slipping into the sensuous fabric of her dress.

The color was perfect for her. It brought out the color of her eyes, and made her hair shine. It was a simple cut, but it fit her like a second skin, showing a generous, but not lewd, amount of cleavage. The hem flirted with her knees, and floated around her with each movement, like a silk cloud.

She spun in front of Dean, and his approval was clear. "Damn, I'm good."

"It helps to have someone else's money to spend, I'm sure."

"Well, that's true." Dean reached up to pull some of her hair loose from the chignon to lay around her temples. "You look great, Jade. The cameras are gonna love you."

She covered her erratic heart with an equally shaky hand. "I'm scared, Dean."

He pulled her into his arms, careful not to crush her dress or destroy her hairdo. "Don't be, Jade. Just think of it as a date with Adam. You're going to ignore everyone else there, just like you'll ignore any mention of you two in tomorrow's gossip columns."

Dean was right. It was just a date. If anything came up, she knew Adam would bring her home. He seemed to be pretty good at shielding her so far.

"I might text the code."

Dean joined in her laughter, then shoved a shot of brandy in her hand, swearing that it wouldn't be enough to knock her down, but just enough to make her relax.

Adam picked her up for their date promptly at seven. He wore a black suit with a one-buttoned jacket that showed off his broad shoulders. Even his shoes looked impeccable.

"Christ, Jade. You look amazing."

"Thank you, so do you."

He took her hand and twirled her under his arm. "Damn it. Now I'll feel like I have to keep my hands off you all night so I don't mess you up."

"Well, we don't want to embarrass you in public."

He shook his head, his eyes still glued on her. "Baby, you're going to be the hot topic of the night. I just can't wait to take you all apart when we get back to my place."

She brushed their chests together, and pulled his head down to hers. "Thank you for the dress."

"Mm, I owe Dean big. Where is he?"

"Made himself scarce when he heard the doorbell. Probably calling his new boyfriend to tell him the coast is clear."

He grinned that crooked smile she remembered from one of his videos, and offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

Tyrell stood by the limousine. He softened his face into a smile for only a moment before snapping back into his role and opened the door. Adam sat beside her, and the door closed.

"Ty is on high alert tonight. He won't be much fun."

"Why?" She lifted their entwined hands to her mouth.

"Tonight he's watching two. Doubles his work load."

"Oh." She didn't think of it that way. She dropped her eyes from his.

"Oh no you don't. I didn't say that to make you feel guilty." He used one long finger to tilt her chin back up. He shook his head, and smiled indulgently. "You know, I would have thought that most women would jump at the chance to ride around in a limo ... have a big guy like Tyrell following them around ... even collect gifts like designer gowns, or ... cash registers." He looked through her eyes and into her soul. "But not you," he continued. "You're not flaunting me like some prize. You're not asking for expensive trinkets. Hell, you haven't even asked me for an autograph. You, Jade Graham, are the most real person I've met in my adult life, and the first woman that makes me glad I'm a man."

Jade could see her heart pounding against the silk bodice of her dress. She swallowed hard.

"Can I kiss you? I'll be careful."

She could only nod. Her brain was incapable of sending speech signals to her mouth, but when he brushed his lips against hers, in his most tender kiss to date, her mouth suddenly began to work correctly. She opened to him, and met his sweeping tongue with the tip of hers.

The car pulled underneath the arched canopy. Four couples milled outside, talking or smoking cigarettes. Behind a thick red velvet rope stood another group of people, obviously not patrons of the fine restaurant, but armed with big black cameras. At the sight of the long black limousine, they all scrambled into position, elbowing each-other away.

"Are you ready for this?"

"I think so. We're not going to make a speech or anything are we?"

"No, nothing like that. Just smile and walk in like you own the place."

"I hope I don't embarrass you."

He placed his lips against her temple and held her. "I'm so proud of you, Jade. I can't wait to show you off to the world."

And then Tyrell was there, holding the door. Adam emerged first, and the flashes popped. He paused for only a second while the crowd yelled his name to get his attention, then he took Jade's hand in his, and drew her out of the vehicle.

The flashes blinded her, but Adam kept her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow, and brought her down the sidewalk. Tyrell walked three steps behind them.

"Adam! Have you started recording...?"

"Mr. Nash, will you introduce us to the beautiful lady?"

"Adam, what can you say about the President's view on abortion?"

"Is it true you've stopped drinking?"

Jade followed Adam's instructions, and pasted a smile, albeit a cardboard one, and kept her head high. Adam ignored the questions, and even leaned down to whisper, "You're doing great!" in her ear. At that moment, her smile went from forced to genuine, and the flashes increased.

"Ma'am, can we get your name?"

"Who is she, Nash?"

Jade always thought ignoring a direct question was rude, but Adam wasn't fazed. As soon as the restaurant door closed behind them, they were blessed with peace.

Pianissimo, a four-star restaurant, was accustomed to its rich and famous patrons.

The tuxedoed maitre d' approached them, and spoke discreetly. "Mr. Nash, Madame, welcome. We have your table ready, please follow me.

"That wasn't too bad, was it?"

Jade noticed that inside the restaurant, the curious looks she received from the others were the same as those outside, but these were at least discreet. "Not too bad. Not with you beside me."

A man appeared from nowhere to hold her chair, and another filled her glass with water. At that moment, Jade worried about making a fool of herself. There were way too many forks! She looked up at Adam, but he was busy ordering a bottle of wine.

Dinner with Adam. That's all this is. Relax, Jade. She forced the muscles in her shoulders to loosen, and by the time they were alone at the table, she felt a little better. The pride in Adam's smile made it easy to block out everything but him.

They dined in peace. Conversation was light and unforced. They could have been sitting cross-legged on the bed in his boat. She didn't even worry about which fork she used, and if she made a mistake, Adam was gentleman enough not to point it out.

Adam's friend Marc was Pianissimo's Chef de Cuisine. He was a short plump man, with sad eyes and a big smile. His title gave him the ability to mingle with the guests, but he was only able to pump Adam's hand in greeting and kiss both of Jade's cheeks before he was called back to the kitchen.

Dinner dishes were cleared, and wine glasses refilled by a waiter that seemed to be assigned to their table alone, then he would slip back into the shadows. Adam reached over the table and held her hand.

"Have I told you how great you look?"

She blushed. "Once or twice."

"Good enough to eat." His eyes trailed down her body and then back up. "Later."

Another couple walked in through the doors, and the noise from the crowd outside along with the bright flashes of cameras briefly drew her attention away from Adam's. "Who exactly are those people outside?"

"On Friday nights, you'll see groups like that camped out next to every restaurant that is known to serve celebrities. The one in the white shirt with the ugly tie is Randal Jessup. He works freelance, but mainly sells his garbage to the *Opinion*."

"Oh." The *Opinion* was the most prominently displayed of all tabloid magazines. The one that showed close-up pictures of celebrity cellulose, and cell-phone pictures of movie stars without makeup. That man had taken pictures of her with Adam Nash. Chances were high her face would be on the front page soon, right next to a pregnant half-alien man.

"I think on the way out I should introduce you. That might save some erroneous stories about who you are."

Jade knew she'd blanched. Even her hands turned ghostly white where they lay nestled in his. "I don't know, Adam."

"Just your name. I'll do the talking. Short and sweet. They still might make you into the princess of a Greenland cannibal tribe, but at least they'll get your name right."

When she looked into Adam's eyes, Jade felt like she could do anything.

"I'll be right there. And so will Tyrell. You just smile."

Jade looked around. "Where is Tyrell?"

"He's in the car. I've got him on speed dial." He poured the last of the wine into her glass.

"He has to sit in the car and wait while you eat dinner?"

"Don't feel sorry for him. It's what I pay him to do," he lowered his voice, "and I pay him well by the way. He's got all the comforts of home in the car. He and Jack are probably watching a movie or something."

"Oh."

When she finished her wine, and practically licked the plate beneath her succulent cheesecake, Adam stood and took her hand, pulling her against him so he could speak against her ear. "Are you ready?"

No. "Yes, let's get it over with."

He tapped into his phone, then covered her hand where it gripped the crook of his elbow, pressing his warmth into her suddenly stiff fingers.

Adam stopped along the way to say hello to an older couple, whom he introduced as Roland and Jeannie French. Roland stood to bend over Jade's offered hand in an outdated yet thoroughly charming gesture.

"Miss Graham, your beauty takes one's eyes from the miscreant beside you, and for that we are all grateful."

"Roland! You're going to embarrass the poor girl," his wife admonished. "It is nice to meet you, Jade. Perhaps you can convince Adam to come to our summer party next month." She waved a white-gloved and heavily jeweled hand at Adam, and pursed her thin lips. "Every year we invite him, and every year he snubs us."

"Now Jeannie, you know I would never snub you. If you recall, last year was my niece's wedding, you wouldn't want me to miss that would you?"

"You have no such excuse this year, young man. You should have received your invitation by now, and of course it includes Miss Graham."

Jade smiled, and looked up at the miscreant beside her who tucked her hand back in his arm, and bid his friends goodbye.

"Their acceptance of you just elevated your status in the eyes of everyone watching."

Thank God Adam didn't tell her that before he introduced her to them. "Who are they?"

"Old movie money."

She didn't have time to ask him to elaborate. As soon as they walked through the tall oak doors, they were barraged with flashing cameras and shouted questions.

Disregarding the almost overwhelming urge to run the other way, Jade followed Adam's lead down the sidewalk, where he stopped directly in front of the blur of flashing shouting heads.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Jade Graham. She's a botanist here in L.A., and she runs the best flower shop in town. I'd appreciate it if you would respect her privacy."

That was short and sweet. He didn't answer their questions, from "where did you meet her?" to "is she as good in bed as Nicole Reece?"

She stumbled a bit with that one, and Adam clenched his jaw, but he said nothing until they were enclosed in the back seat of the limousine.

"Some of those bastards bug the shit out of me. Are you okay?"

Nicole Reece? The English movie star? Oh how she wanted to ask him about that little bit of gossip, but she didn't want to upset him more. Surely there was information online she could always...

No! She wouldn't stoop to that level. If Adam were any other man, she wouldn't google his past lovers.

"I'm fine." She moved as close to him as possible without sitting on his lap, and that might have been alright too. "I'm glad we're finally alone, though."

"I don't suppose you went without underwear tonight." He sent his hand on the quest.

"No such luck, but you're welcome to take them off at some point during the night."

He reached beneath the elastic leg, and swept his knuckle along her slick opening. "I've been thinking about this." He used that knuckle to collect her moisture before he brought his hand out from beneath her dress, and into his mouth.

He watched her closely as he sucked on his finger. His enjoyment of her sent a surge of desire through Jade.

"Sweet ... spicy ... sexy. You taste so damn good Jade. I could spend hours eating you, and I'd probably come over and over right with you."

She leaned into him and kissed him, licking her taste from his lips. By the time they reached his house, strands of her hair had come free from its twisted confines, and he had lipstick on his chin. They managed to clean up fairly respectfully, and walk in a sedate pace to Adam's bedroom, where laughing like anxious children, they stripped and curled beside each other on the silky soft sheets.

"Your first taste of fame. How does it feel?" Now that they were naked, and touching as much of each other as possible, they slowed their frantic pace.

Jade traced the arch of his eyebrow with one lazy finger. "As long as you're there, I can do anything."

"I can't always be there, but I have faith that you can handle it."

"Already thinking about leaving me?" she teased.

He took her hand from his face, and kissed her fingertips. "I can't imagine leaving you."

"Then stay."

"It's out of my hands now. There's no way I can leave."

"What do you mean?" She knew what he meant, she could read it in the depth of his dark blue eyes.

"Jade, I'm so madly in love with you. I don't want to even think about what my life would be like without you in it."

Her heart opened like a flower in full bloom. "Adam Herlihey Nash ... I love you too."

They had sex on the boat last weekend. They fucked in the hallway that day. Tonight, Adam made love to her.

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Chapter Ten

She really didn't want to go to work.

Dean and Marco were in a hotel in San Francisco, probably oblivious to the world, so she knew that there wasn't a way to spend the day in Adam's bed like she wanted to.

Adam drove her home in the white Escalade early in the morning after a quick text to Tyrell explaining where he was, and even the route he was taking.

"Sometimes I feel like a little kid," Adam had told her once when she asked about his constant text messages. "But it's part of his job to know where I am at all times. He even has my cell phone on some GPS thing. He can track everywhere I go."

He followed her into her house, and even into her bedroom, despite her feeble attempts to kick him out. "If you brought some of your things over to my house, we wouldn't have to go through this." He peeled last night's dress off her. Again.

"You wouldn't mind a woman's things in your bachelor bathroom?"

"Hell no. And when you aren't with me, I can go in there and sniff them."

"You're depraved."

"No, Depraved is what I would do after I sniffed them."

"I think I'd like to see that."

"I think I can arrange a private showing." He pulled her into the shower, and lathered the loofa while she shampooed her hair.

"You, sir, are a distraction, and I can't be late for work."

"I'm just helping so you'll be ready faster."

"Then keep your tongue in your mouth."

Not hardly. She did make it to work on time, but only because Adam drove like Mario Andretti. "And now I'll have to pick you up tonight." He kissed her cheek. "I love you, Jade."

Two days after their dinner at Pianissimo, Jade's picture made the front page of four tabloids. She knew only because Ella and Dean informed her. She still refused to read the articles, so she relied on Dean to filter the information for her.

"They're making you out to be some kind of Cinderella. A poor little working girl who struck oil. They didn't even spell Earth Scents right, they spelled it with a C." Dean shook his head.

Jade floated through the weeks that followed. When she wasn't with Adam, she was thinking about him. Earth Scents was busier than ever, but Jade knew it was her recent notoriety drawing the curious crowds to her shop. As long as they kept buying things, she wasn't going to complain. There were days when Dean and Ella had to run the front while she arranged in the back, just to keep the crowds calm. They were able to bump Ella to full-time, and had even interviewed a few applicants for a part-time position. Adam teased her that with the extra help she could take another weekend off soon.

Jade spent a lot of time at Adam's house, much to the pleasure of Elaine. The only thing Jade had to watch for was Elaine's tendency to push for an engagement party in the fall.

Thinking about the night they both swapped doctor's notes, now weeks later, Jade would still blush. She loved the power she felt when she pleased him with her mouth, and for the first time in her life she'd given him a blow job that made him writhe on the bed, and she ignored his warnings to stop. She didn't let up until he came in her mouth. As she drank down Adam's seed, her own sex throbbed with desire. He flipped her onto her back and immediately fastened his mouth on her pulsating core. Two splintering orgasms later, Adam slid his hard cock deep inside her for a third. When they kissed, her taste mingled with his in their mouths. Jade didn't think she'd ever experienced anything anywhere near as sexy.

When Adam went to New York for ten days, Jade moped around the house. Even Marco made fun of her melancholy mood. She gave Dean another weekend off, partly to keep herself busy, but also in the hopes that when Adam returned, she could give him a very lengthy welcome home. She told him her plans over the phone when he returned to his hotel room after dinner with "an old friend's father" one night, and he immediately booked a suite at the Bellagio in Las Vegas.

"I'll call Carley and tell her to charter the jet. Pack light."

"Skip the pajamas?"

"Definitely."

Days later, Jade hurried through a shower. She, Dean and Marco had rented a movie, and she could already smell the

popcorn. She towel-dried her hair and threw on a pair of boxer shorts and a tank top since it was such a warm evening. She shook out her curls, and took her pillow with her to the living room. The boys better not have started the movie without her.

"Jesus, she can't see this."

"You can't hide it from her." Marco leaned over Dean's shoulder to read whatever was on the computer screen.

She walked into the room and stood behind Dean.

"I can't hide it, but I'm not going to be the one..."

Jade had heard enough. "What are you doing?"

Dean shot to his feet and faced her. "Jade! Nothing. Just some ... nothing you want to see." Dean reached back and snapped his laptop closed.

That scared her. "What is it? Nothing's happened to Adam, has it?" She mentally went over his travel itinerary. He wouldn't be in an airplane until Friday morning, but it could always be a car accident ... or a crazed fan...

"He's not hurt."

"Then what is it?"

Dean's lips tightened, and he looked to Marco for help. "It's something you need to hear from Adam. Not on the news."

"Dean ... you are going to show me what the hell you're talking about, and you'll do it right now."

"Huh uh. You'll freak out."

"I'm freaking out right now!" She hugged her pillow against her chest, and looked from Dean to Marco, who had backed away, and kept his mouth shut. "Tell me Dean."

"No. Adam will be home in three days. You can freak out on him."

Jade recognized the stubborn tilt to Dean's jaw. He wasn't going to give in. With one more glance at Marco, she spun on her heel and locked herself in her room, ignoring Dean when he yelled out her name. The first thing she did was power up her laptop. Whatever Dean was looking at involved Adam, and therefore involved her.

For the first time since she started seeing Adam, she typed his name into her search engine.

The first result was his website. She'd look at that later. Music videos after that, and then ... oh God.

Adam Nash Dumps Florist for Nicole ... Love Blossoms Without Florist ... Playboy Nash at It Again ... Nash Sobers Up for a Second Chance with Reece.

She clicked on one. Pictures of Adam and Nicole Reece in an embrace outside of a downtown New York restaurant.

Adam Nash has apparently grown tired of his florist girlfriend after only one month, though still a Nash record. When in New York last night, the country music star was seen having a private meal with actress Nicole Reece at Georgio's, a five-star restaurant in The Village. It wasn't long after the meal when they left together, and showed the world that the two were again the hottest couple in entertainment. According to one Georgio's customer, Nash and Reece rarely looked away from one another, and Nash couldn't keep his hands off the British actress. The only surprise here, folks, is that it took him so long to prune his dying foliage to return to the rose.

Jade ignored the slight, and stared at the picture, looking for something to prove it a fake. She could only see his left side, his right hand wrapped around Nicole's waist, his left buried in the blond curls falling down her neck. It was him, and it was a recent picture.

"No," she groaned.

The next article was similar. This one sported a closeup of Adam's smiling face whispering into Nicole's ear. Her eyes were closed, and her face was beaming.

Jade wiped tears away before they could fall on the keyboard and short out her laptop.

Article after article. Even blog posts from people calling themselves "Industry Insiders". All saying the same thing. Adam spent the evening in Nicole Reece's company, and they left the restaurant in her limousine, presumably to spend the rest of the night in her hotel suite. Like some deranged fan, Jade clicked on every article and memorized each picture until her stomach rolled. One article she read bothered her the most. Not due to the article itself, but the picture attached to this one was an extreme closeup of Adam kissing Nicole passionately. Their faces filled the frame, so close Jade could see the calluses on Adam's thumb where it lay against Nicole Reece's diamond-studded ear. The camera even caught how her perfect pink tongue was tangled with his inside her perfectly made-up mouth.

Her skin crawled. She was sure she wouldn't have been able to melt an ice cube clenched in her hand. Her worst fears were coming to fruition. Adam had grown tired of her. He

went back to his playboy lifestyle. Back to the beautiful celebrity women he was comfortable with.

There were more articles, some detailing his earlier drunken antics, pictures of him with bloodshot eyes and intoxicated expressions. She didn't even have the stomach for that kind of research. She closed her laptop, and concentrated on the piercing pain of heartbreak, and she could feel each tear of the muscle. When she was sufficiently numb, she shivered, and although the house felt too hot earlier that evening, Jade found her most comfortable pair of flannel pants and her pink fleece bathrobe. Before another bout of tears could erupt, Jade left her bedroom in search of her best friend.

She found him in the kitchen. Dean sat at the table staring into a mug of coffee, while Marco stood behind him, rubbing his lover's shoulders in a comforting gesture. As soon as Dean saw her, he stood and enfolded her in his arms.

"You looked, didn't you."

She nodded into his shoulder, and clung to him as if her life depended on it. Her tears began anew, and this time she couldn't hold back.

"Damn it Jade."

"I love ... I loved him."

He sighed. "I know."

"I can't believe it. God Dean, it hurts so bad. I knew it would hurt, but..." She sniffed.

Dean bent down and scooped her into his arms. He carried her to the couch and held her like she was a lost child. She

vaguely heard Marco bid them goodnight after a gentle hand on her shoulder, and a kiss for Dean.

Her phone rang from the other room, and she could tell from the personalized ring tone that it was Adam.

"You should talk to him," Dean said against her hair.

"No. I can't. I don't want him to know I'm crying over him."

"There might be an explanation."

Leave it to Dean to play devil's advocate. "The pictures I saw were pretty self-explanatory. His tongue was in her mouth."

"Shit." He groaned, and held her even tighter when her phone rang again. "I knew this would happen. Knowing the way he was with women ... I never should have let you get on that boat."

After three ignored calls, Dean's phone rang. Before she could stop him, he pulled it from his pocket and answered it.

"Hello?"

Even though this man hurt her, Jade still found herself straining to hear his voice, and wishing she had the nerve to talk to him.

"Oh, yeah I can see how you'd worry, but she's fine. She's here ... no, she ... can't talk right now. She's lying down." Another pause. "She's not really sick, she's ... uh ... I'll tell her you called, but why don't you send her a text or something. She'll see it when she gets up I'm sure."

Would Adam recognize the tightness in Dean's voice, or was it only obvious to her? By the time Dean snapped his phone shut, Jade was crying again.

She couldn't focus on anything but her own pain, and the strong arms where she spent the night withering away.

No amount of makeup could hide her red-rimmed eyes on Friday morning when she and Dean pushed their way through the photographers crowded around the door of Earth Scents. She ignored them like she had since the story broke, but today she couldn't even seem to fake a smile. She hid behind her dark glasses until she was deep in the recesses of the back room while Dean called the police to have the entrance to their business cleared of the paparazzi.

They were worse today, it was as if they knew Adam Nash was flying home today. At eleven fifteen. Flight eleven-twenty from JFK, not that she cared. Maybe they did know. Nothing was sacred to these people.

She'd stopped carrying her phone, tired of the text messages asking what was wrong—as if he didn't know—and tired of the calls she refused to take. Even the incoming calls at Earth Scents she'd delegated to either Ella or the new girl, Cassie. Since business had picked up, Jade never had to work alone, but now that she was no longer dating Adam Nash, her customers might disappear just as quickly as Adam had.

In the wee hours of this morning, as she again lay sleepless, she'd decided that it was good while it lasted. She'd fallen in love with a man who satisfied her every desire, both in her bed and in her mind. It was an experience she'd never forget, and although she regretted giving her heart to him, she was a better and wiser person for it.

That strength didn't last long, because this morning she again found herself staring blankly at the orders for the day.

Soon she wasn't allowed the luxury of self pity; Earth Scents was too busy. Any time a customer asked her about Adam, she hid in the back room like a coward.

"I ordered lunch," Dean announced, breaking her out of another daydream. She looked at the clock, and was surprised to find it was almost noon.

"Thanks. I lost track of time." Adam would be home by now. Maybe he brought Nicole with him. Maybe they were in his bed right now. Or maybe he didn't even come back. He could have decided to spend some more time in New York with her ... or London. Not that she cared.

Damn.

Marco followed Dean into the back room, carrying two brown bags. Dressed in his bike helmet and deli uniform. Jade shook her head, Dean ordered lunch just so he could get his hands on his boyfriend.

"I'm starving." She dug through the bags and found a turkey sandwich. While Dean and Marco greeted each other with a long sexy kiss.

"Break it up boys. No loving in front of the heartbroken girl."

"I offered to kiss you, you turned me down," Dean teased.

"I've seen you kiss—like a man who is used to kissing men. You'd leave scars. Besides, it would be like kissing my sister."

"You don't have a sister," Marco pointed out in that musical Italian accent.

She popped open a can of soda. "None of my brothers kiss men, so that's as close as I get."

Dean had just unwrapped his sandwich when Cassie squealed from the sales floor. A noisy murmur of voices, Ella's announcement of, "Hey, you can't go back there," and the hallway lit up like lightning flashes.

Jade stood up, toppling the folding chair as she did. There was no doubt in her mind what caused the disturbance. Adam was here, and he'd brought the media with him.

"No." She shook her head and backed against the stainless sink. "I can't Dean. I ... can't."

Dean and Marco were halfway to the door when Adam stepped in. Tyrell was behind him, pushing the camera-snapping vultures back into the store.

Jade drank the vision of him. He was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Even better looking now than the day he'd bought Carley flowers. She saw past his un-tucked wrinkled blue shirt, stubbly chin, and the dark circles under his eyes, and saw the man she'd come to love.

Used to love, she amended.

His eyes found hers, and held on. "Jade." He took a step toward her, and she arched her back over the sink.

"Dean," she whimpered.

Dean stepped into Adam's path. "Don't do this now, Nash."

Adam didn't break his stare to look at Dean, he held her prisoner of his gaze, and if she didn't know better, she'd think he was as hungry for the sight of her as she was for him.

His hands clenched and flexed. "I have to Dean. I love this woman, and I'm not going to let the goddamned media ruin the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Jade had never seen this emotion behind his eyes. He looked desperate, frantic, maybe even a little angry. He moved around Dean, and was blocked by Marco. Finally he tore his eyes away from her, and faced the men.

"Look, guys ... I appreciate what you're doing. I'm glad Jade has someone watching out for her when I'm not around. But I'm back." He ran a hand through his hair, and faced Jade again. "I know she's hurting. Give me the chance to make it better."

"Jade?" Dean hadn't stepped away from Adam, and he didn't take his eyes off him either, but she knew what Dean asked. The murmur of anxious paparazzi floated from the sales floor, and three men squared off. She didn't have much choice. As much as she didn't want to have this conversation, let alone here in Earth Scents during business hours, she didn't want to cause an even juicier scene for the tabloids.

"It's okay Dean. I can ... listen to him." She covered her heart with one shaky hand, and gripped the edge of the sink with the other. Marco and Dean walked around Adam and toward the door.

"I'm right down that hall..."

Jade wasn't sure who Dean's comment was directed toward, but she nodded.

Adam took two steps toward her before she raised a hand to stop him. "Don't." The word came out a strangled cry. She cleared her throat. "Don't come any closer. Just ... say what you have to say and go."

He winced, but didn't take the final steps to reach her. "I see your pain. I feel it too. I missed you so much over the past week and a half that I just wanted to..."

"No," she barked. "I saw how much you missed me Adam."

"Tell me." He inched closer, but stopped again when she flinched. "Tell me what you saw. Tell me where you saw it."

"Why? Is there more than one hot story about Adam Nash going around?" Her voice rose to a frantic pitch, but she couldn't control it any better than she could control her shaky knees.

"There's always more than one," he shouted back. "It's one thing after another out there." He pointed one finger toward the now empty hallway, then brought that hand back to drag it down his face. "I'm sorry, Jade. I'm not mad at you. It's the damned cameras in my face all the time. It's been a hell of a long week, and the last few days without talking to you have been ... please can I ... just hold you for a minute?"

"Maybe you should have brought Nicole Reece along if you wanted your hands on a woman."

He sighed, opened his mouth, then closed it, brought one hand out toward her, then dropped it. Then he swore. "That's what I thought." He speared her with eyes that suddenly looked more black than blue. "Jade, I did not sleep with Nicole."

She pinched her eyes closed, happy to have heard the words she desperately wanted to hear, but hearing him say *that woman's* name muffled her joy.

"I know some pictures got out, and I know that's what you're upset about." He started pacing, his long legs stiff and

tense. "And I don't know exactly what you saw, or what you read, but when you stopped talking to me, I went over everything that was printed about me in the past few days, which just reminded me why I hate to read that garbage." He stopped in front of her, almost close enough to reach out and touch, but she clamped onto the cold steel of the sink's edge to resist the temptation.

"Yes, I saw Nicole Reece while I was in New York. We had dinner together. What the articles conveniently left out was the fact that her father was with us. He's the guy I told you about on the phone later that night." Her eyes snapped to his, and he nodded wearily. "Joshua Reece is a big fan of mine, and it was his birthday. Nicky asked if I'd join them for dinner, and that's what I did." She remembered a phone call one night, when he told her about his old friend's father who joined them for dinner. She was sure he hadn't mentioned that his old friend was a woman, or that her name was Nicole Reece.

"You failed to mention who your old," she threw up air quotes, "friend was, or even that she was a woman."

"No I didn't mention that, but not because I was guilty of anything. I've always had an issue with people name-dropping all the time, trying to look important by who they know; I've just turned it into a habit to keep quiet about who I'm with and what I do." One more step, and he was close enough that she had to lift her chin to see him. "That's my fault. I guess I'm just not used to having someone in my life that would give a damn about anything I do. I should have

told you who she was, but honestly, that's how I see her, as a friend."

"But the kiss..."

"There wasn't a kiss, Jade. On the way to her car, she thanked me for joining them, and gave me a hug. Nothing more."

Jade's whirling mind tried to pull all the information together to make sense of it.

"Her father was sitting in the car, but of course no one bothered to mention that. The whole thing lasted ten seconds. We got into the car, and they dropped me off at the hotel. I called you when I got into the hotel, remember? That was the night I ordered *Shawshank Redemption* on pay-per-view."

She did remember that phone conversation. She dug her fingers into her temples. The pictures weren't dated, and she didn't even stop to think about his phone call before she read the news.

"But what about the kiss?"

"I didn't kiss her."

"The pictures say otherwise." *And pictures don't lie*, she reminded herself. *Do they?*

"Jade, I didn't kiss her. She's just an old friend..."

"I read about that too." She pushed herself away from the sink. Adam was way too close, and she couldn't think.

He put both hands on her shoulders, halting her retreat, and she was stuck looking into those eyes. "I dated Nicky, yes. But it was years ago, and it was one of those things that fizzled out before it even started. We just sort of ... laughed

at ourselves for trying to make something more of our friendship than there was, and went back to being friends. That's it. His hands on her made her want to collapse in his arms. She resisted, but only barely. He tilted her chin up until she was again captured by his blue eyes.

"The only time our conversation turned away from my music and her father was when she asked about you."

She licked her lips. She wanted to believe him. "She asked about me?"

"*Everyone* asked about you. Every time I got cranky, Henry threatened to fly you in for a booty call to get my head on straight. When I showed up late one morning for a breakfast meeting, they blamed my late-night phone calls, and Ty gave me a hard time when I dragged him into Tiffany's to look at rings."

"Oh." She blushed.

"Yeah. This isn't a game for me." His eyes danced over her face. "I walked around Manhattan with a goofy grin on my face because I couldn't get you off my mind. It's obvious to everyone how much I love you. Nicky even said she was sorry she asked about you, because I wouldn't shut up after that. I have never been this happy in my life. You're not just another woman in my bed. You're the woman in my heart—the one I love. The kind of love I've written about for years, but looking back those songs are so sterile compared to what this really feels like." He laughed. "Yeah, I sound like a sap, but I want you to know everything I feel so you never doubt again. Fame, fortune, notoriety, women, alcohol ... even my dream of making music for a living didn't make me happy. *You*,

Jade. You make me happy, for the first time in my adult life, and I can stop looking for pleasure in strings of women, or gallons of alcohol." He furrowed his brow. "God, Jade ... I know I'm not good enough for you yet, but I'm trying."

Jade clamped both lips between her teeth. She had a stronghold on his shirt, now damp handfuls of silk the color of his eyes. She so wanted to believe everything he said. Her heart recognized him, her body missed his, and the warning bells in her brain grew progressively quieter.

"Now listen to me." He cupped her face in his hands and forced her to see the honesty in his. "I wanted you to stay away from those types of articles, and this is the reason why. I hope someday you can trust me more than you trust them."

Now she felt foolish. He *had* warned her. "But the pictures ... and ... it's hard when they won't leave me alone."

"I know. I just want you to have enough confidence in me to hear me out. I love you, Jade. I don't want to ever lose you because of some damned reporter or photographer. If I have to take you everywhere with me, then so be it. It's a sacrifice I'd be more than willing to make," he teased.

She tried to smile, but her face was still too stiff. "I don't want to be that girl. I should be able to trust you ... no matter what I see or hear."

"Then tell me you believe me." His voice dropped to that after-sex tone.

His explanations did make sense. She did want to believe him. He'd never lied to her before, and to top it all off, he was the man she loved. She looked up into his eyes and saw the

truth there. She saw the worry, the desperation, and even the love.

How could she put the credibility of the tabloids over his word? She suddenly felt ridiculously childish for every action over the past three days.

She nodded, a frantic movement. "I do. I believe you Adam. Oh God, I'm so..."

"Huh uh." He stopped her with one long finger against her lips. "You believe me, that's all I need. You don't apologize for this one. Show me the kiss online, and I'll find the bastard who's sorry.

Without permission or apology, he wrapped her in his arms. "I love you Jade. Always ... forever ... only you. Tell me you know that. If you don't know that, then I've failed."

She couldn't hold back her tears. She cried because he was home. She cried because in his arms she felt like she was home, and she cried because her broken heart finally began to beat again.

She couldn't get close enough to him. She wanted to crawl underneath his skin and curl up inside him where it was safe and warm. His familiar scent filled her nostrils, and she breathed it in, reveling in the spiciness that was so ... alive. So *Adam*. She sniffed, and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I missed you." She traced the outline of one sinewy muscle by his shoulder. The sounds from the sales floor grew quieter. Either Tyrell had kicked them all out, or Dean enforced his "buy or fly" rule. It didn't matter; they were gone, and Adam was here.

"I missed you too. I don't want to let go of you." He bent his head and kissed her. Jade melted against him, thankful for his strength. He sipped at her lips, he licked them, and then he drew her tongue into a homecoming celebration.

"Do you think Dean would let me take you home? We really need to pack."

"Pack?" She opened sleepy eyes to blink him into focus.

"Among other things." He winked. "Don't tell me you forgot about our Vegas trip."

She had forgotten. "I just was sure that you ... I mean."

"I know. Come on, I'll ask The Warden. Maybe you could take a nap with me, I haven't slept in days, maybe with your legs tangled in mine I can remember how. But before we go I need to hear one more thing."

For the first time in days, Jade smiled, the expression again familiar to her, reaching her eyes and filling her heart. She looked directly into his eyes, and she saw the love in them through the love in hers. "I love you Adam."

Lord, how she missed his kisses.

"God damn, that's music to my ears."

The End

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About the Author:

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