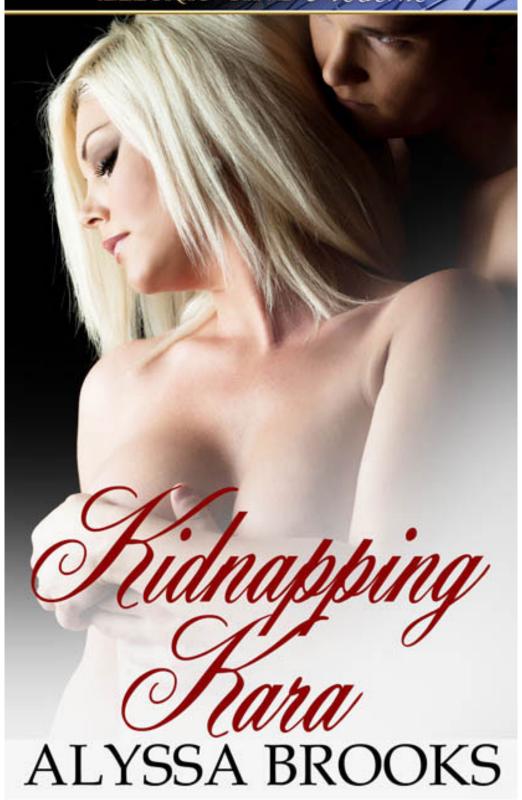
ELLORA'S CAVE Moderne



Kidnapping Kara

Alyssa Brooks

Kara Morgan – fiery, passionate, wild. But a drug addict? A stripper? Nearly a decade is plenty long enough to forget the wayward lover who ran out on him, but try as he might, Shaun Weston can't kick Kara from his mind. Now, just when his luck can't get any worse, her wealthy mother is waving a lot of money in his face and begging him to help save her daughter. To kidnap Kara.

Shaun Weston – caring, good-hearted, determined. But reasonable? Or right about her? Not on his life. Taken by surprise — while completely naked — then bound, gagged and hauled away caveman style by the one man she's never stopped hurting for, Shaun is fit-to-be-tied angry...and maybe just a little turned-on. Okay, a lot turned-on.

Who knew she had such a kinky side? Or that he did too? And why is he back in her life now, determined to "save" her? Someone sure has their share of explaining to do—but with passions running this hot, who has time for talking?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Kidnapping Kara

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KIDNAPPING KARA

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Chapter One

"For never was a story of more woe Than this of Juliet and her Romeo." – William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

A desperate mother does desperate things.

This, Gloria Morgan told herself, was nothing if not necessary. Still, she couldn't tamp down the nip of guilt-laced fear that twisted through her abdomen. Indeed, she was resorting to dastardly—unladylike if nothing else—means. Stooping to the level of a regular hoodlum.

Necessary.

In one hand, Gloria teetered a much-needed glass of pinot blanc that sloshed precariously with every bump and pothole along the cursed back road that led to the Weston farm. In the other, she clutched a detective report she'd scanned too many times to count yet still managed to send her heart pounding in a manner her cardiologist would deplore.

"Careful," she admonished her driver. "Must you hit every ditch in this godforsaken road?"

"Sorry, ma'am."

"Just deliver us there without staining my blouse!"

How could it be true? *Her* daughter...

At the thoughts, her hands shook. She sampled another sip of the bittersweet liquid she'd purchased last month while traveling across France. Ah, Paris. She'd take Kara there shopping when this was all said and done. Once her daughter was right of mind, she would love trips and the such. What young lady wouldn't?

Sipping slowly at her wine—a necessary factor to maintaining low blood pressure—Gloria once again consider her position. The three photographs that scattered across her lap. *Him*. The bane of her daughter's existence.

Gloria's only hope now.

What else could she do? Not exactly having criminal tendencies, returning to the source seemed the most feasible plan. After all, her sons refused to help her. Insisted she "back off" as Trent, her youngest son, had put it. Let Kara live her life.

As if that were any way to speak to his mother!

At any rate, Gloria could see why her daughter had once fallen for this "Shaun". He had that rough, untamed look about him that the young ladies went for these days—it

was to be surmised the barber was far too great an expense. Unkempt golden hair tousled at the back of his neck, and from the whiskers shadowing his jaw in more than one picture, it was assumable he only shaved once a week. If that. A rich farmer's tan burnished his skin and a massive amount of muscles accompanied his caveman-like appearance.

But underneath it all, should some brave soul take the man in hand and clean him up, he was admittedly handsome. A strong jaw. Sensual lips. Stunning, thickly lashed amber eyes.

It was just too bad he was the piss-poor corrupter who'd ruined her daughter's life. Because of him, she'd run off. Because of him—

A cry strangled in her throat at the thought. Gloria couldn't bear to think on it. She'd faint dead away, picturing her daughter behaving like…like white *trash*.

Gloria was out of options. Kara wasn't coming around to the right way of things and if her husband discovered what she had about Kara in this detective's report, there was no telling how it might affect his political career. What he might do—disown her, undoubtedly—when Gloria was more intent than ever on bringing their family back together.

She was a woman with a weak heart and this was her *daughter*. Eight long years she'd watched her throw her life away.

Kara wouldn't come to heel for money. Not for clothes, not for a car. Not for schooling, not for any monetary incentive. She was independent now, she claimed. Didn't need a cent of the family money.

Looped out of her mind was more like it.

Well then, that left Gloria one course of action. If she couldn't bribe her, she'd bribe others. And to get Kara home, she'd simply seduce her — with one Shaun Weston.

* * * * *

"You've *got* to be kidding me." Yet somehow, even after all this time, Shaun had always expected the gleaming silver Rolls-Royce that rumbled slowly down the long, dusty lane toward his farmhouse—that, or a police car.

Kara.

He was a damn fool to even hope. Ought to be scrambling for the loft and cowering in Lucy's hay rather than face the driver of that vehicle. The Rolls could mean nothing but trouble—Kara Morgan, defined. Look up the word in the dictionary and there was her picture.

Oh yes, t-r-o-u-b-l-e that he didn't need! And more importantly, didn't want. Not anymore.

His heart, however—which had set about fluttering as if he'd swallowed a damn hummingbird—had a different way of seeing it. Tension wound in his muscles.

Setting aside the gear he'd just pulled from his tractor transmission—thus far, today, like so many others in his life, was *not* going well—Shaun stepped from the barn into the deceptively peaceful spring morning and headed toward the house. Birds trilled. Lucy mooed. The moist scent of the new dawn hung off budding trees. Aching filled his chest.

Each step seemed an eternity in which his pulse drummed faster and sunlight reflected off the Rolls' expertly waxed exterior, creating hazy streaks that flashed memories like frames in one of those old motion picture projectors. Kara, in the pitch of night, balancing her way across the barnyard fence. Kara, snagging his hand and dragging him toward the pond for a midnight swim. Kara, reciting Shakespeare to an audience of unhappily awakened geese.

Kara, laughing. Kara, kissing. Kara, beneath him.

That saucy mouth, always daring him. The way she'd given her virginity to him, so eager to be all his. Making sweet, slow, passionate love to him in the hayloft many a night.

That smile, gazing up at him as if he were the world. Her tiny hand tangled in his as she eagerly listened to stories of his life. Her support after Henry died, the way her thin arms had wrapped around his chest and squeezed with reassurance. It would be okay—he had her. She'd never leave him.

Shaun could've sworn they had the kind of love that lasted forever. Young, yes, but true, straight to the core of him.

Kara, however, seemed destined to disappear come daybreak.

And now, for the first time ever, a Rolls was creeping up his drive without the protection of the moon. It wasn't the exact same "borrowed" car she'd originally shown up in time and again all those years ago, this version of money well wasted clearly a more recent model. But all the same, it was her daddy's. The bigger question was, was it the dark-haired, pale-skinned ethereal creature with a penchant for turning his world topsy-turvy on the other side of those tinted windows? Boldly returning to him?

He wouldn't put it past her. Not that he wanted her back at this point. Hell no, Shaun was no masochist. She didn't love him—never had, never would. That much he knew for sure. As for himself, he had himself a nice lady he was seeing now.

Perhaps it was Kara's father, stopping in to give him a long-overdue ass whooping? The latter he doubted...it would involve Charles Morgan, Sr. caring about his daughter more than himself.

But for Kara to come back? After all this time?

Eight long years it'd been. *Eight years* since that fateful night Kara crash-landed smack into the middle of his existence, arriving via her father's hijacked Rolls. Since she'd stolen his heart like the bandit she was...then sped out of his life months later on a stolen bike.

The Rolls glided to a stop beneath the big oak tree that shaded his paint-peeling porch, the rear driver's-side door admitting the rising figure of a graceful woman. A

female embodiment of wealth, wearing a fitted blue pantsuit, blonde chin-length hair pinned back with a diamond clip. Dangling sapphire earrings dazzled in the sunlight, complete with matching brooch and Botoxed lips pressed flat with distaste.

Not Kara. Definitely not her father. But now Shaun saw where Trouble got those huge, fathomless brown eyes—from her mother. Nothing cheap about the lady.

Not quite sure what to expect, Shaun tipped his John Deere hat in greeting. "Ma'am."

The car door slammed behind her, the driver keeping the engine running. Good...hopefully that meant she didn't plan to stay long. This clearly wasn't a social call.

"I suppose you know who I am," came her curt reply and the tilt of her chin, her critical gaze sweeping along his length.

"I do."

"As I do you, Mr. Shaun Weston. You stole my daughter's heart. Her virginity. Perhaps...her sanity." Fishing in the side pocket of her white leather purse, she retrieved a pack of Chics, removing one slim, white cancer stick and holding it between two fingers, pursing her lips as if she expected him to light it.

Turning his palms, Shaun gave her a shrug. "Don't smoke." He'd just as soon she didn't around him either, but he figured this wasn't nearly a friendly enough conversation for being particular. "And to be more accurate, Mrs. Morgan, I believe she's the one who committed the stealing."

With a sigh of vexation, she again fished into the outer compartment of her purse and retrieved an elegant silver lighter.

"Hmmm, yes. My daughter, I've come to accept, leaves much to be desired in the arena of behaving like a lady." So did she—disdainful looks were rude in Shaun's opinion. With a flick of her lighter, she drew a hearty drag, the end illuminating red. "You may call me Gloria."

Friends now, were they? Hardly.

"Kara's not here, *Mrs. Morgan,*" he offered, not sure what else to say as smoke spiraled, wafting with the hauntingly poignant scent of Nan and Henry. God, how he missed them. To think, he hadn't much noticed the secondhand smoke all his teenage years. He'd just been thrilled to finally have a real home.

Funny how good it smelled to him now, regardless of how he despised cigarettes.

Aware to the core of him how tobacco had chiefly contributed to the deaths of the only two people who'd ever been real parents to him—Henry first, quick and unexpectedly from heart disease, then Nan, slowly and painfully from lung cancer—Shaun was compelled to take a hearty step backward to more breathable space. Resting a shoulder to the tree, he crossed both legs and arms.

"My nerves, you know. One day I'll quit. My heart doctor insists." Flourishing the cigarette, she tapped off ashes and inhaled again. "Tell me. Did you love her very much?"

"I did," he confirmed with the clench of his heart. Too much for his own good. "Obviously she didn't feel the same about me."

Which—had he not been so blinded by those huge eyes and bewitching nature—he should have sensed disaster from the start.

"Do you love her still?"

If that wasn't a hell of a question. Shaun knew the right answer...so why did that big fat *No!* he should be blurting elude his tongue? "Suppose you could say a man doesn't forget a girl like Kara."

"I see." With yet another mocking glance to his tattered, grease-stained t-shirt and old Levi's, she waved her free hand, motioning to their surroundings. "As it is, I would much rather have chewed off her marrying an unfortunate farmer. In hindsight, we could have made something tolerable of your life for her. The land is valuable, I'd imagine. You could've been trained."

"Excuse me?" Trained? Insulting much?

More than a little. But, kicking his legs straight and hooking fingers in his front pockets, Shaun couldn't help the deep chuckle that flowed from him. The little woman had sheer nerve—a set of steel balls tucked away somewhere—he'd give her that. Now he saw where Kara got her bluntness from.

Partially annoyed, partially amused, he toyed with the notion of kicking her off his property, but he was too curious to know where this conversation was headed. "You, The Hulk and twenty cattle prods maybe."

Every syllable she spoke carried this chastising tone, as if she had something over him. "I am aware, you see, that you are in dire financial straits."

From the first breath he took. So? Life never had any intention of being easy on Shaun Weston, and sure, the recent crash in peanut sales was devastating. In hindsight, trading off raising the tobacco his adoptive parents and their parents before had always grown in lieu of peanuts hadn't been his best fiscal decision. But he wasn't one to sacrifice morals for money. Tobacco killed millions...he'd be damned if he had a hand in that. Besides, how could he have anticipated the wave of salmonella that would send Americans running scared?

At any rate, he'd make it. Always had, always would. And *that* was none of her business. The day he sold off his acreage and tucked his tail like a beaten dog was the same day Kara developed a good-girl streak.

"Look, lady, I'm gathering the time for good manners is beyond us, so what exactly do you want? I haven't seen spit of Kara. Don't plan to or want to either."

Shelly, one of his fellow churchgoers he'd been seeing, was a nice lady. Decent and kind and a damn good cook. Downright sweet as a man could find in a woman. A few

times he'd thought about proposing—but just hadn't worked up the gumption yet. Not that he could afford a family.

The last thing he needed was Kara back in his life, in any form. Shaun wasn't such a fool he didn't know what that would do to him.

"You see, there's the dilemma, because *I* want my daughter home. Immediately. Whatever the cost."

"I told you –"

"Yes, yes, you've no idea where she is. Fortunately...or unfortunately...I do." Casting the cigarette to the ground, she crushed it beneath a pointed toe. "I suppose I could have gone to a less-reputable source for this task but I want it kept very quiet. Under control. The doctors will simply be told she was delivered to me by her concerned lover and any protests she issues will only fit her profile. She's distraught. No longer in her right mind. You did the right thing."

"I haven't done anything."

"But you will, for Kara. You love my daughter, anyone can see the fool you are for her just from glimmer in your gaze when I mention her name."

Ouch.

"I believe I can trust her in your hands," she went on. "According to my detective, all in all you're a fine man. Piss-poor for your morals but a regular good guy when you're thinking with the right head. Considering you're the reason we lost Kara—the one to blame without rebuff—well, it seems fitting you should be left to this task. Penance for your sins, if you will."

Knew how to lay it on, didn't she? "What are you talking about?"

"I'm referring to money, Mr. Weston. Ten-thousand dollars."

The number nearly took his breath away. Just the thought of getting his hands on that sort of cash...catching up on the property taxes he was behind on. Or being able to afford the seed he needed for spring planting and escape the disastrous peanut business.

Setting himself right, so maybe he could finally settle down. Start the family he'd always wanted.

Just what did she want from him? "Lady, you're talking in riddles."

"Then let me make myself plain. You are broke, on the verge of losing this farm. My daughter, as she has personally informed me, is stripping. Taking her clothes off for perverts in some grotesque establishment entitled Custom Carpets. A drug addict now, I'll add. She refuses to speak to me. To meet with any sort of reason. I want you to kidnap her. To bring her home."

Feeling as if he'd just been bitch-slapped because none of this made sense, Shaun found himself senselessly repeating, "Custom Carpets?"

"As she suggested I do, use your imagination, Mr. Weston."

It still took him a full minute. "Oh. Oh."

Something fierce inside him seared at the thought of his Kara parading around in nothing but high heels. Trimmed down there like some sort of sideshow.

Fists clenched, he found himself grinding out, "Let me get this straight. You're offering to pay me *ten-thousand* dollars to *kidnap* Kara?" *Just give me my damn keys*, he wanted to shout.

"Yes."

"No! No way!" She was asking him to commit a crime! As in felony. Jail time.

"You must do this."

"I'm crazy for not kicking you off my property five minutes ago."

Still. Stripping? Drugs?

Ten-thousand dollars?

Holy hell.

Never more torn, Shaun turned away, fingers pressed to his forehead as he walked several steps then whipped around. Turned, stomped grass the other direction and spun back, throwing down his hand. Shoot. Was he actually considering this?

In answer to that question, he karate-chopped empty air. "Absolutely no way!"

"Please, Mr. Weston, think of how she needs you," she insisted quietly. "I wouldn't have come here without doing all my homework and believing this is my best course of action. I know all about you. Think of your real mother. If you could help her now, wouldn't you?"

Dammit! Just...dammit.

Talk about a blow below the belt. Drugs—crack cocaine to be more specific—had killed his mother. But not before shredding her life into painful slivers—and his.

The thought of Kara like that...his heart winced at the possibility.

"I have to admit, you make your case." Across the board. Gloria had whetted rather fierce emotions in him. His protective nature had just reared into overdrive and all he could think about was doing what it took. Whatever it took.

The one woman he'd ever loved could not destroy herself like that. How could he allow it, knowing what he knew? Having seen the things in life he'd seen?

"There is the money to be considered as well," Gloria reminded pointedly. "Payment for a good deed. For saving her life. And it'll save this farm."

That it would. Darn it, it would.

Shaun stuffed clenched hands in his pockets, kicking one boot with the other, resolved to stop his pacing and tamp down the knee-jerk reaction tempting him. What was he thinking anyway? Allowing some renegade urge to go chase Kara down, fling her over his horse like some white knight and ride off into the sunset overtake him was totally ludicrous. Consider reality... Kara would hate him. Kara was trouble. Kara *never* did anything she didn't want.

Watch me. Weren't those the last words she'd ever said to him, spurned by his insistence she couldn't run off. *Watch me.*

And she had. Right out of his life.

Yes, too bad Mrs. Morgan's plan had one giant crater-sized hole.

"Look, I get your side, I do. But you could hand Kara your whole world and she won't stay put if she doesn't want." A lesson hard learned. "I can't help you. Try seeing eye to eye with your daughter. That might work better."

But Shaun especially knew that was as big a crock as saying Kara would listen to reason. Not only was Kara stubborn as a mule but drug addicts didn't reason. Ever.

Ahhhh...hell. "Are you absolutely positive she's doing drugs, Mrs. Morgan?"

"If it'll lend credence to your decision, I'll disclose the full detective report to you, Mr. Weston. Kara *is* sick and getting high. Taking off her clothes for money...does it appear she needs to do that?" Her thumb hitched toward the running Rolls then returned to finger her brooch. "I'd give her just about anything and she knows that. But every time I telephone her, it's verbal war for no reason at all. She hangs up on me. All these years she's refused to come home, to allow me to provide her with the finer things she's entitled to in life, and I'm left with no recourse but this. My husband is about to run for governor of Virginia and we cannot tolerate her sticking needles in her arms or whatever she's up to! Do you know she refuses to attend Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner? Why? Because she knows we will demand she seek help and she doesn't *want* help! But no longer will I take no for an answer. I fully intend to see her placed in a home for psychiatric treatment, immediately, by whatever means necessary. *You* are that means."

Shaun couldn't help his slow nod. Damn, a detective report. Kara was doping up. As much as he hated to believe it, to see it...

How could what Mrs. Morgan was saying not hold truth? He'd always known Kara was an emotional train wreck. She was passionate. Rebellious. Impulsive. But he'd never accounted her unstable until this moment. *Stripping?* If the proof was there, it had to be true. All the same though... "You forget, she's an adult. She'll never agree."

"What she wants doesn't matter. You will deliver her to me. Lie to her. Seduce her and use your past together to persuade her if you must, if that's what it takes to get her here. Undoubtedly she'll be ranting notions about being kidnapped and the institution will be obligated to place her under a twenty-four-hour hold. The doctor will determine her unfit and a judge will grant me protective medical custody."

Shaun couldn't help but scoff. "Let me guess, money really can buy anything? The doctor's receiving twice as much as me and the judge is a personal friend."

"That, Mr. Weston, is not your concern. Your concern is ten-thousand dollars, fifty percent payable now, fifty percent upon her return. I'll provide everything you need. Expenses. A vehicle."

"You've got the cash. Have the PI kidnap her."

"He's a legitimate business man, not a criminal. Besides, we need this to appear as if Kara's boyfriend simply brought her home for help. Not that she was actually kidnapped."

"We?" Dammit!

Then her voice lowered to a soft plea, dangerous as hooked talons. "Please think about your mother. If you love Kara at all, consider her well-being."

Of all the bloody stupid things, he *did* still love her. Couldn't deny he cared about her a whole hell of a lot...couldn't bear the thought of where she was at, what she might be doing this very moment.

Not his Kara.

But risk something going wrong? Being arrested? What would happen to his farm while he was in prison that many years? Not to mention his relationship with Shelly?

He might not have it perfect but at least he could say he had a good thing going on here.

"What you're asking me to do..." It was just too much. The bottom line was, as much as he was concerned, Kara *wasn't* his problem. Same as eight years ago, he plain refused to let her wild ways destroy his life. "No. And that's my final answer."

* * * * *

Final his ass.

Sleep deprivation does funny things to a man. Makes him think, makes him feel *far* too much.

By morning, Shaun's eyes were dry from remaining wide open. He was ready to chuck his lumpy pillow out the window. Hell, the whole bed.

Now he understood why Kara stole her dad's Rolls at night and cruised the back roads. Insomnia was sheer torture, especially when said restless night was filled with thoughts of the one who shattered his heart...and the prospect of kidnapping her.

By God, that he was actually still considering this.

But when he hadn't been thinking about Kara, he'd been thinking about his broken childhood. His mother. The things drugs did to a body, the situations a woman might put herself in...put her kids in.

Picturing the woman he once loved like that... Shaun couldn't do it.

In all honesty, his mind was already made, even before spending the night tossing and turning and contemplating Kara—and sure, the money and the farm and how stupid walking away from that much cash was.

It was the answer to all those Sunday prayers he put in at church.

God sure did work in mysterious – frustrating – ways.

Pulling himself from the bed, he swung his legs over the side, plopping his forehead in hand. What choice did he have?

It wasn't as if he'd be doing some *harmful*. Quite the contrary.

Kidnapping Kara. Everything about the plan was completely insane. Risky at that. What if Gloria was wrong and the doctors actually believed her rant about being abducted? What if he was pulled over in the process? If she got away and went to the authorities?

But if he didn't do it, who would? Someone "less reputable" as Gloria threatened?

His heart churned at the thought. More than likely the woman just hinted at that to pull his strings, but how could he take the chance? Indeed, Gloria was desperate when it came to saving her daughter.

The bottom line? Kara was in trouble. Needed him. He felt it in his gut. Couldn't walk away, not now that he knew.

And sure, there was the money. He'd be inhuman not to want it. But when he thought about Nan and Henry and losing the farm that had been in their family for ages...they'd entrusted him with their legacy, something wholly special to Shaun, and suffice to say, that upped the game. There wasn't much he wouldn't do to save the Weston land.

Then sell the necklace, his conscience nagged. It wasn't no ten thousand but it'd at least help a smidgen. Every dollar counted. But stupidly, Shaun just couldn't do that. He'd bought it as a belated birthday present for Kara. Couldn't bear the thought of turning it over to some pawn shop.

Truth was, he'd rather kidnap the woman than cheapen how he'd felt about her like that. And the irony was, if he *didn't* do this, selling off acreage would be his only choice.

With any luck, it wouldn't have to be so extreme. Kara might be the poster child for wild emotions but she wasn't stupid. More like extremely intelligent...and deep down he couldn't find it in him to believe she wanted to be where she was right now. She wasn't like his mom.

If he could just get her alone, reason with her. Maybe he could convince her to get help on her own. Maybe *he* could help her. This whole kidnapping scam wouldn't be necessary and he'd bring her home willingly.

Right, he scoffed, keep spinning fairy tales.

Chapter Two

"He that is strucken blind cannot forget The precious treasure of his eyesight lost." — William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Strange. Definitely weird.

Clicking the phone on the receiver, Nathan Morgan tugged his tie loose, frowning heavily as he contemplated the conversation he'd just ended.

Nope, something definitely wasn't right.

More than his fair share—since Brenden was head over heels for some floozy and nowhere to be found ninety percent of the time now, and Trent wasted every free opportunity living a second life his parents had no idea about—Nathan had listened to his mother rant and rave about Kara. Often enough to know when something was off.

For one, their entire ten-minute call she'd been perfectly pleasant. Not like herself at all. For two, she hadn't mentioned his baby sister even once. No threats, no pleading with him, as he'd tolerated ever since she discovered he and Kara were talking again. No fake tears and mentions of her blood pressure.

Just...nothing.

Unease knotting in his stomach, he picked up the phone again and dialed his mother back, determined to get to the bottom of this.

* * * * *

Sweet Dreams tea, guzzled. Soothing ocean sounds, check. Sprigs of lavender tucked under the satin case covering her memory foam pillow, check. Room pitchblack, check.

Check, check, check!

Talk about patently ridiculous! God, Kara wished she were at her own place, in her own bed. Not that she actually believed even home would make much difference.

Bolting upright, she snagged her pillow and hurled it into the dark room. *Great advice, Doc.* The freaking pillow and crashing tide had done wonders. To think, she'd even forced herself up this morning at six and went jogging.

Yup. *Jogging*. Ick. Then over to her apartment to check on Chrissy. Then her morning college class. Then work and the endlessly boring task of punching the calculator, answering phones, customer service and filing, filing, filing. Then studying. Then back home again to Chrissy to hang out for the evening, just so the talkative

woman she'd rescued—and subsequently was harboring—didn't get lonely and change her mind about leaving her jackass of a boyfriend now that the bruises—and bones—were finally starting to heal.

A jam-packed schedule that should've exhausted anyone. But here it was, one a.m. and Kara had ants in her pants. How could she ever hope to live a normal life if she couldn't simply *sleep*?

Right about now, that was all she wanted in the world. Not to close her eyes and be bombarded with memories, her mind going a mile a minute. Her heart aching. Facing a morning of fatigue and misery.

Stupid bed wasn't helping matters either—Chrissy being a stripper, one would think all those fives she had tucked in her thongs would enable her to afford something other than this lump-fest. Good grief, the woman's apartment was dump city. But the past few months, Chad had taken her for broke—and broke her.

Asshole Chad. Forget wanting to know the meaning of life, Kara just wanted to know why any woman would forgive a guy who beat her. God pray, this time Chrissy wouldn't. Not if Kara had anything to do about it.

After finding Chrissy close to dead when she didn't show for work—after so many times, she and all the girls knew what *that* meant—Kara had taken Chrissy under her wing and switched apartments with her, hoping to shade her from the jerkface's sweet-talking and apologies. At Kara's insistence, Chrissy's landlord told Chad she ran out on the rent, and since Chrissy was the lease holder, he had to go. Kara had moved in, giving them a cover story. Far as Chad was concerned, Chrissy had disappeared into thin air. She didn't leave the apartment for anything—which was driving her batty—and wouldn't either, not until Kara scraped together enough pennies so when Chrissy's face didn't look like an apple someone had played baseball with, she could fly her home to her mother in Ontario.

Just another worry that kept Kara tossing in her sheets until the wee hours of the night.

Well, she might as well get up. After this many years, she knew better than to try to remain in bed and fight it. The longer she stayed, the more nuts she drove herself. It'd always been that way, since she was ten, maybe eleven. Some people smoked. Some drank. Her? For the last seventeen, eighteen years, she ran the roads at night, trying to escape her demons. Searching for something, anything that could provide distraction. Some sort of peace. Atonement.

So go back, her mind urged, and she promptly shoved the thought away. A hundred times she'd picked up that phone but always came back to one reasoning—as if Shaun would want her now. She'd only humiliate herself.

Leaving him—lying to him in the first place—had been the biggest mistake she'd ever made. She accepted that. But what choice had her father left her, once all was said and done? He would've sent Shaun to jail and it would've been all her fault.

They say someone doesn't realize what they have until it's gone. God, how bitter-sweetly accurate that saying was. Regret defined her. There and only there, in Shaun's arms, had she ever known any sort of tranquility...true love. Certainly hadn't received it from her critical parents and her anger toward them is exactly why, when he refused to run off with her, she'd acted on total impulse, so used to approaching every confrontation by heaping on the attitude. Expecting the worst. Take the typical teen and multiply it by ten—yup, that'd been her.

She could only hope that in becoming a counselor, she could help kids before they became the screwed-up mess she'd been. Of course at times she had to worry it would be the blind leading the blind. Maybe she should stick to saving strippers—she'd helped out so many of her "coworkers" from various situations this past year they'd nicknamed her Hero. Drugs, money troubles, straight-talk advice, wardrobe malfunctions—being the secretary of a co-owned strip joint and carpet mart sure kept a woman awake at night.

Tossing the blankets off, Kara flung her feet to the cool, hard faux-wood flooring that lined the apartment, padding across uneven rifts in the linoleum and scattered laundry. She hit the wall switch. "This sucks," she muttered as light filled the small room. "What now?"

She could study more. After all, she did have an exam in her Saturday class tomorrow morning. But the thought just depressed her. Most likely she'd fail, too tired to remember anything despite her devotion—what a great birthday *that* would make for.

Watch TV? Ugh. As if that would be helpful in putting her to sleep. Besides, Chrissy's television wouldn't come in clear unless she took a fist to it and not for more than thirty seconds at that. Must've adapted to Chad.

Read? But she didn't have any good books on hand. Clean the mess she'd made of her friend's apartment? Not appealing. She'd save that for laundry day. Eat away her pain? Tempting. But the last thing she needed was to go from insomniac to binger.

Kara's gaze slid to the keys dangling from a hook by the door. What could it hurt? Sure, the doctor had told her not to, had claimed driving around at night wasn't safe nor conductive to relaxing for sleep. But what did the doctor know? Not a lot apparently, because here she was, wide awake and all he could offer as a solution was pills. And get addicted? No thank you. Her mother was a prime example of exactly why she didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't take pills. She had no desire to ever be that pathetic. Pretending to be perfect but slurring words over dinner most of the time, out of pure misery.

Kara just needed to learn to chill the old-fashioned way. But for tonight, her memories were shrouds. Her ghosts were haunting her. The mistakes she'd made. Lies she'd told. Lives she'd ruined. Shaun. *Charles*.

The thought came with a constricting of her chest. An overwhelming emotional pull. Shaky lips and brimming tears.

But this time...she couldn't allow the pain in her heart to drive her away. She couldn't keep denying what she needed to face.

Sure, she could go cruise the roads with no purpose, no pain. Take a night trip to nowhere, the cold air in her face, the wind in her hair. Free.

Or...she could go see Charles.

She'd tried everything else. Seriously, lavender sprigs? Come on.

She knew it was time that she took her psychologist's advice. That was why she'd moved to DC last year after all—to be close to his grave, to finally come to terms with her oldest brother's death in a way her parents had never permitted. That and to be closer to her other brothers in Virginia and Maryland, with whom she was finally starting to cultivate healthy adult relationships with.

But in the end, it always came back to Charles. The—unhealthy, according to Dr. Fields—guilt she held on to was eating her alive, and deep down, she knew she needed to find a way to absolve herself...to come to terms. But that was a lot easier said than done. So was going to his grave.

But she couldn't avoid this forever.

So okay. She'd do it. She'd go.

Crossing the room, she grabbed her coat and slipped it on over her stars and moons pajamas, snagging her keys and dragging in a heavy breath. God help her, give her strength. She could do this. *Had* to, because Kara wanted to be whole again like she wanted her next breath.

* * * * *

Up to her old tricks, apparently. God, just the sight of her.

Helmet on, pajama pants waving in the breeze, she pushed a shiny red moped from her dilapidated, brick apartment building, swung herself on and kick-started the engine.

Two seconds later she was jumping the curb and buzzing right past him.

"Where you off to, Trouble?" he murmured to himself. Some other midnight lover who had replaced him?

No. Shaun didn't want to think like that. Didn't want to acknowledge the jealously that streaked through him like lightning. Dammit, he had him a nice girlfriend. Real nice. Helluva cook, need he remind himself? Best lasagna he'd ever tasted. He was here to take Kara for help and that was that.

Most likely she was off scoring drugs anyway. Fuck.

He started the engine of the utility van Gloria had rented, thinking he'd follow her, stop her, then quickly changed his mind and cranked the keys back. She was already zipping around the corner. In this big jalopy, he couldn't keep up. Besides, he wouldn't exactly be discreet.

Better to use this opportunity to break in. With any luck, she'd return soon—before the sun came up and blew his cover.

Still intent on reasoning with her, he'd thought a time or ten about simply knocking on her door. Asking her out for a coffee. But if she was as resistant as she was to her mother, then that could possibly scare her off—and create witnesses. Better that she was cornered and he make a clean go of taking her—willing or not—without proof he'd ever been sniffing around.

So he'd shown up around eleven, figured he'd sneak in her apartment while she worked and await her return. If talking to her didn't cut it, he'd steal her away in the early morning hours when her neighbors were sleeping. Most likely, he'd figured, she'd be a little drunk or a little high, and therefore more manageable.

Instead, he'd called her apartment from a payphone to check if it was empty and she'd answered. So much for that plan. What kind of stripper didn't work on a Friday night?

A broke one living in the slums, he would imagine.

Pulling the keys from the ignition, Shaun tossed them in his book bag then removed a pair of black leather gloves and pulled them on. Slinging the backpack around his shoulders, he flipped his hoodie up and exited the vehicle, rushing, with his head down, across the potholed street. Adrenaline pulsed and a car alarm screamed in the night. A guy in baggy clothes, who Shaun assumed to be a dealer, rapped some hip-hop song to no one in particular, manning the corner, and Shaun tipped his head just barely enough for a glance, thankful the guy was choosing to look the other way. He imagined in a place like this people knew how to mind their own business.

Hopping onto the jagged sidewalk, he started to lunge for the front door when he noticed a quivering bum in a stairwell, covered with a newspaper.

So much for no witnesses this time of night—yet somehow he didn't think those men would be an issue.

Shaun stopped only long enough to fish a twenty from his wallet, still keeping his head down as he tossed the bill and punctuated in a low, dangerous voice, "You never saw me. Say you do and I'll come back and take that money out of your hide."

Inside, he revolted at the idea of his hard-earned cash going to booze or drugs, as it likely would, but there was nothing to be done about it. Saying a little prayer the guy would buy food instead, he pushed past the unlocked front entry, scanning the doors on the left side of a staircase and finding her apartment much easier than expected. Hers was the third and last at the end of the graffiti-covered hall—D. He'd no idea what'd happened to A but that was beside the point.

Making a dash to her door, he pulled out the pick gun Gloria had also turned him on to and made quick, confident work of figuring out the lock based on the instructional video he'd watched. Also Gloria's doing—the woman kind of scared him, she was so cunning.

The old knob gave far too easily—what a shithole this place was...Kara didn't even have a deadbolt—and he slid into the room, blood rushing and heart slamming as he flicked on the light. Thank God, no guy in the bed or dog to bark, as the detective had reported. The guy was good—thorough—Shaun would give him that.

Releasing the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, Shaun clicked the door shut behind him, inhaling her scent. Feminine yet spicy somehow. Like flowers and cinnamon rolled into one.

So here he was. Kara's apartment.

Disappointment for her seared through him. To say it wasn't much was the understatement of this century. A one-room scattered mess with a kitchen on one side and a bed on the other, a table in between, covered in books and paper. Peeling floral paper lined the walls and a bedside light flickered dangerously. Women's clothing was flung everywhere—the place was a literal fire hazard—but at least he could say the kitchen was clean and roaches hadn't been spotted scurrying from the light. He didn't know why but he walked forward, swinging open the fridge. No sooner than he spotted carrots, cheese and milk, he hurled it shut and released the handle as if it were fire, feeling like an intruder. And heck, that he was.

Expecting to find something against her besides the fact she didn't use a hamper, he took stock in the garments lining the floor, wondering at their normalcy. Simple jeans, cotton underwear, sweatshirts, a lot of dark colors. But nothing even remotely sexy.

"Huh." Slinging his book bag to a chair, he went to the open closet and bingo! Slut clothes galore. Red satin teddies and big feather boas. Black leather and white lace. Heels that could be labeled lethal.

And there he stood, gaping. Flicking through the outfits, hanger by hanger. Picturing Kara in each and every one.

Growing hard.

Growing extraordinarily frustrated. What in the hell was wrong with him?

Shelly, Shelly, Shelly, dammit! Curly blonde hair, pretty flowery dresses. Innocence. Lasagna!

Kara had turned into everything he would never want. So why was he standing here, with his pants popped like a tent, turned-on by the image of her in slutty attire?

Fuck! Tearing himself away, needing to convince himself of how undesirable she really was, he stormed to the bathroom, visually searching for some proof she was a drug addict too. The stripper part had been proven.

So where was her kit? *All* addicts had a kit. He slammed drawers and doors of the vanity, determined. Coming up empty-handed.

No needles, no mirrors lined with coke, no pipe. Hell, not even any risqué makeup lying about. No trashy-smelling perfume.

"Huh," he reiterated. She must keep all that at Custom Carpets then, right? As for her drug supplies, they must be on her. That was the most obvious explanation—she was out to score.

True. All of it was true.

Reality echoed around him. Wound in him like a rubber band stretched too far. About to snap. *True*, dammit.

His Kara.

God, he wished he'd found something else, anything else but that closet full of trashy attire. But what had he thought? That he'd come here and discover it was all a big misunderstanding? Of course not.

The detective was thorough. A regular professional. He *knew* that.

With an exasperated sigh, he towed a gloved hand through his hair, needing out of the bathroom. The place where most likely she did it—lined a mirror with coke and snorted through a dollar bill. Jammed needles in her arms until her eyes were rolling in the back of her head.

God, his Kara.

Miserable, he plopped down in a chair at the table. The knot in his throat was sickening as he glanced down at the paper lying in the open text book. What was this? Notes on childhood psychology? And there was her name...except...it wasn't. Kara *Weston*, scrawled in beautiful loopy penmanship. "I'll be."

Just seeing that name, signed so innocently, dredged up a whole new flood of old feelings. Cocking his head, he read the spines of the rest of the books lying in a pile. *Introduction to Sociology, Public Speaking* and *English Literature*. She was evidently going to college. Well, that was good. Relief—only partial—sank through his tensed muscles.

But why was she using his name?

He'd asked her, begged her nearly. *Marry you*? She'd practically laughed in his face. *You're the stupid one!*

Yeah he was. A regular fool who-

Footsteps thudded in the hall. "Oh shit!" He panicked, flying across the room to slap off the light then dropping to the floor on all fours in the pitch-dark, sweeping his hands to-and-fro as he scrambled to search out the table, diving between chairs.

* * * * *

"So I showed finally. Only took most of my life...a life that I have because of you." Teardrops fell silently on the dewed grass beneath her flattened palms and Kara made no attempt at holding them back. Her nails dug into the dirt, clutching at the soil that held him. "I'm so sorry, Charles. So sorry." Her unladylike snort filled the air as she sucked back a sob. "More sorry than you'll ever imagine."

The kicker was she couldn't completely remember the hideous crime she'd committed, only knew the tale that had been told to her and this strange sense of frustration, this yearning to cut free whenever she imagined herself there. She'd been three, born with "more annoying energy than ten little girls ever needed," her mother always said, and they'd been in the city visiting a museum.

Tedious boredom, irritating boredom. A clown handing out balloons across the street. A rush of excitement, tearing away from her mother. Forever etched in her mind, though medical science said she shouldn't recall, not at this age.

Charles, as the story went, had dashed after her, throwing her out of the way of a bus. Her oldest brother hadn't been so lucky though. His body crushed, he'd been pronounced dead on the scene.

Using the back of her hand, Kara swiped away the hot liquid trailing down her cheeks. "It should have been me. I've always known so." There was no emotion in her voice now, only sharp honesty. "Daddy hates me for your death, Mother always acted like I need to make up for it. Get better grades. *Perfect* grades," she mocked. "Wear pretty pink in all the latest fashions and date the sons of Daddy's friends. Achieve to be Miss America. Go to the Olympics with my gymnastics. Blah, blah, blah. Nothing I do is as good as Charles would've done, and I used to be *so* mad at you for that. Stupid, I know...you're dead because of me.

"I came here to make amends, Charles. I'm sorry, I just want you to know that. I'm sorry. I know you can't ever forgive me...you're dead. But I just needed to say it for once. I took your life, and Daddy was right to wish it was you and not me who had lived. Imagine that...me saying Daddy's right about anything."

Wind whipped around her, surprisingly warm for the chilly spring night, and Kara rose from her knees, hugging herself. "So that's that then. I'm gonna go...but just so you know, I've decided as long as I'm here in your place, I'll try to make good use of my life. In a sick way, Mother's right. I need to make up for your death. At least you shouldn't have to hate me for being a total wastoid."

And as she stood and walked away, she recalled something else, a memory buried so deep she didn't have the right to remember it. A big, sprawling backyard, Charles ranting, "Race me, squirt. Come on, race me." And she'd been faster than her bigger brother.

As least, he'd wanted her to think so.

Chapter Three

"He jests at scars that never felt a wound.
But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun."

- William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Poor Nan, sick again...

He'd woken up at three a.m. to the sound of her upchucking in the bedside trash can. The chemo was kicking her butt—and stressing Henry out so bad he was having chest pains. Refused to see a doctor though...swore it was heartburn.

Shaun couldn't wait until the treatments were over and Nan was better. All this misery was behind them.

The back door slammed shut behind him and he headed toward the garbage cans, glancing off into the starless night.

"Oh hell no." What was that?

A protective side as he'd never known flaring, Shaun Orp ditched the plastic bag, slammed down the metal lid and raced across the driveway toward the field. About a quarter mile down the dirt lane that ran out front the Westons' house—his new home, he had to remind himself—unmoving yellow headlights beamed. Shadows darted across Lucy's pasture.

Cow tippers.

Not on his life. Certainly not on Lucy's.

Damn fool kids. Probably drunk, and if there was one thing Shaun knew well, it was that drunk led to dangerous. In a flurry he yanked open the cab of Henry's truck, snagging the rifle that rested on a rack across the back window.

Not that he knew how to disengage the lock on the thing, but if these punks harmed Lucy, he'd learn. After what happened to Ricky...

A few football jerks from North High had tipped him in the middle of the night, breaking several of his ribs. And sure, he was just a beef steer but a young one all the same, and Henry had to put him down way before his time. That'd been the first time Shaun had ever witnessed a beast of any kind take a bullet to the head.

The next day, Shaun had gone to school and offered up a little payback in the cafeteria stairwell. Busted a couple of noses and was suspended for two weeks...not to bring up the beating a gang of the boys' friends later gave him.

Normally, that would've resulted in his foster parents giving him the boot. Nothing new by then. Back to the group home, back to the life he was used to. But Nan and Henry, bless their hearts, they were different. Loving Christians who were teaching him to be a better man, who tended his bruises and home-schooled him after that. Who'd just offered to adopt him despite Nan being sick, Henry having a weak heart—whether he wanted to admit it or not—and his being almost eighteen.

Arms pumping, he sprinted past the barn, shouting, "Hey! I've got you in my sights! Move and I'll shoot your pansy asses!"

Lesson learned the last time, but that didn't mean he couldn't scare the pants off whoever was in his field. Henry was busy caring for Nan and sure as shit didn't need any added stress to his heart right now, so it was up to Shaun to protect the farm. "I mean it! Move and I'll fill you so full of holes I'll park you out front as a fountain!"

"Okay, okay," came the voice of a chipmunk. Two hands poked above the cow's back. "I'm sorry. I surrender, see?"

From this distance, he could now make out the vehicle—a gleaming silver Rolls-Royce. Rich kids slummin' it. "Let's go, everyone else out."

Stepping around Lucy, Shaun made out the image of a tiny female, long, dark hair dancing in the breezy night, pale skin glowing in the moonlight. "Come on, out of the shadows."

"It's just me."

"Yeah right."

"No, it is. Can you maybe lower that? I'm pretty sure I'm not any threat to you."

Suddenly, as his gaze darted about the field, he realized it *was* just her. There went his plan to make the punks strip and drive home that way.

"You're tipping cows *alone*? Any idea how dangerous that is, you little brat?" Clearly taken aback, she opened her mouth to protest but Shaun wasn't in the mood to allow her a word in edgewise. "Forget *your* safety. *If* a little girl like you could manage to down Lucy—which more than likely you'd get trampled—do you have any idea the damage being shoved over in the dead of their sleep can do? That's traumatic, for one. Broken ribs, for another. Then the cow has to be put down. That's *murder*."

Head cocked, she just stared at him with those huge fathomless eyes...one second, two...as if waiting for the punch line or something. Then out of nowhere, she gave a shaky laugh, hands still in the air.

"It's not funny. You know, this cow provides fresh, hormone- and steroid-free organic milk to a very sick, very *good* lady who's fighting cancer. And you want to terrorize her, all in the name of a little fun?"

"Of course not." Instantly, she sobered, and this close, he could see the fear etched in her gaze, hear the nervous edge to her voice. "Of course it isn't funny. But seriously, you think I wanted to tip your cow?"

"What else would you be doing out here?"

"I just...I thought I'd say hi. Pet her. I'm really sorry."

It was then that he realized she was wearing her pajamas—pink-and-green-checkered with fur trim and slippers. "It's one in the morning."

"I'm painfully aware. Can I maybe—" She twitched her fingers, silently asking to put her hands down, and he realized only then that he still held her at gunpoint. Dropping the barrel, he granted her a nod and she lowered her arms slowly, brushing her palms over her nightclothes. "For real, though, I couldn't sleep, so I was just cruising around and saw the farm and though, hey, I'll pet a cow. It was stupid, I realize now. But I wouldn't hurt a fly. And I'm sorry to hear about your grandma."

"My foster mom." Clearing his throat, Shaun gave her running vehicle a glance, its headlights providing them with light. "So your daddy lets you ride around all night in his Royce? Are you even old enough to drive? Don't you have school?"

Just who the hell was this ethereal-like creature standing in his soon-to-be dad's field?

As Shaun took new stock in the woman-child standing before him, he began to think he was dreaming. Five foot if she was a day, she came just to his chest, more dark, flowing hair than anything, with an adorable heart-shaped face and eyes that danced her every emotion.

Her fragile shoulders lifted and fell. "Whatever. What my father doesn't know won't hurt him. And school's so boring my classes are the only thing that actually puts me to sleep."

"I guess I know that feeling. Until Nan started home-schooling me, my grades were in the toilet."

"Oh, I ace every test. That's not the problem."

"Take harder classes."

"I'm taking advanced placement. Even a few college courses."

Curiosity piqued, Shaun asked, "Let me get this straight. I'm standing in the presence of a super genius, insomniac car thief who wants to pet my cow?"

"Yup."

He had to laugh. "Go ahead then. Lucy loves it when you scratch behind her ears." His hand met hers on Lucy's nape, instant fireworks at the simple touch as he slowly guided her fingers to just the right spot...

At the scratching sound, Shaun jerked awake, banging his head on the table in the process. "Ow!" *Shit!* Dammit, he needed to be quiet! Kara was home!

The ticking of the clock and sound of the doorknob wiggling filled the dark room, and Shaun held his breath, praying his breaking in hadn't damaged the lock too much.

Had he really fallen asleep hiding under a table? After his initial scare, he'd been too paranoid to move and figured this spot was as good as any. Somehow—if the aching in his cheek told the correct story—he'd passed out with his face to the hard chair. No figuring, he supposed—after all, he hadn't slept in near forty-eight hours.

Finally the door swung open and the flick of the light switch followed. From his limited view, he watched as she pushed her moped inside, parking it directly in front of him and stomping down the kickstand before tossing her keys to the table. Without noticing him, she headed toward the bathroom, stripping off her clothes as she walked, and he was ever thankful his view was mostly blocked. The mind-boggling female sure didn't have any qualms about taking off her clothes, now did she?

Seconds later, he heard the rush of water and the hum of her singing. Such a beautiful, angelic voice... Kara had always seemed mystical to him. A being who appeared in the night, so unusual, so unique... Even now part of him wondered how she could be real.

Of course angels or fairies didn't take off their clothes for money. Or do drugs. And that was very real.

Blasted by a surge of anger—all he could think about was his mom, the way cocaine had destroyed her life, *his* life—he decided he couldn't hide himself forever. Time for her to face the music. Creeping from under the table, he quietly as possible set about tugging a nearby dresser in front of the door to block her only escape then unplugged and hid the phone in the kitchen cabinet. Snagging her keys, he zipped them in his book bag.

Then he went to the bed, scooting into the farthest most corner and crossing his legs. And he waited, time marked only by the slow tick of the clock and her endless chorus of melodic humming.

About ten minutes later she shut the water off. He listened to her step from the tub, waited with his heart bruising his ribs for her to enter the room. *Don't scream*, he practiced in his mind. *It's me, Shaun*.

Don't scream. It's me, Shaun. Over and over again he replayed the words he'd say as soon as she exited that bathroom.

But then she did. Waltzed right out and Shaun forgot to breathe. Couldn't think straight. Could only sit there and stare.

By all that was holy, Kara was in her birthday suit. Naked as the day she was born, the most sensual, arousing combination of fragile woman and unexpected curves he'd ever seen. Sloped hips. A tiny waist. High, perky breasts that he wanted to lather his mouth all over and suck on until the sun rose.

Really no qualms about nudity. *Shelly* would have had on a robe. A towel. Something! Not that he'd ever greeted her fresh out of the shower, but he didn't need to have sex with her to know she wouldn't parade around like that.

Don't scream. It's me, Shaun. That was his plan. But he couldn't speak, found himself paralyzed. Mesmerized.

A diamond now glistened in her navel, definitely not there previously, drawing his eyes to the flat plane of her belly. And, as the detective pictures had shown, she'd cut her hair short, shaved at the nape and cut on a sharp angle toward her chin, the wet and messy near-black strands highlighted with blonde streaks throughout.

But what struck him the most, struck him the hardest, was the place between her thighs—not waxed, not trimmed or shaven, nothing "custom" about it. Completely all natural.

Of course maybe that was the appeal. While many men liked a cropped crotch, many others, like him, wanted the real deal. A "carpet".

Searing jealously lodged in his throat as she strutted across the room, swooping to the floor to pick up an oddly innocent-looking, flowered nightgown and Shaun winced at the sight of her sweetheart-shaped ass. Her pink, glistening pussy.

She was so small, so shapely—that tiny body really packed a punch—and his blood pounded with the reminder that she was supposed to be *his*. All his.

Not anymore.

"No, this one's dirty, I think," she mumbled to herself and dropped the garment. As if she had some method of telling the clean from the not, given the amount of clothes strewn about? "Need something lighter anyway. Hopefully I can move back before I have to dig out my spring stuff."

Move back? Wait...was she thinking of returning home to her mother?

A thread of hope twisted through him. Maybe she wanted help.

Finally, as she swung upright and glanced at the dresser, freezing in that spot, he found the will to voice his rehearsed line. "Don't scream," he croaked. "It's me, Shaun."

She screamed anyway, a frantic little squeal that bounced off the walls as she whirled around, arms going every which way in an attempt to cover herself. "Oh. My. *God!* Shaun? *What* are you doing here?" she shrieked, lunging for a shirt on the floor. "Turn around! I'm naked!"

Yeah right. As if Shaun had any intention of giving her the opportunity to dash out a window or find something to whack him on the head with.

"Why cover yourself?" He gave a shrug as she draped the t-shirt in front of her like a curtain, hiding the tempting little body that had his cock straining against his jeans. "Why the modesty, I *know*." Hadn't hundreds, maybe thousands of other men seen her already? Reaching in his back pocket, painfully aware he was playing with fire, he pulled out his wallet. "So what'll get me a good show? Ten? Twenty?"

Instantly, the insults soured in his mouth, not seeming nearly as well-deserved as when the words had formed on his tongue. Kara might be treating herself like a whore, but for him to treat her like one?

Unacceptable. He was here to help her, not hurt her.

"You bastard. I don't know what you think you *know* but I wouldn't move this shirt for a million bucks! Now...get out!" That dark, liquid gaze, glistening with rage—and also bloodshot, he noticed—darted to the table, plainly looking for her keys then for the phone. But he hadn't missed her hesitation. "Out I said!"

So it was true. Just look at her eyes. She was high.

"Not until we have a little discussion." Shaun launched himself off the bed then, stalking toward her. "And certainly not without you."

"Why would I want to go anywhere with you?" Her voice trembled at the question, a total lie.

"Never said you would," came his cool response as he shirked his hoodie, tossing it over the back of a chair as if he planned to stick around a while but leaving on the black leather gloves that lent to mind someone who didn't want to leave fingerprints. "But you will."

Desire. Disdain. Determination. All three glimmered in the rich amber hue of Shaun's eyes as he devoured the distance between them and Kara stood there with her thumping heart attempting to escape out her throat, helpless at the sight of him, feeling as if she'd been smacked in the face and hit by a train all at once. "Fat chance. This is breaking and entering, you know?"

"I'm painfully aware."

"Well..." Kara found herself at a loss for words, she was so shocked. Not in a million years, no matter how much she yearned, did she actually expect to see him again. Now here she was, standing naked in Chrissy's dump of an apartment, and he'd just propositioned her as if she were nothing but a cheap piece of trash. Shaun, who'd always treated her as though she was something special. Loved her for her.

Anger and embarrassment seared her face, pulsing hot through her body. And yes, longing. Some undeniable piece of her wanted nothing more than to rush forward and fling herself into his arms. He looked good...damn good...wavy golden hair cut just short enough that the tousled strands fell into perfect disharmony, days-old stubble covering his strong jaw, creating a more manly appearance than she remembered. A little taller too, she thought, topping off the six-foot boy she remembered by at least a couple of inches. And he was definitely brawnier, ripped biceps and defined chest working beneath his black t-shirt as he swung his arms to match his long, stealthy stride.

As for fear, Kara felt none—she knew Shaun well enough to know he'd never hurt a hair on her head. All the same, she retreated a step, bumping the middle of her back against the dresser, demanding the questions coursing through her mind. "What do you want? Why are you here?"

Stopping in front of her, he hooked his muscled arms across his chest, staring down at her intently. "I'm here to save you."

Okay then. Kara glanced around, thinking he *looked* damn good, but had he lost his mind? "Well, can I at least get dressed first? I don't see any fire." Holding the shirt for dear life, she tried to brush past him but his gloved hand caught her arm, towing her back. Far too close for comfort.

"You think I'm gonna let you go in the bathroom to take another hit?" came his low snarl. "Think again."

"I'm sorry?" Now he was just rambling in riddles. He *must* be crazy. "You think I'm going to hit something? I assure you, I gave up punching walls years ago. Counterproductive, I find."

"Don't be coy with me. Poor little rich girl. You've a silver spoon shoved in your mouth and you chose to ruin your life like this? Smart as you are, you could make something of yourself." His fingers clenched a little firmer, proving his unwillingness to release her.

"I am making something of myself." She pointed to the books on the table. "I'm going to college."

Her arm seared in his leather grasp, the vicinity of his elbow to her barely covered breast, dizzying.

"No more games. I know."

That she was naked and nearly in his arms? That after so many years and no one who could compare, the effect was almost overwhelming? "Well, it's a good thing one of us has a clue what you're referring to because I'm totally at a loss."

"Then by all means, let me spell it out. I'm talking about the drugs. The stripping. How can you do those things to yourself?" His eyes searched hers, demanding answers to tall tales and her outrage flared as he yanked her arm straight, looking for track marks.

How dare he think she'd do those things? Oh, she could. Easily. Calvin had offered her a chance to dance likely hundreds of times the past year. Said she had the body for the job. Too bad she didn't have the right moves. Or personality. Boring or not, she preferred an office job—and that was even though it meant she made not nearly as much. As for the drugs? Shoot, if she wanted—which would be all too easy—her doc was more than pushy on the subject of doping her to sleep at night.

"That's why you're here? To accuse me of being...being a worthless tramp?" The moment those words left her mouth, she winced. The women she'd befriended the past year had hearts too. They were just confused. Messed up. As if Kara didn't know a thing or twenty about having one helluva screwed-up head?

"I don't think you're worthless. Or a tramp. But if what I hear is true, then I do know you're in trouble. Look at your eyes. They're bloodshot."

From crying. But she wouldn't tell him that...he didn't deserve an explanation. A feeling of inadequacy, all too familiar, trailed quickly by busy soldiers erecting a wall of defense, rocketed to the surface. "Oh yeah," she flipped off, "I'm just riding the magic carpet. Woohoo!"

"Kara, stop it. Be serious."

"No. No, I won't." All her life she'd spent it not being good enough. Unable to measure up to what Charles might have been, certainly not in her parents' opinion. They'd lost the good son for the bad daughter.

But Shaun, she realized in that moment...now she knew why she'd fallen in instant love with him. He didn't care, not about Charles or all her shortcomings. He'd been the one person ever in her life who loved her just for her. Called her a genius. An angel. A gift from God. No one had ever thought highly of her, like he had, an aspiration Kara worked hard for and experienced little these days, unless it was coming from a naked dance crew.

Deep down, some buried, bruised section of her psyche knew she deserved that. Was worthy of affection and praise, and longed simply to be appreciated. Cherished.

And now the one person in all the world who'd ever made her feel that way accused her of things she deliberately avoided? That stung, soul deep. Sure, she did handle the office work for a strip club. Sure, she could perhaps see where he'd forged his misunderstanding, especially given where she was staying. But just to assume the very worst, right off the bat? He could've *asked* what she was doing there. At least given her *some* sort of the benefit of doubt.

So whatever. Let him think how he wanted.

In fact... Over her modesty, she whipped the t-shirt she still clutched with her free hand across the room. "No sense in this then. Since you're so right."

"Fuck," he swore under his breath, looking away. "Kara, I just want to talk about this."

"Talk? Well, I think I'm in the mood to dance." Swaying back and forth, she bounced her boobs and wagged her butt, so angry she no longer cared about the fool she made of herself. Wouldn't change what he thought about her anyway. "Come on, baby, pull out those dollar bills." She bounced, she wiggled, she gyrated, mimicking the little movements she'd seen Chrissy and the others perform a hundred times. "Better make 'em fives. I'm worth that much, don't you think?"

"Stop it!" When she didn't listen, he switched hands and grabbed her left arm as well, dragging her in front of him and giving her a little shake. "Stop, I said!"

Breathing hard, Kara glared at him in seething resentment.

"Answer me this," he demanded. "Where were you tonight?"

Tears brimming in her eyes, Kara looked away. He didn't deserve to know.

"Kara, Kara..." Shaun whispered, leaning close, voice filled with aching. "I just want to help you. Let me help you."

"Help me? I don't *get* you. How did you find me?" she demanded weakly. "What are you doing here?" And then it hit her all at once. "One of my brothers?" Only Trent she truly trusted. Nathan...he was just so uptight at times, who could tell what he really thought of anyone? And Brenden was always threatening to send someone along to hogtie her and drag her home. But he said it jokingly...right? Disgust surfaced raw and hot. "My *mother*?"

Pulling back, Shaun swallowed. Studied her a moment. "A detective. I had to know you were all right. And you're not."

"Oh." All the antipathy in her fled. "Well, I am. Fine, that is. You have this all wrong, Shaun."

"Okay, we'll discuss everything. I promise." And then he gently kissed away a tear, his lips touching her more deeply inside than she had any desire to feel, and Kara jerked her gaze back to his, wanting to be furious. Wanting anything but to feel the need that swarmed her body, hot and demanding.

"Kara," came her name again, as if he couldn't say it enough. "God."

"Don't do this," she whimpered. "You really should get off me. We really should talk *now*."

Yet in that instant, Kara knew as damn good and well as he did that was the last thing she wanted.

Yes, breaking in here as he had, he'd earned himself a good slap to the face. Maybe a kick between the legs, considering. All the same, he'd come for her. Couldn't get her out of his mind, even after all these years. Same as her.

Blood pulsing and mind blurring the pesky details, her body responded primally to his—yes, dammit, she wanted him, and Kara didn't have it in her to fight as he hauled her to her tiptoes, leaning down so they came face-to-face.

Their gazes locked in battle and desire, his heavy inhalations—as if he were fighting with everything in him—matching hers. "Darn it, Kara. You're right. We shouldn't."

But it was exactly what he'd come here for.

This time, reading between his words was easy. All she had to do was glance in those smoldering, dark amber eyes to know he wanted to kiss her badly. Wanted his mouth on her, his body on her, and he wanted it as intensely as she did.

The wait reflected a lifetime, seconds that dragged by like years before his lips were on hers, molding softly, as if testing. Touching her with those gloved hands, caressing her, giving her every chance to really deny him. But Kara couldn't.

Anger exploding into passion, she arched up hungrily, grinding her mouth to his, demanding his kiss. The next thing she knew, he'd whipped off those gloves and their mouths and bodies were tangled in a furious embrace, tongues swooping, hands grabbing and exploring.

Unable to contain a raging compulsion to feel every last inch of him, she dove her hands under his t-shirt, exploring muscles as she kissed him and his calloused palms flattened her breasts, dragging over her nipples and causing them to pucker.

Continuing on, he swept her waist, inciting shivers along her spine as he captured her ass and squeezed, lifting, and Kara instinctively followed through on the action, leaping and wrapping her legs around him, not missing the hard, jeans-clad length that jutted at the juncture of her thighs. So close, so arousing.

Mouth working hers with little nibbles and sucks, tongue darting, he carried her to the bed, dumping her beneath him. Tearing free, his lips found her breast, licking around her nipple, tasting and flicking the pebbled bud and driving her to moan aloud and arch into him. God, how weak for him she was. How totally, insatiably she wanted him to take her. "Shaun, I don't believe you're real. How can this be happening?"

Really, she didn't. She was a fool for this, a fool for him. All the same, she whimpered for more.

"God, I've missed you. More than a reasonable man should." His stubble grated sensitive flesh as he moved to the other breast, applying the same treatment. Soft, scratchy, almost shocking at times. Worshipping with little forays of his tongue. "I must be insane."

"I'll second that. Certifiable."

"It must be catching then. You gave me my crazies, honey." With tiny pecks, he moved to the center of her chest, traveling lower, over the flat of her belly, past her diamond-accented navel, lips grazing the coarse, dark curls that covered her.

And there he stopped. Dead in his tracks. Had his rational side suddenly kicked in?

Wrenching away, he jumped off the bed as if it were on fire and cleared his throat. "I, um...I'm sorry. I can't do this. I'm seeing someone."

Dear God. He *what*? Every ion of her being still pulsed. Physically, she wanted to beg him to continue. But she refused, absolutely refused to stoop any lower. Already she'd played the whore for him, just as he expected.

A girlfriend? Why had he come here then?

The answer screamed at her—somehow he'd gotten it into his head she needed saving. She was nothing more than a charity case to him.

"Some great boyfriend you are, chasing down your ex to make out with her." Heart clamping, tears threatening, she rolled to her side, kicking out her feet and bouncing off the bed then making a race to the bathroom before he could stop her. "I'll just go smoke some crack then."

"Kara, wait! Dammit, wait!"

Fucking hell, could he have screwed this up any worse?

Rock-hard, Shaun grabbed a pillow from her bed and heaved it full force into the wall. Knotted a fist and swung at open air.

Shit.

About now he didn't trust himself to speak, much less be near her. Prayed she had some clothes in that bathroom and hadn't left them all lying throughout the rest of the apartment.

It took a lot to ruffle his feathers. Since leaving behind his teenager years, he wasn't normally a man of temper. Wasn't one to let emotion rule. But then, thus far, it wasn't his *big* head controlling the situation.

Yup, he felt like he was eighteen and at odds with the world again. Head over heels for a pretty girl and not making much sense. Just like last time.

He'd have to call it quits with Shelly now. Couldn't look her in her pretty blue eyes and rightly say he felt the same way anymore. Couldn't betray her any more than he had and no matter where his head was, his heart...

Well now, this was a fine pickle. Label him a masochist and toss him in a bed of sharp knives.

So much for his plan to reason with Kara—and keep his fair distance. It had gone right out the window the moment he set eyes on her. He wanted her too much. Needed to believe every sarcastic remark that came from her mouth—flippant comments designed to lead him to believe she was shocked…and innocent.

That had to be all an act, because her closet—*that* was very real. She was just being defensive. He'd hit the nail on the head and she just didn't want to admit out loud what she'd become. Face herself.

Any which way about it though, he should *not* have laid her out for the taking like that. For one, it was hardly conductive to treating her with respect, which she deserved, no matter what she'd done. Which she was in dire need of, considering the accusations he'd just thrust at her and she hadn't denied. Only confirmed in fact, in a roundabout way that made him *not* believe her.

Two, he hadn't come here with any intention of making love to her, nor was he such a sex maniac that he actually toted condoms around with him in his wallet like some guys did. He and Shelly had hardly gotten to the intimacy part yet. She was the type who waited for real commitment, and after Kara, he'd developed an inclination toward that line of thinking as well.

Unlike the majority of the male population, he saw sex as a very special, very intimate act designed for *love*rs. Love being the operative word. That was part Nan churching him up, he supposed, as well as part of his inexplicable yearning for a strong, healthy relationship—the kind that would lead to marriage and kids. A genuinely nice family like he'd never really had.

Minimal heartache that way too. Less likely a woman would change her mind if a ring was on her finger. His biggest mistake with Kara.

But the bottom line was, if he was going to take a woman, he was going to *mean* it. Wanted her to as well.

Which brought about reason three—he had no idea where he and Kara stood, but he *did* know that getting involved with her was a one-way road to heartache.

He just wished his calling off their heated little kissing session hadn't hurt her feelings, as it plainly had. She'd taken his stopping the wrong way—personally. Didn't sound too thrilled over the idea of him seeing someone either, if he wasn't mistaken. Damn well shouldn't have blurted that.

If "reasoning" with Kara was still on the table, he sure had a lot of making up to do. Talking *and* listening. Damn well couldn't let her know her mother had sent him—the look in her eyes had said it all. If she found out the truth, hell hath no fury.

Now calmed—in more ways than one—Shaun went to the bathroom door and knocked. "Kara, look...can we just start over?" When she didn't respond, he added, "Please? I know I said some harsh things, know I caught you off guard with all this. I admit I'm a total shithead at times."

He expected some flip comment. For her to let him have it.

Instead, silence.

Shaun jiggled the knob, finding it—of course—locked. "Kara, come on. Open up to me."

Still, silence.

"Kara? Kara!"

Only then did Shaun think about the small rectangular window above the toilet. Lord knew she was tiny enough, but she'd have to be an acrobat to launch herself out of it.

But then, he recalled, Kara *had* been an acrobat of sorts. In high school she'd been the star of her gymnastics team. Hence her talent for walking the pasture fence...

Chapter Four

"Is love a tender thing? It is too rough,
Too rude, too boist'rous; and it pricks like thorn."

– William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

That feeling—something wasn't right. It struck Nathan hard and fast come two a.m., and he bolted to sitting. Instinctively, his hand swept to the place where Susan should lay, finding the pressed Egyptian cotton cold and empty. Gone, he reminded himself. His wife had left him. It was for the best.

God, it was way too early for this.

The same ticking suspicions that had plagued him the past couple of days assaulted his mind. Mother, frantic he and his brothers drag Kara home. Utterly convinced Kara was stripping and doing drugs, which unless Kara was the most practiced liar in the world, Nathan didn't buy for a minute. Then suddenly, nothing. No more worries, no more pleading and insisting. A complete one-eighty.

Even though Nathan had spoken to Kara on Thursday, and upon hearing her laughing little voice fine and well, dismissed his worries, scheduling an appointment in his PDA for dinner the following week, something still wasn't sitting right.

All day Friday she hadn't answered a single one of his many calls. Probably thought he was smothering her—after all, they'd been distant in past years. He'd gotten married, she'd run off, and now suddenly he was making a habit of sticking his nose in her business as if he had no life and nothing better to do.

And maybe that was the problem. He didn't, what with Susan gone now. But was it such a crime for a brother to care about his little sister?

Fuck, he was starting to sound like Mother.

Tomorrow morning before work, he promised himself, fluffing his pillow. If she still wasn't answering, he'd head over to her apartment and make a fool of his worrywart self.

* * * * *

Panic struck Shaun like an explosion, and without bothering to bust into the bathroom and confirm her absence, he snagged his book bag, neglecting to gather his hoodie or gloves as he tossed the bag on his shoulders, and raced to the door, practically throwing the dresser from his way. Hating the two seconds it required to lock her door behind him but knowing in this sort of neighborhood it was necessary—lest he be responsible for her moped being stolen among other crimes.

Leaving behind plenty of fingerprints, he raced from the apartment building, heading toward the side alley. His timing was perfect. Just as he entered the dark passageway, there she was, exiting the other side. Holy shit, she was wearing nothing but a yellow shower curtain that billowed in the breeze, slippers flopping on her feet. Now he knew she was doped up.

Why else would she be fleeing? Practically naked at that? Jonesing for another hit, that's why.

Running full stride, he devoured the distance between them as Kara crossed the side street into another alley. She may have been the idol of many on the uneven bars and balance beam, but he had the legs to beat any track star by a mile—not that he'd ever had the chance to join the team, not with being shoved from foster home to foster home.

Feeling half man, half cheetah, he sprinted through the shadowy, garbage-lined alley, rapidly closing in on her, not bothering to stop and look before he sprinted across the near-empty boulevard that lay between them.

In no time he was upon her, tackling her midstride and locking his arms about her chest. "Gotcha!"

"Stop it! Let me go!"

Picking her up, kicking and screaming, he cornered her against the wall. Fury as he'd never known roiled through him. She'd just put herself in so much danger it near choked him to think about. A slum like this, with drug dealers and bums and surely perverts about, and she goes streaking through the streets in a shower curtain and furry slippers?

"Where do you think you're headed?" The low, threatening growl to his voice surprised him. Never had he been this outraged, this scared for someone. "I told you, you aren't going anywhere except with me."

With a whimper, she shoved at his chest and attempted to squirm beneath his hold. "I hate you!" she shrieked. "Let me go! Let me - "

Shaun clamped a hand over her mouth, not all too surprised when her teeth gnashed into skin.

No stranger to pain in his life, Shaun set his jaw and refused to pull back, spinning her around and pinning her back to his chest. "I can do this all day," he warned, turning her away from the wall and forcing her to walk ahead. "Can you?"

Her teeth loosened and she spat protests into his palm.

"Good, we see eye to eye." Not that he understood a muffled word of hers or would listen to a single thing she said at this point. There was only one reason for her to take off like she had—she had need of a fix so bad, she'd do anything. "Bite me again and *I* swear to God I'll turn you over my knee and spank you right here in the alley."

More muttered objections. Twisting and dragging her heels.

Done messing around—someone was likely to spot them—Shaun whisked her off her feet, the arm he slung around her torso easily lifting her feather weight several inches off the ground and allowing him to walk faster, despite her kicking legs and the thin plastic that crinkled, slippery in his grasp. Headed toward where he'd parked the van, he heard her slippers drop one by one and chalked them up to a loss—he wasn't about to chance losing her to save her footwear. Besides, should she escape, she wouldn't get far barefoot.

Several minutes later, he hurried across the street in front of her apartment building, ducking behind the van. "Don't move. Don't scream. Don't so much as breathe unless you want that drug dealer over there who's suddenly all eyes to come to your rescue. I'll remind you you're not exactly dressed for the ball, Cinderella. And it seems you've lost both your slippers." Ah, recognition. Under the buzzing, flickering streetlight above, fear flickered in her telling gaze and he set her on her feet, confident she'd come to terms with the danger she'd put herself in. She might escape him but chances weren't good she'd make it back to her apartment barefoot and mostly naked, still in one piece. "You know him, huh? Know he's a bad dude? I noticed, close as he was, you didn't run to him, now did you?"

She didn't answer of course, but the look in her eyes made terror wind in his gut. The one thing he hadn't come with was Henry's rifle—and he'd never ached more for the safety such a defense provided.

Quickly, he wrestled off the book bag and snagged his keys from the front pocket, hitting the unlock button. Then she was back in his arms and he was flinging open the rear doors, shoving her inside the dim interior and climbing in himself.

For safety reasons, his first priority was to relock the van. Then he threw the keys to the front floorboard and rummaged the book bag a second time, bringing out the bandana and two red sashes Gloria had provided. Each about six inches wide and made of some sort of silky material—so Kara's skin wouldn't chafe and leave evidence when he tied her up, Gloria had explained.

Breathing heavily, Kara just sat there, legs folded beneath her, staring at him in the darkness. Her gasp pierced the air as he threw down the supplies in front of her. "You are plumb loco! Come on! You have to know you can't get away with this."

"Sure I will. Already am, though it'd be a lot easier on you if you'd just cooperate." But first...

"You better take me back to my apartment! Or else! I mean it! My friends and boss are going to catch on quick! Call the cops! Seriously, they will, in a heartbeat! Where are you kidnapping me off to anyway? *Shaun*. Be reasonable!"

Ignoring her demands and protests and wasting no energy on niceties, he grabbed the shower curtain where she clutched it at her chest and tore it from her body, ignoring her shrieks of "No! No, no, no!" as he went to the front passenger window, rolling it down just far enough to chuck the sheet of plastic out. In the event her bindings didn't hold, she wouldn't be going anywhere naked.

Why the thought brought a surge of energy to his cock, he didn't know. Attempting to tamp down the arousal, he returned and lowered himself to his knees in front of her, rolling the bandana up.

"What—" Kara's voice hitched. "No! Oh my God, I'll cooperate, okay? I promise!"

"Fat chance of that." Shoving the bandana in her mouth, he looped it around her head, tying it in an unyielding knot. "Nope, both our lives are on the line here. I'm not taking any more chances."

"Bthbrb! Sonthbth!" Bastard! Son of a bitch!

Kara whipped her head back and forth, attempting to throw his hands off as he finished the knot. Fury roiled hot, evident in every ragged breath she drew.

How dare he?

As if to answer her silent wrath, he assured her in a warm, apologetic tone, "Just until we get out of city limits. Can't have you screaming now. Once we get somewhere safe, we'll work this out."

Oh right. That made it all just dandy then. As if he hadn't just ripped away her only means of clothing and gagged her! As if he didn't have a girlfriend! When she got free, she definitely had a big kick between the legs for him!

The stale taste of fabric rubbed between her teeth and tears threatened, but Kara refused their release. At this point, she really had *no* idea why he was doing this to her—schizophrenic, maybe?—but he didn't get to see her cry. Hear her beg. Not her, not ever.

With a rough hand to her shoulder, he pushed her facedown to the floor of the van and the coarse carpet scratched her breasts, abrading her nipples as she whimpered helplessly, hating herself, hating that she was reacting to him, her pussy pooling hot and wet with desire as he snagged her wrists in his seemingly gigantic, all-powerful hands and forced them to the small of her back, pinning them there.

More tears attempted to slip through her barrier and a sob escaped. Almost tenderly, he looped some sort of soft, silky fabric about her wrists several times then tied it, sweeping fingers over the arc of her buttocks, almost...petting her. Worshipping. "I really am sorry about this, Kara. I wanted it to go another way, I did, but I have to be sure you're safe."

Said the man kidnapping and tying her up. Gliding his fingers over her thigh; both terrifying and arousing her with his intimate touch.

What, was this his idea of some sort of sex game or something?

She could almost hope so. Never had she trembled more inside, felt more exposed and out of control. Then she wouldn't have to worry about whatever nutso reason he was *really* kidnapping her.

Not for love. Not for her brothers. Not for her mother.

Her dad, maybe? Ah, hell no!

Besides, Shaun was the very last person he'd turn to. After her father's wrath that last night before she ran away from home, she considered herself very lucky Shaun hadn't been thrown in jail and labeled a felon. Or shoot, six foot under.

"Shthn," she attempted, muscles clenching when his touch went suddenly still. "Pthse."

"I know. I *know* I shouldn't be touching you like this. *Fuck.*" His fingers jerked away as if he'd encountered fire. "Let's just get this over with."

He caught her ankles, securing a second silky-soft sash about them and pulling it tight. And then he rose to his feet, hunching over as he moved to the front of the van and ducked into the driver's seat. Leaving her there, a confused mess of physical aching and mental stress.

Screaming into the bandana with all her might as he revved the engine – knowing it was useless – Kara choked back emotion.

Assaulted by contrasting sensations, she writhed and tossed her body side to side. The roughness of the van's rug against her nipples, snagging her navel piercing, the silky softness of the fabric restraining her... The tingles infusing her naked body. The yearning... To want him, and not just with her body, after all he'd done—she was more than just trying to find a comfortable spot, she was searching for escape. From herself.

But Kara of all people knew that was impossible—she'd spent years running from the woman in the mirror. And now he trussed her up like an Amazon capture about to be loaded on a big stick and carried away to be sacrificed, and there was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. Nothing to do but face this, her desire for him included. Her desire for him especially.

Cripes, he wasn't even touching her! So why was it getting worse?

Frustrated, she hollered again.

"Look, you keep yelling like that you're going to hurt your throat. Just calm down and I promise we'll sort this out soon."

Why would he care? she wanted to demand. Did he not recall that she'd sped out of his life forever, more than eight years ago? That she'd broken his heart? That they hadn't seen hide nor hair of each other until today? And now—to quote him—he was here to save her?

For heaven's sake, she had a psychology test to study for. Clearly she was going to fail because *this* sure hadn't been on her study guide.

"Do you have any idea how badly you scared me? Running, in a *shower curtain*, down these mean city streets? Camelot this is not, princess."

In hindsight, not her most brilliant decision, but it was only a few blocks to her apartment. In a moment of heated anger and bruised ego, she'd figured she could reach her apartment easily and still had plenty of clothes there.

Shaun flicked on the radio, filling the interior with some country song then quickly punching the music off. Several more tense seconds clicked by.

"Look, Kara, I know you're mad at me right now and I don't blame you a lick. Not even when you left did I. But I think—hell, I *know*—any which way about it, you're in trouble. So try to trust me for once, okay?"

Try to trust me. A line she remembered well. If only he'd remove this bandana, she might admit she wish she'd done just that.

That, in essence, she *had* trusted him...but she hadn't been worthy of his confidence and had been too scared to tell him the truth, too afraid of what her parents would do.

Kinda hard having a one-sided conversation though.

"You thinking about that day too?"

She saw him glance in the rearview mirror but she gave no acknowledgement. He had, after all, thrown out her ball gown and magic slippers.

"I'd never known anyone like you, popping up night after night, week after week like you did. Got to be I drank a cup of coffee around ten, just so I was certain I wouldn't fall asleep and miss you. And then that night came. You remember what you said to me?"

It was then that Kara realized he wasn't referring to the day she left—and there could only be one night he spoke of. All the rest blurred together, a magical series of swimming and chatting and just being.

But *that* night. Leave it to a man to bring it up.

"'It's my birthday,' you said. Just arched up on your tiptoes, kissed me senseless and announced, 'There's only one thing I want.' Hit me by total surprise. You never even gave me a chance to get you a real present."

Until that day, he'd refused to touch her beyond a kiss, and she'd wanted the stubborn man beyond the pale. That was Shaun, always good, always pure in his intentions. Unlike her, a total corrupter. She'd selfishly done everything to tempt him that summer, but he'd stayed true—not until she was eighteen.

It's my birthday, she'd said. Lied.

It had been nearing fall and the night dew from a humid August day had clung to her flip-flopped feet and the grasses encompassing the pond where they always met, crickets chirping a melody. He'd agreed with a groan, kissing her and hiking her into his capable arms, carrying her with long, eager strides to the barn.

Her heart pounded furiously as she followed him up the ladder to the hayloft, hoisted the final step by his strong, firm grasp. There, in a pile of strewn hay, he'd laid her out and worshipped her body, inch by inch, slowly exploring and teasing until she'd nearly lost her mind. And then he'd taken her, so carefully, so sorry when she winced in pain.

Had there ever been anything more wonderful than giving herself to him? More glorious, more perfect? Afterward, she'd slept like a baby in his arms, lost in another world until he was forced to wake her so she could return home.

In the days that followed, the two had worried and wondered over their lack of protection that first time, but that hadn't stopped them from doing it again and again—those times with condoms of course.

"I really loved you, Trouble," Shaun drew her from her reverie. "Which is why I can't look the other direction now."

Tears cluttered on her lashes. March, not August. Her birthday was in March.

* * * * *

The little red light dinged a second time, causing Shaun's fingers to clench the wheel.

Gas. Good God, *gas*. So stupid! All Gloria's planning, thinking ahead—a rental van, a pick gun, hell, silk sashes to tie Kara up with—and he'd forgotten to simply fill up ahead of time. Dammit! The trip home would take about two hours and he had no choice but to stop before they hit the highway.

But it would be okay, right? It wasn't as if there were a lot of folks out this time of night. And she was tied up. Gagged. *Naked*. How he was handling her made him blanch but at least he could be certain Kara wasn't going anywhere. Was safe.

Dammit, she'd left him no choice.

Exactly—no choice. Streaking off through the streets as she had, she *had* to be high. Except...

Well, I'll be. There it was—Custom Carpets. Shaun gawked at the store front in disbelief. A huge window boasted a *Two Rooms For One* advertisement in bright orange and red and behind it, rolls of carpet lined one wall.

Not a nudie club. A carpet place.

Confusion, followed by zinging glee rolled like waves through him. Could it be? Kara wasn't stripping?

That or there was simply two places with the same name. But somehow he didn't think there was. Hell, maybe he didn't want to.

All the same, could he feel like more of an ass? And yet pure relief flowed through him. Speechless, he cast a glance at her in the rearview mirror, hardly surprised to find her trying to work her hands free.

Not stripping. Please let it be so.

But then three bright, blinking red triple *XXX*s caught his eye. Sitting kitty-corner to the carpet place, a strip joint. Neighbors. What were the odds of that?

Well hell.

Disappointment crashed. Reality presented itself. He was such a fool to still be hoping. Even if she weren't dancing -if—it still wouldn't change the fact he suspected she was high as a kite. Or that he'd officially kidnapped her.

Besides, why then would she have told her mother she was dancing?

That wasn't something a daughter lied about. Not normally. So maybe she was selling drugs and that was her cover story? But why wouldn't the detective put that in his report?

Again, he was right back to square one. But she could be working at the carpet place, some desperate part of him whispered.

A massive knot forming in his throat, he spotted a station just up ahead and pulled in behind the building, parking in the shadows and cranking off the engine.

Now what? *Had* anything changed anyway? Or had there ever been an issue in the first place?

Perhaps...just perhaps Gloria lied? Exaggerated? She had mentioned her husband's political career. Maybe the detective had read between the wrong lines.

Or perhaps it was just his old feelings for Kara, blinding his heart to the reality in front of him. Causing him not to believe the harsh comments she'd spat earlier. *I'll just go smoke some crack then*.

She'd admitted it just as much as she'd denied it. About the stripping too.

Okay, one step at a time, he told himself. After all, there *was* ten-thousand dollars and her word against his on the line. He *had* kidnapped her.

So, step one—no way was he using his credit card. He'd pay cash then pull up to the pumps. Less chance of being spotted that way, should she try to make a ruckus. Then they'd go to his house. But he wouldn't call her mother, not yet. He could get through to her, he was sure of it.

"I...um...I have to fill up," he told her, swinging open the driver's side door. "I'll buy you a soda. You want a candy bar maybe?" Maybe she had the munchies. Scoring brownie points however possible couldn't hurt, right?

She glared bullets.

"Hershey's are your favorite, right? And Mountain Rush?"

Fury reigned, shooting through the air. Piercing his heart.

"Okay then. No funny business. Remember where you're at...drug addicts and rapists sure as shit aren't gonna tuck tail and run at the sight of a pretty lady advertising all she's got and then some." In the darkness, he could feel her piercing glare. In and out, he told himself. No problem. "Be good, Kara. Please. If not for me, for chocolate."

To that Kara relented, giving a jerky nod, and Shaun slammed the door shut, the *beep, beep* of door locks filling the night. Dashing in the twenty-four-hour convenience store, he went straight to the counter, digging out his wallet. "Let's see..."

And right there next to the chewing gum, there they were. Condoms. Just glaring at him. Shouting his name. *Shit*. Nice family place this was.

But he just couldn't help himself.

It wasn't a thought. Not a decision. Just a split reaction—he saw them and grabbed them. A second later, in a wash of heat, it hit how inappropriate the action was. But it was too late for putting them back.

"And forty on pump..." With a glance out the window, he double-checked all the pumps were empty, as did the acne-mottled, unamused clerk, who gave him a weird look. "Pump one."

"Anything else for ya?" the guy answered so slowly — punching buttons on the cash register as if he had 'til next week — that Shaun nearly groaned. He was about to say, "No, hurry the hell up," when it hit him.

Crap. Her chocolate and soda. "Hershey bars. Where can I find them?"

Picking up the condoms and turning the box round and round, the clerk searched for a barcode. Only once he found it did he lazily lift his hand, pointing to the last aisle over. "On the bottom shelf, I think. We might be out."

Out of Hershey's? What sort of dump was this? By then Shaun had already plowed through two aisles where they *weren't*, thinking God almighty, have mercy.

* * * * *

The thing about silky sashes was the fabric was slippery. It glided. It gave. In other words, knots peeled free fairly easily. The moment he slammed the door and the van's alarm *beep*, *beep* filled the night, Kara hands were free and she went for her ankles.

Naked or not, she was getting the hell out of there ASAP.

Reunions were nice and all that, but she had a desperate friend depending on her and an unforgiving boss who anticipated her presence Monday afternoon—then there was her exam and she sure as shit wasn't spending her birthday being held hostage!

Since the son of a bitch and his *argh!* aggravating bandana—which she peeled from her head, having already freed her feet—weren't leaving much opportunity for conversation or explanation, she was hardly sticking around long enough for a chocolate bar or to discover whatever he intended or wanted to discuss. Uh-huh, no way. She'd take her chances streaking.

Besides, Kara had a plan – one he'd fed right into.

Now freed, she wrapped one silk sash about her small breasts and knotted it off. The other she made into a diaper of sorts, wrapping it about her legs and hips so the important parts were shielded. The bandana she tucked into the makeshift waist, creating a butt flap of sorts.

Not exactly Prada but it worked.

Enjoy your chocolate, asshole. Dashing to the door, Kara bolted, running across a grassy knoll and the nearly deserted road, full speed ahead toward the strip club, where one of the girls could provide her some clothes and a ride home after closing. Only when she'd made it to the door did she give pause and glance back, realizing Shaun had caught on quick and was hot on her trail.

Kidnapping Kara

Not about to take her chances with *him*, Kara ducked inside the dark, smoky interior.

Chapter Five

"That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."

- William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Adrenaline rushed. Embarrassment pounded. All around her, colorful lights pulsed and erotic music hammered. How the hell had the club gotten so damn *big*? Crowded? Every touch-and-go footstep as she flew past shiny chrome tables and black leather booths, filled with gawking men and adorned by confused strippers who glanced her way, as if to say "What the hell?" was its own unique brand of torture.

"Kelly! Kelly! Help!" Kara hissed, scurrying her way straight to the bar amidst a barrage of whistling and male murmurings. No doubt about it, the newest half-dressed female streaking rather unladylike for cover had officially been noticed. Was stealing the show. "Quick! You have to hide me!"

"Illusion," the blonde bartender shushed with a reprimanding side glance, reminding Kara she wasn't supposed to use their real names around customers. In nothing but a super slinky purple dress that rivaled a bathing suit, the recently retired dancer and brand-spanking new mother set the martini she'd been shaking down. Her artificially violet eyes drifted over her length then back up. "Good God, Hero," she burst out, "you get yourself wrapped up in some weird sex game or somethin'?"

"Sounds fun to me!" the perv waiting for his drink called.

"I'll get in on that!" another shouted.

Kara felt herself turning colors. "Illusion, please. You owe me."

A rare day when Kara cashed in on a favor. When Illusion had become pregnant, Kara had convinced her sexist boss to keep Illusion on by mention of the Family and Medical Leave Act. In all honesty, Kara really wasn't sure if would even legally apply, but Calvin fell for the ploy all the same, allowing Illusion to take over the club's cleaning and now tend bar.

Shoot...was that a mob gathering? "You look like you need unwrapped, sweet thing!"

"I'll say! Come 'ere, baby. I've got a twenty with your name on it!"

"Oh shush! This here's a nice lady!" Grabbing her by the arm, Illusion whirled her behind her, tucking her safely from view. "Are you all right? I've neva seen you in here after openin' before."

"I— Oh my God, here he comes. *Hide* me." Kara dove to the floor under the bar, tucking herself between the chest fridge and sink and waving her hands back and forth as if to motion, "Act like I'm not here."

The moments that ticked by were oxygenless. She imagined Shaun looking lost. Scanning the bar and taking in all the sexually clad ladies. Wondering just where in the hell she'd gotten off to. Wondering if he should just give up, stay and enjoy his surroundings.

Not Shaun, she scoffed at herself. He wasn't that type of guy. Still, she couldn't control the pang of jealously that zapped through her at the thought of him getting his eyes full of all those beautifully shaped women. Perfect on the outside at least.

Unlike her, wanting all around.

"Whoo-whee!" *Oh shit.* Calvin strode behind the bar, loud enough to wake the dead and stopped dead in his tracks in front of her. All pot-bellied, five foot four of him beamed a foolish grin complete with gold tooth and he *har-hared* a laugh that shook his toupee. A gleeful and garish cat who had finally caught its mouse. "Well, what have we here?"

Wincing, she waved her arms back and forth in a gesture of refutation, the daunting image of Shaun whirling their direction—zeroing in on her—flashing through her mind.

Great...oh great...just great.

Fairly certain her face had just turned a deep shade of maroon—and her cover had just been blown—Kara debated whether to stand and face the music and cringe further under the bar. For the moment though, she was so at a loss for words she couldn't move.

Talk about a night gone wrong.

Illusion, bless her heart, attempted to create a distraction, gliding in front of Calvin and fiddling with the collar of his pale pink shirt. "Cal, dear," she whispered in his ear seductively. "I-"

"Oh, leave off and do your job. And suck that gut in. Your baby fat is showing." Slapping Illusion's behind as he pushed her away, Calvin hunkered down on one knee, predictably dense. Annoyingly big-mouthed and sexist. Men and their one-track minds. "Well shoot, honey, ain't no call to be embarrassed. That outfit could use help, for sure." Icy-blue soulless eyes drank in her exposed body, offering no mercy. "Sweetheart, you should have let me know you's finally come around and decided to give dancing a try. Can't have you up there without any lessons. Of course," he rambled on, leaving her sputtering, "a little amateur act every once in a while is fun. The men enjoy a little show innocence here and there."

"Calvin, I'm not sure you und —"

"Tut-tut, darlin'. Illusion, I'll take over your spot for a few. You get Precious here in the back and dress her up proper. Nothing too revealing. We want to keep those men guessing—and paying. Let's see...I want her looking all leather and lace. Sweet and

nasty. Then you can take her for a turn around the floor, giving her the lowdown on how to interact with customers."

"I—" Kara started to protest but fell short. Go with it, some imp urged her. This was her ticket out from under the bar. Into some clothes, slutty and revealing though they would undoubtedly be. Out the back, if she wanted to run.

But to where? Home wasn't exactly two blocks at this point.

If she were really brave, she'd stay. Strut around in her costume until closing time and make Shaun pay like hell. And if he tried to give her what for?

Well, as a dancer, she had every right to demand the bouncers remove a man who was bothering her. And wouldn't it serve Shaun right?

Oh yes, so right. The bastard was so concerned she was taking her clothes off for a living? Well, in the course of one night, he'd driven her to it and had no one to thank but himself.

Only then did she dare rise to her feet, stretching tall. Now they were playing on her field. "Let's be clear, Calvin, I'm keeping my day job. But...trying on sexy new shoes every now and then can't hurt, right?"

Already he was busying himself, digging out a beer from the fridge. "Whatever you say, Precious. Whatever you say."

And so, just like that, she'd been dubbed her stage name, officially a stripper.

* * * * *

Where'd she go?

God help him, he was beginning to think he'd lost her completely. At this very moment she could be on the phone, calling the cops. By this time tomorrow he'd be wearing stripes and trading his chicken for toilet paper.

Maybe he should just get out of here. Go while the getting was good.

Go.

Except his feet were glued to the light-reflecting floor. His mind set on following through with this. Frantic, Shaun spun. He scanned, he searched. His heart pounded. She wasn't in the bathroom, wasn't anywhere he could see. All around, pretty ladies sashayed and showed off...battering his vision one after the next. Blondes, brunettes, redheads. Women on the stage, women on laps, women in cages. None were his Kara.

But she had to be somewhere. He was one hundred percent sure he'd seen her slip in here—which figured, only confirming his suspicions. Kara was a stripper. Definitely needed his help.

Come on, where are you at?

In the next instant, Shaun blinked and realized his prayers had been answered. *There!* Not but ten feet away, being led up a short set of stairs adjacent to the center

stage, in nothing but those damn sashes. The vixen had wound them around her and wrapped herself up like a mummy. A very sexy, ninety-percent-exposed mummy.

Instinct took over and he charged forth, calling out, "Kara!" Probably not the smartest move he'd ever made, but Shaun wasn't about to let her slip away a second time. "Kara, wait! Please!"

There was a hitch to her next step but no pause.

"Kara, come on. I'm begging you!"

The stripper clutching her arm giggled. "Ohhh girl. First night dancin', Hero, and you've already got a fan. Yummy too! And you told me yesterday you're not cut out for this!" Tossing sleek blonde hair his direction, she *tsk-tsked*. "But you'll have to wait your turn! Dancers only past the stairs."

With that, they disappeared behind a heavy red curtain.

"First night?" Shaun spluttered, completely knocked for six. "Wait a sec! What's that mean?"

Only Kara's head popped out, a sinister smile playing across her lips. "Since my reputation precedes me, I'm thinking, what the hey? Why not? Since I've been *stripped* anyway, maybe I should give dancing a try. Right after I get done smoking my crack and hitting a bong, that is."

It smacked him across the face him all at once then. That she wasn't really a stripper. That he—as well as the detective and her mother—had been wrong about that least that. That Blondey had called her Hero. The college books that lined her table. The insult he'd witnessed, more than once, in her eyes.

Somehow, Kara knew this blonde women but not as a "coworker". As a hero.

What was going on here? "Kara, I'm sorry. Please talk to me."

"Dressed like this?" She shot him of reproach. "Why, surely you prefer your strippers in more appealing attire? I'm only trying to meet your expectations."

A punch to the gut might as well have doubled him over. She *meant* to actually go through with this? "Kara, I know you're mad about the shower curtain. You want to punish me. I get that."

"Ah, ladies and gents, he's not so dense after all. See you in a few."

"But you can't—"

The curtains whipped shut, blocking him out. Oh yes she could, apparently.

Like hell! Not on his watch! No way, no how! "Kara!"

His eardrums echoed in pain from the intense pounding of his heart. His fists clenched at empty air, yearning to grab on to her. Haul her over his shoulder and make like a bandit.

"Kara! Seriously!"

But she as gone. No longer responding. Off doing God knew what behind that curtain. For all he knew, she *was* smoking crack. Or sneaking out the back.

Or actually getting duded up, every real intention of coming back out here turned stripper. *Watch me*.

Ah yes, how could he expect anything less from her, willful woman extraordinaire?

Dammit. What now? Every masculine instinct in him raged to go after her.

Battling urges so primal he had to curl his toes in his boots to keep his feet from moving forward, he forced himself a step backward. *Down boy*.

Cool. He had to play this cool.

Much as he wanted to bust in after her, he knew he'd only be charged by the bodyguards and kicked out. A sixth sense—likely the same damn idiot one that had convinced him it was kosher to leave her bound in the van—told him to wait her out.

But she had said, "See you in a few!" and Shaun honestly believed she wanted to stick it to him. Rub the stripper issue in his face.

Because that was Kara. Kara, who really wasn't a stripper.

Dumbfounded, apprehension pulsing through him, winding with rash, mindblurring jealousy, Shaun compelled himself to stuff his hands in his pockets and gravitate to the nearest booth. To sit the hell down, kick one leg over the other and stick this out, eyes glued to the stairs until, in a body-startling kick to the brain, he realized she very well might not be returning to work the floor—she might be headed directly to the stage.

Something he was not going to allow.

Frantically, his gaze darted back and forth like ping-pong balls between the large all-metal arena in the center that reflected multicolored lights, featuring the standard pole mid-podium, currently being climbed by a curly-haired vixen, and the two runways that angled left and right alongside it, also boosting female-clad poles. The curtain she'd disappeared behind. The front door, wondering if he should make a break for it.

Sick in the stomach. Anticipating.

Waiting, wondering just what in the hell she was up to.

Why he was still here, damn near chancing it all? Only he couldn't leave. Refused to tuck tail and run now, this far in. He'd come here on a mission, and by God, he'd fulfill it. Not for Gloria. Maybe not even for Kara.

Shaun wasn't such a fool that he didn't realize his actions were largely personal.

The seconds ticked by, turning into minutes, each one punctuated by memories. Kara then, Kara now. All he'd put her through tonight.

His blood raced, his most primal manly instincts raged. What was she doing? Trying on the entire wardrobe?

Probably had dashed out the back door and vanished by now.

Twenty more seconds and he was busting through that curtain.

Nineteen, eighteen...

"Hey there, sexy. You look lonely."

Seventeen...

Shaun glanced to the left to find a dark-haired, fair-skinned female preening against the back of the booth for his attention. Instantly her coloring reminded him of Kara and he winced, looking away. "I'm fine, thanks."

Sixteen...

"It's Ecstasy," she purred. Dressed scantly in shiny, bright turquoise—her outfit little more than straps that also served to remind him of Kara and those wide ribbons she'd wrapped around herself—the pushy woman sashayed in front of him, flat belly in his face. Hips rolling. Breasts thrusting. "Bet I can make you feel better. Turn that frown upside down. Lift another area as well."

Shaun gulped, able to smell her. What was she wearing, pussy perfume? Talk about too close for comfort—damn woman was blocking his view. "I just want to sit alone. Thanks." Seventeen... Oh shit, or was it fifteen?

"A drink then?" she persisted. "Tell me what you want, baby, and I'll fetch it."

"I just want to watch. That's all." And finish counting down the seconds until he could give himself permission to break crazy on this joint. "Thanks but no thanks."

At that, she finally stopped swinging that body and thrusting those hips. Thank God. "Sweetheart, paying customers only." Her overly plucked, etched-in eyebrows arched expectantly, as if threatening him.

Translation, fork out some ones and fives – or scat.

What was taking Kara so damn long? Shaun cleared his throat, thinking this was so not part of his plan. "Yeah, well, uh...you're not my type."

"Shoulda just said so." A finger played at her fuchsia lips. "Whatda ya want? A blonde? Oh! Bet you're the auburn type. I think Cinnamon is looking for a lap to ride."

Anything to get rid of her. Once she turned her back, he was darting backstage. Forget twenty seconds, it had damn near been a minute. "Okay, great."

"Don't go disappearing now."

He wouldn't recommend she count on it. He had a "Hero" to rescue, whether she wanted it or not—

Hero. Shaun leapt after the woman's retreating, swaying backside that the bright blue did not cover near enough. "Wait!"

Opportunity had come knocking and hard, he realized. Why not answer? He would bet all his ones and fives could buy more than body moves. If Kara wouldn't give him straight answers, maybe he could buy them from Ecstasy here.

With mascaraed, catlike eyes she slanted a questioning glance over her shoulder just as he dug his wallet from his jeans' pocket and sat back down. One by one he plucked his lower bills, lining them on the table. Just that easily, her attention was secured. "That girl who just went backstage."

One thin, dark brow arced, mouth quirking. "Hero?"

"Hero, right. You mind telling me why you call her that?"

Almost looking hesitant, she considered the money he'd just laid out on the table. "Calvin says I don't get paid for standing around and talking. It's against the rules."

Fabulous.

"Then by all means, dance." He waggled a one. "But dance and answer. Calvin won't know the difference."

Again she considered, appearing awfully unsure. "Did that asshole Chad send you? Because I don't know where Chrissy is."

"Who?"

Glancing over him, something suddenly motivated her—likely that Calvin fellow she spoke of—and she started rocking her body in beat to the music. Practically humping his thigh. "Whatda ya want with Kara if Chad ain't your motivation?"

Breasts twitching, she grabbed at his hair, dragging sharp nails through the strands.

"Kara and I are old flames. I'm concerned about her." Tucking the dollar in the waistband of her hot pants, he gave her a gentle shove back for some space and pulled another from the pile he'd arranged on the table, waving it as he again asked, "So tell me how you know her. Why you call her Hero."

"Still in love with her you mean?" Ecstasy chuckled a throaty little giggle and leaned low, peeling aside her bra for him to tuck the money in. Shaun did, chore that it was. "I have no idea what Kara is doing going backstage tonight and," she added with a threatening point of sharp, glossy fuchsia fingernail, "I better not find out you're forcing her. She's too good for this line of work. Ain't hard like us."

"We're definitely on the same wavelength there. If anything I'm trying to make Kara not dance."

Ecstasy went back to gyrating, twirling to wag that butt in his face as she spoke. "So she works here. Does the paperwork and inventory and whatnot." Wiggle, wiggle, shake, shake. But Shaun saw nothing but the redness brimming Kara's eyes earlier when he'd first kidnapped her, question after question assaulting his brain. Dammit, he had to figure her out, so what if it took blowing his every last buck on a stripper who was hardly turning him on? "But Calvin's been telling her a while she should dance too. How much money she'd make. Hasn't so much as nibbled at the bait though."

"And you girls call her Hero because?"

Shaun tucked another bill in her waistband as she turned, resuming stretching and shaking that lithe, hot body, and Shaun was almost mad he wasn't getting hard. Just went to prove how deep-seated Kara was in his mind, even after all this time.

It never would've worked with Shelly anyway. God help him, there was only one woman for him and she was currently backstage at a strip joint, either getting high or painting her face up like a whore.

"Kara's a regular angel sans wings. Any one of us needs help, she's there without us even asking. Helped Illusion through her pregnancy, even went to the docs with her. Gave me a place to sleep a few nights when my man kicked me out. Hell, that girl would give a bum on the street her last buck. Seen her do it. She even..." For only an instant, there was a hitch to Ecstasy's dancing. "Never mind."

Aha! He was on to something. "What?"

"Well, that Chad jerk I mentioned. He was beating on Chrissy real bad. No one knows what happened to Chrissy but we're all sure Kara helped her. Somehow." Totally not what he expected but Shaun paid out anyway as she again opened her "bra" for the cash. "Like I said, a regular angel, Hero is. So you better not do her wrong."

"What about dru-" Shaun turned back to the table for another five and realized he was all out. Crap.

"Better hit the ATM, honey." Ecstasy put a foot between them faster than he could whip out his wallet and fetch the second to last bill in there. A fifty, it figured.

"What'll this get me?" Gloria damn well better refund him. She promised expenses after all. "Five answers? Six?"

"Six and a whole lot more."

Moving fully over his lap, she began thrusting those hips, chafing her crotch over his zipper area. Ruffling his hair and putting her breasts in his face. "Now what were you asking?"

"Kara," he choked out as she buried his nose in those creamy-white mounds and waggled. *Crap.* Why couldn't Ecstasy just answer without all the body rubbing? "You called her a wingless angel. Meaning she has faults. Would those be—*shit.*"

Face buried in another woman's breasts—who was holding his hair hostage—it had to be *then* that he spotted Kara tiptoeing down those stairs one uncertain step at a time. *Then* that his cock finally sprang to life, hard as steel at the sight. In an almost flowy—but clingy in all the places it counted—*way* mini dress better labeled a dressy shirt, which boosted a plunging neckline and slit sleeves, banded with stretchy hot pink lace both at mid-forearm and just below her crotch, she appeared from behind the curtain. Knocked his socks right off.

Her hair had been fluffed wildly. Heavy makeup applied. Around her neck she'd fashioned those silk sashes all together into a bow, a long strand trailing. A very feminine collar and leash.

If anyone had ever looked like hell in heels, it was her and he was so damn turnedon by the sight, he forgot all about the chest his face was currently smothered in.

"Holy smokes..." he muffled into boob.

Those slim, tanned legs were bare, causing his heart to stutter and skip beats, her feet cocooned in chunky, clear sandals that defied gravity with—his guess—at least sixinch supports of see-through plastic. "Glass" slippers.

She was sending him a message—loud and clear—and chilling goose bumps erupted over his arms and back at the sight those shoes. He'd driven her to this. Stripped her of her pride and pushed her past her own limits.

It was just too damn bad for her that—while those shoes might've carried plenty of significance—she damn well couldn't walk in them, obvious from the gingerly little steps she took, Illusion urging her to, "Focus ahead. Just glide."

Just glide. Kara was trying her best to find her center of gravity. To let her body flow.

But then she caught sight of him—enjoying a lap dance from Ecstasy—and Kara lost all sense of balance. Face first she went careening off the second step to land flat on her face, as did her plan to totally ignore him. To stick it to him by flirting with every Joe Schmoe in the joint.

"Umphh!" Kara cried, the breath momentarily knocked from her. Stunned by the unexpected turn of events, the sharp pang lancing through her ribs. Instead of *her* driving *him* nuts, he'd just flat knocked her on her face.

"Oh my God, Ka-Precious!" Illusion quickly corrected, dipping to a crouching position next to her. "Are you hurt? Should I call for help?"

As if everyone in the damn place didn't have their eyes on her right now? Including him, if he could pull his face from Ecstasy's breasts!

"Damn shoes," she gasped as fire flooded her face. Well, this was one way to garner attention. "I'm fine. No worries."

Kara scrambled to get up but before she could find her feet, powerful hands locked under her arms. Held her there. "Whoa there. Take a minute and breathe."

"I'm fine." Reason screamed at her to wrench free of those big, strong arms that supported her as if she weighed nothing, to run the opposite direction.

Then she glanced up and noticed Ecstasy standing there, sticking her nose in her business. Hovering near *her* man. *The pawing slut!* The green-eyed monster struck through Kara, sharp and blinding.

But she had no right to be so jealous. No right to be so angry. No right to feel this way.

He *wasn't* hers. Not anymore.

Or so she told herself.

She should right herself. Stand on her own two feet and start mingling the club. Teach him a lesson.

Let him go back to Ecstasy or whoever he wanted.

But it didn't surpass Kara that there wasn't much punishment in him receiving another lap dance. Oh no, in fact, it was her who would do the suffering.

Despite all her intelligence, Kara found herself agreeing with a silent nod as he insisted, "We should sit you down a minute. Here we go." Her spine Jell-O as he swept her off her feet, into his arms and snuggled her close to his chest, carrying her to the nearest empty booth. His scent, that of sunshine and straw and some random cologne that defined rugged male, permeated her senses. His strength, the easy way he whisked her in his arms, infused every corner of her mind.

The hell of it was, her sudden agreeability was out of nothing but pure unadulterated jealously. Five minutes ago he'd been shelling out for a striptease and now she was putty in his hands? If that wasn't backward of her, what was?

"Oh my God, Precious." Illusion scampered behind them. "Look, whoever you are, you should put her down. Calvin won't like it."

"Calvin can go to hell."

"Oh, can I now?" Speak of the devil, by the time Shaun was gently setting her in one of the circular booths, there Calvin was, ready to stink up a storm. "What's going on here? Back off."

Putting some starch in her spine—hard to do when so much skin was exposed and Shaun's hands just lingered dangerously on her arms—Kara forced a smile and waved him off. "It's fine, Calvin. I fell. He helped me up."

"Well, he needs to back off my newest girl unless he wants to start shelling out! Or be kicked out!"

An embarrassing statement that earned her a pointed glare, one that dared her to respond, and when she didn't, Shaun rose to full height but didn't budge an inch, blocking Calvin from access to her. "The lady and I need to speak, alone."

"Lady? That there's no lady. Precious is a stripper and you pay for her attentions. Policy is hands off!"

"She is a lady, my lady, and she isn't a stripper! Tell him, Kara."

Oh boy.

"Also policy. No boyfriends or husbands!" Calvin attempted to shoulder Shaun out of the way, and when he didn't immediately didn't budge, motioned hurriedly for one of the bouncers.

"No!" Kara cried. God, what was wrong with her? Him being kicked out was a dream come true. Wasn't it? "Let him stay, just a few minutes, Calvin. I'd like to hear what he has to say."

"Policy, darlin'," he insisted, now joined by Hank, a crossed-armed muscle freak who snatched up Shaun by the elbow and she could tell by the glare in his amber gaze, reflecting heatedly in the club's blinking lights, that he wasn't leaving without a fight. Worse, Hank—Kara swore Calvin hired oversized freaks to make up for his own size shortcomings—was notorious for roughing up out-of-hand customers.

Not that she should care. He deserved it. But all the same, against her better judgment, Kara blurted, "Okay, fine. I'll leave with him and you can forget about me

dancing." Not that she actually planned to anyway. Whipping her legs over the side, she scooted from the booth. "Get out of my way!"

Instantly, in the face of defeat, those "rules" could be bent. "No, no, no," Calvin cooed. "No need for that. Five minutes, no problem." Poking a stubby finger, he whirled around to Shaun. "Hands off!"

The crowd cleared, leaving only her and him amidst curious glances from both male customers and the other strippers.

"Well," Kara sighed.

"Well."

Awkwardly, he motioned for her to scoot over and slid into the booth against squeaky black leather. "You're all right then?" It was obvious from his open hand that struggled midair with where to go, that he wanted to touch her. Wrap her in his embrace.

Not quite ready for that, Kara scooted over a few inches.

"Besides being humiliated to my very core?" Not just over the fall either. Now that her anger had started to subside, it occurred she had no idea how she was going to show her face at work come Monday. No idea how she'd ever live this down.

"Kara, listen, I'm sorry, okay? I was only paying that woman to dance so I could ply her for information about you." That hovering hand emphasized his every word. "Just...please."

Kara wasn't sure if she should be madder at that or relieved. Though she scooted another inch away, she wanted nothing more than to slide toward him, snuggle under that arm and vow all was forgiven. Being this close to him after this long—his scent, his strength, his masculine presence—was more than intoxicating. It was unnerving.

"Sorry is as sorry does." Biting down on her lower lip, Kara briefly considered letting her pride run the show. That would be the easy route—having him removed from the club. But she'd also never sleep again. Would regret losing him a second time, twice as much. "Should I expect to wake up tomorrow morning to find you prepared to ambush me from my closet and hogtie me, or are you finally finished with this whole 'kidnapping' fiasco? Ready to give me some explanations?"

Chapter Six

"Tempt not a desperate man."

– William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

"Explanations." A heavy sigh dragged from Shaun as he plowed his hand through his hair. Under his breath, he swore, raising Kara's brows. "Where do I start?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps with why you searched me out?"

Why, indeed. If he told her the truth now, he could fully expect her to bolt from the table directly to onstage. Back at the apartment earlier, she'd demanded to know if her mother had put him up to this, and considering the narrowing of her eyes at the question, when she found out that was indeed the case, it wouldn't be pretty.

He'd have to tell her eventually. Just not here, not now when he was finally getting through to her. "Why...I guess it was stupid really."

"And?"

Shaun scrambled for an explanation. "I, uh...well. Shelly and I—"

"Your girlfriend?"

"Past tense, all considering. Can't in good conscience keep what all's happened tonight from her. But something was starting there, at least I'd hoped it was. Before it went any further, I guess...some part of me had to know whatever happened to you."

In some way, he supposed that was partially the truth. In the end, he'd agreed to help Gloria because deep down, he *did* still think of Kara—and often. Whatever had happened, he cared a lot about her. Had to know she was okay.

And as much as he'd boosted up Shelly in his mind, things between them weren't like they should be. A certain magic was missing.

Simply put, Shelly wasn't Kara.

"So, I hired a detective," he lied further, digging himself quite a hole to crawl out of later. "Figured it would end there, knowing you were okay."

"And what he found made it appear I was living in the slums. Working at a strip club. I suppose, considering the circumstances..." There was a softening of her sweet voice that filled him with hope anew. Maybe talking this over was still an option. "I can see where he developed such notions. Still, *you* could have asked me out for coffee. Gotten a lot more fact than fiction that way." To his great relief, Kara cracked a little smile. Leaned—though maybe he was just being hopeful—ever so slightly his direction. "Know what I'm saying?"

"When you're right," he admitted. "But back up a sec. So you *don't* live in the slums?"

Maybe that explained the stripper clothes then. Unless Kara just had a penchant for dressing nasty in the bedroom.

And why did that thought send shivers skittering along his cock? Talk about bad timing.

"No." Following that admission, her voice hushed and she ducked her head, motioning for him to move closer—an invitation that gave him just the excuse he needed to drape his arm around her. *Just try to stop me, Calvin.* "One of the women who works here...her boyfriend was beating on her pretty bad. Long story short, she's hiding out at my apartment while I stay in hers. That was part of the reason I was so desperate to get away. Someone has to look in on her. Keep her chin up."

"I'll be." Had he ever had her pegged wrong. Enchanted to know she harbored such goodwill, Shaun ran a finger over her smooth, blushed cheek, beginning to wonder just how much more there was to this little woman who was hands-down the sexiest slip of a thing he'd ever held in his arms. Just who had she become? "So, Miss Secretary, like I've heard, you're a regular hero. Counseling pregnant woman, aiding women on the run."

Holding her lush little body so close, his eyes devouring the sight of her in that...outfit, Shaun couldn't stop his cock from responding, no matter how inappropriate the moment.

"Rumor has it. Guess we have that in common." She gave a shrug that bobbed the crests of those bared breasts and her slow smile spread a little farther, pushing into her cheeks, those dark, mascaraed eyes twinkling brilliantly. "I may not appreciate the tactics you engaged in but I'm glad you still care."

"Me too." God, was he ever. Unable to help himself, his finger moved to her lips, tenderly tracing their outline as his eyes drifted to that compact, curvaceous body draped in shiny black imitation silk and pink lace. Now that they were moving past the anger and apologies and his fear she'd jump onstage, it was damn near impossible for him to concentrate on anything but what she was wearing. Those sashes knotted around her neck. "You know...I have to admit, you looking mighty appealing in that getup. I had no idea I could be so turned-on."

That statement drew her eyes south and she made an "O" with her mouth, noting the shaft that pushed against his jeans. "You're damn distracting, woman."

"Well." She beamed, grinning. "I'm not exactly dressed for the ball."

"Or going for coffee either." Shaun knew things were hardly perfect between them, not nearly resolved, but she was so damn enthralling he couldn't resist the temptation to lean down and brush a kiss to her cheek. "Unless it's at your place."

"Calvin will have your ass," she laughed.

"Calvin can go to hell. Should have thought of that before he had you put this on. All I want at the moment is to kiss you and kiss you right." To scoot her onto his lap, carry her out of there and erase all the years between them thoroughly and properly.

"No touching my ass."

She wasn't his, not anymore. His sensible side knew that. But something in him screamed *Mine!* Insisted he *touch*, and his finger drifted along her jaw, down her neck.

Not once in the past eight years could he have imagined wanting her back as much as he did in that moment.

"Seriously. You'll start a riot." Tone shaky, she coiled out from under his arm and put annoying distance between them. "Shaun."

"What?"

"We shouldn't...you know. As nice as it would be to just kiss and make up, I'm thinking maybe we aren't quite done talking yet."

"I know. Dammit, I know, and I'm sorry. Me and my constant apologies." Leaning down, he released a deep exhalation, focusing straight ahead. What in Sam Hill was wrong with him? Zero to sixty in five point two.

She was right. So right.

The detective had been wrong about her occupation. But that was only part of the equation.

Every instinct told him Kara wasn't using drugs. Her eyes didn't look glossy or red right now. She appeared coherent and reasonable.

What's more, the more he thought on it, drugs just didn't seem like her.

But then she gave an uncomfortable squirm in her seat, darting her gaze about as she warned, "Our five minutes are more than up." In a rush, was she? Old doubts came roaring to the surface as he remembered how shifty his mother had become when she started to need a hit bad.

Kara *had* fallen flat on her face coming out of the dressing room. *Had* stayed back there forever. *Had* been out this morning at one a.m.

What were really the chances she was clean *and* not taking her clothes off for a living? Slightly too good to be true in his life experience.

"Forget about Calvin." Shaun figured he would do best to start small and work the conversation up to that. "How did you end up employed by a scum like him anyway?"

"I started at Custom Carpets, working sales. Calvin owns that too. I suppose he took a shine to me because after a few months he offered to let me handle the books for both companies." Again she squirmed, clearing her throat, something about her voice stressed. "And sure, it's not exactly Bloomingdale's. But it pays well and white-collar jobs, earning good money, are few and far between for someone who hasn't finished her education. Which he works around too. Lets me decide my own hours so I can attend school full-time."

No hints there. She sounded so completely on the up-and-up. Shaun had a sick feeling it was too good to be true.

"So enough about me. How's your Nan?"

In instant reaction, his eyes fell. His throat clogged up. "Not long after you left," was all he could manage.

"Oh Shaun, I'm so sorry." Almost hesitantly, her hand reached for his. Seconds ticked by, his revelation hovering in the air, their fingers barely touching. "Shaun, really. Let's get out of here. I should head backstage, put on a robe so we can leave." Again her gaze dashed toward the bar then returned to meet his. "If you *promise* no more of this kidnapping crap, I'll let you drive me home and we can finish working things out there."

"On my honor." Shaun made the sign of the cross. "But first...we're being open right?" At least now that he'd gotten his paws off her. "Setting everything straight? Being honest and forthright?" *You're not*, his conscience reminded.

Wrinkles in her forehead furrowed, as if to say What now? "I guess..."

"So, was there any other reason you were desperate to get away? Anything else you need to be straight with me about?"

He watched her throat muscles constrict. A dark glare that crossed her eyes. "Such as?"

His heart thrummed, everything in him screaming this was *not* the question to ask. That he didn't *need* to ask it.

But for hell's sake, he was getting all wrapped up in her again and knew all too well—Kara was trouble. Unpredictable. *Heartache*.

Kara looked about as comfortable as a fish out of water.

What if? He could stand a lot of things, a lot of surprises she might cast his way. But drugs? Better to be upfront from the start and face the issues head-on.

"Ahem. Glo—" Shit. Double clearing his throat then coughing to give the impression his throat had gone dry, he quickly corrected. "Gloncy, the detective. Well...if you were like my mother, I couldn't stand that and he seemed pretty convinced you are." Gloncy?

"Using drugs you mean?"

"You are fidgety as all get out all of a sudden."

"Oh. I see. How could I forget?" Her voice was strained and she threw her hands into frustrated fists that hit the table. "I'm loose *and* I'm an addict."

"I'm not saying, just askin' —"

Her jaw tensed, throat worked. He could just see her chewing over her words. The decision whether or not to sock him square in the nose. "For your information, yes, I'm uncomfortable because, as you so scrupulously pointed out, I'm sitting here in a strip club scantily dressed, with my *taken* ex who just got a lap dance and my boss who is anticipating I'll soon be taking it all off."

"Taken? Shelly and I-"

"Are technically still together. And let's face it, if it weren't for you thinking I was some charity case—drug addict!—you'd probably *marry* her!" she spat the last few words as if they were poison.

"I-"

Of all the bad timing in the world, as if to prove her point, Calvin chose that moment to kick on some funky new music, announcing over the loudspeakers that it was time for their newest dancer to show off her goods. A bright pink spotlight beamed down on Kara's contorted face and a cacophony of cheers, whoops and hollers insisted she hit the stage.

She didn't have to say it. He could see it in her eyes. Pure rebellion. *Watch me*.

True to nature, he'd yet again jammed his foot in his mouth with one stupid question spinning all their progress a complete one-eighty, and she had every intention of making him pay for it.

"Kara, no." Hell no. He had no intention of budging and letting her out of this booth. Too bad for him the U-shaped seat allowed an escape route. "Kara! We aren't finished yet! Don't do this!" I don't love Shelly. I love you!

But he couldn't say it out loud. Was too terrified of where such foolishness would land him—face first in a pile of shitty heartbreak.

"Well, take a number." Landing on shaky feet, in one sweeping movement she motioned across the bar, preening and thrusting those pert breasts out. "My audience awaits."

"Like hell it does! You can't do this." Shaun jumped to his feet, making a grab for her and a murmur rolled through their audience.

Jerking away from him, Kara turned her back. "Watch me."

And there it was.

Why did she have to have such an off-keel temper? Look at her! Wobbling unsteadily, trying to balance herself and play off sexy all at once. She couldn't even walk in those shoes, much less dance! *Exactly why she fell, dumbass!*

Ah, he was a jackass in human form—and a jackass about to make his billionth mistake of the night. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. It might land him in jail but he *refused* to let her go through with this.

"So we're back to this," he called after her, scanning the crowd. Spotting the bouncers and gauging his chances.

"We're back to this!" Not over his rotting body buried six feet under. He'd burn in hell—or, more realistically, rot in jail first.

Seething with protective instincts, Shaun planted his feet firmly. Breathing like a raging bull, he battled for control. Take it easy, he warned himself, don't cause a scene too soon. He let her *think* she was getting her way, teetering precariously as she balanced her way closer and closer to the stage.

But there wasn't a chance Kara was taking her clothes off.

Only when she hit those famed steps did he allow himself to charge forth, full speed ahead, praying to God his suspicions were true and there was a back exit. Fire safety rules there had to be. His dumb luck said different.

He was only a step behind her when Kara finally clued in and whirled around, mouth gaping.

Before she knew what hit her, Shaun leaned low, barreled her over his shoulder and dove behind the curtain with her screaming the whole way. "You promised! You swore!"

In a blur, Shaun tore through the dressing room to the rear exit, jostling her with every step, seeming to knock the cries from her. "You made the sign of the cross! On your honor!"

As cool air blasted her face—not to mention her exposed bottom—she shrieked to high heaven. Struggling, beating on his back. In repayment, he smacked her bottom sharply. "Enough!"

His barking command only made her fight harder.

Not this, not again!

To think, she'd trusted him. Had given him the benefit of the doubt...which he surely wasn't giving her.

High, her ass! How dare he after all he'd been wrong about?

It was as if he *wanted* something to be wrong with her. Wanted some excuse. Wanted to do exactly this.

Or maybe he just was wishing for a reason not to like her so he could be with "Shelly". Barf. The woman was probably *perfect*!

"You better let me go! Calvin will call the cops!" One of her "glass slippers" plunked to the pavement then the other, with a shattering crack.

"By then we'll be long gone." The bastard had her legs in a vise grip. Behaved as if her fists were naught but pebbles bouncing off his back as he sprinted across the trafficfree highway and over the grassy knoll back to the van.

Releasing one leg, he swung open the rear door. Unceremoniously, she found herself being dumped inside and went scrambling to get away. Kara realized then that this wasn't the time for word games or pride. He might really take her God knew where, and Chrissy was counting on her! "You idiot!" she screeched, "I was calling your bluff! I wasn't really going to dance! I was going for the robe!"

"Too late now." With one swift movement, he yanked free the bow at her neck. "We'll never know now, will we?"

"I know I hate you!"

Kara let loose a barrage of kicking and punching as he wrestled her to the ground, flipped her over and *pop*, *pop*, *pop*! delivered three sharp slaps to her bottom that stung like a mother and made her freeze in place. "Shaun!"

She could not believe he'd just done that. Spanked her, as he'd warned earlier.

"Behave!" he threatened with a low growl. "Or I swear I'll give you the thrashing you deserve."

What the hell?

And *what* was that strange sensation coursing through her, filling her body with tingly heat, the oddest tickling in her stomach as he went about securing her arms into place then her feet? "Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

To that question he stuffed the bandana back in her mouth.

It happened so damn fast this time, Kara went from shock to lying there, pinned beneath him, gagged and bound, her butt smarting in admonition.

Taking her underarm, Shaun hauled her up. "Have a seat and try to behave."

Yeah right. Kara knew all her arguing in the world wouldn't stop him—but she had no intention of making it easy on him.

Forget the gas he so badly needed, an eighth of a tank could get him at least fifty, sixty miles from here. Any minute, he thoroughly expected to see the flashing blues and reds. It would be a miracle if he slipped away.

Why he was kidnapping the woman currently battling her bounds and spewing muffled curses at him—knowing now that she was neither a stripper nor on drugs—he refused to think about.

He'd done it. It was done.

Shaun clambered to the front of the van and seated himself. By the time he started the engine and shifted in gear, she was scooting on her knees to the front passenger seat. "Kara. Stay in the back."

Jamming on the gas, Shaun threw up one hand, cranking the wheel with the other. "Go! Don't give me any crap!"

Hoisting herself awkwardly into the front passenger seat, she settled herself as if getting comfortable for the long haul.

"What in the heck do you think you're doing?" Someone would see her! Like the cops when they passed by!

"Thving da sheet."

Having a seat. Holy crud. In the distance he heard sirens. Hitching a thumb to the rear, he sped down the mostly empty road toward freedom. "I swear, *the back*. Now."

With a lift to her chin, he swore she grinned beneath that bandana. "Nwo."

"Yes!" A mile and a quarter to the highway exit. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His fists clenched. "I'm not playing, Kara. Go before I pull over and throttle you!"

But he was in no position to do that—and she knew it.

Ignoring him, she watched out the window and the muscles in his jaw ticced. This was not going well—there was nothing he could do but drive on and pray. Pray like hell.

"Don't mess with me, Kara!" he shouted again, heart pounding. "Go! I swear to God, if I have to stop this vehicle..."

No acknowledgement.

"Do you want me to go to jail?" Dumb question. Clearly, she was trying to get him busted. "This isn't a game! I could lose my farm!" What the hell had he been thinking back there in the club? When Gloria propositioned him in the first place? He *knew* he shouldn't have agreed to this! Not in a million years! "Get. In. The. Back! *Now!*"

It felt as if his life were flashing before his eyes. He'd chanced everything on "saving" her...everything, and for what? Kara wasn't taking off her clothes. Wasn't on drugs.

Either the detective had been far off base...or Gloria had concocted the whole damn story.

One thing he knew for damn sure—not once but twice he'd just gone caveman crazy on Kara Morgan, a woman who would never bow down to defeat. *Never*. Fucking hell, he knew that! Now he faced losing his home, everything Nan and Henry had lived for, and prison time.

Fuming, he cruised down the highway, constantly watching his speed. Promising himself no one could see her—it was dark, the windows were tinted.

But *he* could see her. Spine arched from the wrists bound at the small of her back. The curve of her buttocks peeking out from beneath that slip of a stripper dress, the way the silky fabric clung to the slant of her small waist and slim hips. Those mouthwatering breasts, pointy nipples evident.

That glare.

Every passing of headlights that flashed off her smooth, pale skin made him wince.

Demands, threats, pleading—"Get in the back," and "I mean it or else,"—seemed to have become his mantra. Kara plain ignored him. Several more miles he drove on the edge of his seat. Why did the damn woman have to be so impossible? So damn sexy?

Finally, he could take it no more—he *had* to get her out of sight. He'd just have to drag her back there himself. Hog tie her if that's what it took.

Veering off an exit—this one thankfully more rural—he pulled into a deserted Park and Ride designated for carpoolers, not bothering to shut off the engine as he tapped on the interior light. "Let's go. I mean it." When she refused to budge, he snagged her under the arms, dragging her kicking and fighting, her muffled protests filling the vehicle's interior.

"Kara, stop it!" Hauling her to the back, he wrestled her to floor, pinning her shoulders as her body thrashed beneath him. "Stop! Calm down!"

More muted squeals and writhing between his legs, getting him rock-hard. Steel with need.

"God, Kara." Against his better judgment, he reached up and tugged the bandana from her mouth, over her chin. "Scream and it goes right back into place."

Breathing heavy, she ceased fighting and stared at him in shock in the dim light, clearly waiting for what was next.

"If you would stop acting so nutty it wouldn't have to be like this."

Her silent glare told him *he* was the nutty one.

All that drama, and when he removed the gag, she became quiet as a mouse? "Well, say something."

Again nothing but those big eyes, tearing straight through to his soul. Spurring strong feelings of guilt.

"I was wrong, okay?" he whispered. "When I get around you I can't think straight. I lose it." Painfully, he was aware of her body trapped beneath his. The sexy attire clinging to her body, sliding against his rough clothes. The hard drumming of her heart mirroring his own. The aching silence she left him with.

In that moment, Shaun struggled as he'd never struggled in his life. So much that his teeth chattered and his fingers shook as he swept them along the fragile angle of her cheekbone. It was primal, seated deep within, this desire for her. This need to be with her, to love her, to *make* love to her, even after all these years. He couldn't shake it.

At long last she spoke, leaning into his fingers as they traced circles over her cheeks, murmuring a quaky, "What are you doing?"

Catching the sides of her face, he threaded his fingers through her hair, lifting her head to his. "What I should have done earlier, dammit."

Chapter Seven

"For stony limits cannot hold love out, And what love can do that dares love attempt." — William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

His lips swept down on her then, full and deep, tongue plunging past her teeth. No softness, no slight hesitation to gauge her feelings as Shaun normally would have. Only pure, intent hunger that she couldn't deny. A mouth that wanted to own her, almost bruising in its capture. Certainly demanding.

A whimper escaped, drowned out by his hungry groan, and instinct warred within Kara, her pride shrieking this was wrong. Her heart insisting it was right. Oh so right.

Damn him for having any power over her still. Before setting eyes on him again, she'd wanted this with all her heart. Today, she could shoot him for it. If her wrists weren't still bound, she'd give him a good smack across the face like he'd smacked her bottom. Three times, the asshole.

At the mental reminder, something unknown coursed through her. Settled in the oddest places.

Her lower abdomen. Her breasts. Her pussy.

Dammit, what was that? The kiss she returned was pure struggle, physically and emotionally furious as she matched the suction he applied, thrusting her tongue against his. She wanted him too much, hated that she did. He'd humiliated her. Treated her worse than a misbehaved child. Accused her of awful things.

To that thought, she bit down on the full flesh of his lip and his grunt of pain echoed in the cavern of her mouth. The grasp on her cropped hair tugged at her scalp as he tore his mouth free, cursing and grabbing her by the biceps, forcing her to turn onto her stomach. Trapping her. "Why would you do that, Kara?"

"Fuck you." The slippery fabric of her "dress" slid across the rough flooring, catching on her belly piercing. A wicked combination of nice and naughty. Creating frissons of sensitivity that rushed along her spine as her arms strained at the infuriating reminder that she was still restrained. Still completely at his mercy. Again turned-on by it.

Despite herself, she couldn't contain her needy whimper.

"Fuck you? Or fuck me?" His lips found her nape, applying little bites and sharp sucks in punishment for the one she'd dealt him. For her harsh words. "I know you want me," he ground out between nips, undoubtedly leaving his mark as she mewed at both his mouth and his words. "So tell me to stop and I will."

Really, it was that easy?

But of course it was. The kidnappings and insults aside, this was still Shaun. Still the greatest, nicest, most-upstanding guy on the planet. Maybe she had no idea where this side of him had come from, no clue why he was doing this, but he wouldn't actually force her, hurt her.

Untie her? No. Let her go? Not a chance.

But cease this seduction? She would bank on it.

One word. One simple word to a situation so complicated it made her shake in both anger and emotion.

One word. But her voice was nowhere to be found. Instead, Kara sucked in a sharp, empty breath.

"Tell me," he demanded with another slight nibble. "Come on, where's it at?"

Instead, she jerked her head to the side, thrashing against him, desperate to escape the pulsing in her pussy that only grew worse with each second she spent prone and pinned beneath him.

"Oh, I get it. You're purposely pushing me...and yet...you want me. You're trying to goad me." Scooting back, he captured her by the thighs and forced her to her knees, hiking the stripper wear to her waist, his hand twisting in her short hair and pinning her face to the coarse carpet. "You sure did settle down earlier when I smacked that sweet ass of yours. Is that how you want it? Rough? It this what it takes with you now?"

With his free hand, he reached around and caught her breast, which had fallen from the billowy bodice, squeezing with calloused fingers. "To satisfy you? Lord knows a man can't talk to you!"

"Yes!" Because she didn't want this to be nice. Sweet or lovely or anything like it. Let him fuck her. Let him be rough, nasty even. "Yes, dammit, okay?"

Just don't let her heart shred into bits and bits. Just don't let her feel the pain of losing him again. Those endless nights she ran until her moped was drained of gas, facing beautiful, poignant dawns of orange and pink, sobbing and sleepless. Pining for what she had destroyed. Knowing she didn't remotely deserve his love.

Especially now.

Shelly, however—Kara would almost guarantee—did. That's what bugged her the most about him being with another woman, the feeling of inferiority.

Sandpapery fingers captured her nipple, rolling it between his grasp harshly. Pinching and firing strikes of electricity through her. "So, that's what I was doing wrong all along, huh?" Tugging sharply, he drew down on her nipple, causing her to cry out. Inciting tremors to quake through her pussy, clit swollen and pulsing. "Too nice, too perfectly pleasant for you, right, Kara?"

"You said it!" Squeezing her eyes to the truth, she concentrated on mind-shattering arousal. How desperately she wanted him. Not the memories, the images of his gentle touch, his soft, sultry kisses. How loved and adored he made her feel. "I like my men

with a taste of excitement. So don't be a bore!" she choked out, hating herself for the hurtful, sarcastic words. But they were the only wall she had. Her only defense. Faking a yawn, she thrust her butt against him. "Come on, fuck me! If you've got it in you."

"Men?" With a frustrated groan, blunt nails scraped the underside of her breast, down her belly, and rounded her hip, landing with a *thwack!* to her butt. Fingers flexing into flesh, scraping as if trying to grasp for sanity. Instigating themselves between her pussy folds, aligning with her slit. All at once plunging inside. Pulling back, a third digit joined the pack then slammed into her once again. "That boring, Trouble?"

Lodged deep inside, his fingers crooked and swirled, finding the sensitive spot that made her tense with the urge to scream as he applied pressure and his other hand dragged slowly free of her hair. He released the short, silky strands in what seemed like slow motion, his fingers meandering a hot, pressing path down her back until he clutched butt muscle possessively.

"Well? This enough for you?" *Thwack, thwack, thwack!* Her pussy contracted, needing to draw him in, needing more. "Answer me! Thinking about other men now?"

She'd learned long ago not to bother. No one could compare—especially now. Oh sure, she'd dated...a long line of self-centered, immature or otherwise annoying jerks.

No one good, no one Shaun.

Precisely why, in this moment, she'd do anything, take anything, with the exception of him being the nice guy who touched her heart to the very core.

"That all you got? Come on. Make me scream!" she ground out between teeth, breathing heavily through her nose. Thrashing as he leaned over her back, driving his fingers higher, thumb sliding between her butt cheeks. His hard cock pressed against her flank and he growled an angry-sounding, "Careful. You might just push me too far."

Trembles cascaded down her spine at the threat, but she wouldn't show it. Couldn't let him know the effect he had on her. So, she laughed. Giggled all light and airy, retorting with, "You? Yeah right." She bucked against him, demanding, "Give me all you've got, if you can, Mr. Never Be Bad."

"You know, I think you've no idea what you're getting yourself into," he warned with his own chuckle. His fingers swirled deep inside her, sending her boat rocking.

"Ohhhh. Sounds tempting." To keep from showing how very close to the edge she was, stupidly she dared, "Surprise me!" Truth be told, she wasn't too sure she could swallow her own medicine.

Was starting to worry this was *not* the way to hold him at bay.

Suddenly, in a flash of dawning, the night's events zipped through her mind. Shaun throwing her over his shoulder and kidnapping her. Shaun tearing away the shower curtain, fingers touching her sensually as he tied her up. Shaun threatening to spank her. Indeed, cracking that palm to the flat of her ass. Shaun completely unexpected.

Tonight he wasn't exactly the poster boy for "nice guy".

And she may have just dug herself a hole deeper than she could climb out of.

She certainly didn't expect the furious growl that emanated from him. The fingers that wrenched free, the desperate aching and hot shame that pulsed as he rummaged in the van behind her, and she listened to the sounds of him struggling out of his clothes and tearing open a box.

Kara struggled against the sashes knotting her wrists and feet, tied tighter this time. Hopeless. There was no going back, not now.

As if she could ever reverse the deep pulsing within her. Escape the gnawing hunger that had shadowed her for years.

Moments later, he placed his condom-clad cock at her entry as his thumb swept the folds of her cunt, dragging moisture back to her anus. With one forceful thrust, he drove to the hilt with no preamble, shattering into her like an earthquake, his thumb simultaneously pushing into her anus, driving her to cry out at the unanticipated invasion.

Holy crap, what was he doing? And why was she clenching around him—pussy and butt—eager for more? Whimpering in helpless delight?

He was right. No idea. No clue at all.

His other hand harshly smacked her ass, harder this time as if he meant it, searing her skin.

And then all three were crashing in unison. Palm to her flank, *thwack, thwack, thwack!* Thumb pushing, spreading her with gut-clenching sensation. Long shaft thrusting strong and steady, sparing not an inch. The growls that emanated from him almost animalistic.

"How's that, Kara?" He slammed into her. *Thwack, thwack, thawack!* "That enough for you?"

"Yes," came her whimper. "Don't stop. Please."

Ecstasy burned hot, every square inch of her body aflame. Riddled with tingles. No longer did she want more as a means of goading him. She just *wanted* more.

His cock glided her higher and higher, his thumb pressing into her possessively, the punishment that he delivered to her left cheek sharp little slaps that somehow felt good.

Her world blurred, lines she'd long ago drawn in concrete and sworn not to cross just *poof!* Disappeared as she came violently, pussy shuddering around him, body rippling with intensity, plagued with the overwhelming need to pour her heart out, to tell him how much she loved him.

To finally stop fighting—herself more than him. At that moment, Kara just didn't have it in her anymore to be angry or flippant or to keep those walls erect.

And God help her, she let go. Screamed his name over and over. Softly cried her love until she was melting like wax under the hot, flickering flame of a candle. Finished yet somehow not, her body moving in rhythm to his, slowing and grasping. Unintentionally inviting something sweeter.

"Oh Kara." His fingers curled into her butt, spreading her open as his thumb retreated and was replaced with two fingers that dipped within. "God, I'm a fool for you."

Slowing his hips, he measured his strokes, matching them with the fingers that sank and spread inside the snug, clamping depths of her rectum. Working in circles, exploring her body, her every little reaction. Making the most thorough love to her she'd ever experienced.

Kara squeezed her eyes to force back emotion, almost sputtering at the second orgasm that took her by surprise, blooming like a fever that washed over her, all at once bursting in quaking explosion. Spiraling, falling harder, falling faster until she somehow soared past the pleasure and into body-mush reality.

Shaun lay over her, having spent himself in the condom, cock still emanating little quivers and jerks deep inside her. Fingers still lodged in her anus.

Tenderly, he eased himself free and she lay flat as he moved above her, placing a kiss to her shoulder blade. "Did you mean it?" The question came out a gruff, desperate-sounding demand. "That you love me?"

As she opened her mouth to answer, he seemed to go stiff over her, arms locking at either side of her. "Forget it, don't answer that."

And then she felt it, a wet, warm drop to her cheek. A tear. Oh God.

"Shaun?"

"Aghh." Rolling off, he gave a manly snort. "Just forget it, all right?"

"No. Not all right." In that moment, Kara had never despised herself more and could hardly bear to look at him. It was okay that she hurt, ached inside, but not him. *No!* She felt like stomping her foot. A great guy like him...he deserved so much better.

For hell's sake, *she'd* screwed up, not him. Lying as she had and running the risk of him going to jail, she'd been obligated to disappear on him, lest her father pursue statutory rape charges. The ultimatum had been clear—she was forbidden from seeing Shaun again or else, a reprieve that had been based more on her father's fear of public humiliation than caring for her.

It went without saying she deserved no less than to ache the rest of her life for her stupid choice. But *he* was supposed to have forgotten about her. Moved on. Not come after her nearly a decade later!

Not be dropping tears to the back of her neck.

She just couldn't lie to him, to herself anymore. "The truth is...the truth *is.*..I've never meant anything more in my life but that. I've always loved you, Shaun. There wasn't any other men. I'd swear it on my brother's grave and —"

"Don't." With a ragged, emotion-laced inhalation, he cursed as he released his breath, giving a short nod of acknowledgement. For a moment, she swore he was about to reach out to her, pull her back into his arms. Instead, he rose to his feet, hesitating there for a moment, saying nothing as he stared down at her. In the shadowy interior of the van, his expression was unreadable. "Dammit, Kara, I...dammit."

That said it all, didn't it?

Forget a penny...she'd give a fortune to know what was going on his head right now. But she dared not ask. Had probably said too much already. Nothing had changed between them.

Except everything.

Shaun just couldn't believe it. She had those kind of feelings for him? Still, after all this time?

But Shaun knew better than anyone that time meant nothing. Stood still in the face of something true and destined.

He told himself she hadn't really loved him at all. Had taken solace in that reality.

It hadn't been true. Hadn't been destined. Romeo and Juliet they were not.

Making love to her, hearing her scream those professions, had shaken Shaun to the core. It felt as if a bomb had just been dropped on him, blowing his fairly uncomplicated existence to bits. For years the one thing that had kept him sane was the blunt reality that Kara didn't care for him, not the way he cared for her. He'd convinced himself there was no "them". Only work, the farm. Only moving on.

But unless she was the best, most-practiced damn liar in existence, she *loved* him.

So why...why? Gulping back questions, not to mention guilt for the way he'd manhandled her—and oh so much more—he forced himself to screw his head on straight and suck back tears. As if standing there, blubbering like a baby would help matters.

No. He'd screwed up enough tonight to last a lifetime. Now it was about time he got something right and that started with a clear head and clean hands.

Dragging on his jeans and leaving them open, his condom-clad cock hanging out, he left her lying there with a pinch of remorse, still naked and bound as he stepped into his boots and moved to the front to snag a water bottle. "I'll be right back," he somehow managed to get out, by some miracle avoided sounding like a crying fool. "Hold tight."

Going out the driver's side door, he hopped into the night and rolled off the condom, tossing it in a nearby trashcan then dribbled water over the tip of his shaft, rinsing himself clean. *Cold.* Goose bumps jazzed and his cock fell limp as he zipped up his pants then poured the remainder of the liquid over his hands, rubbing his fingers together as it trickled onto the pavement.

Satisfied, he pitched the empty plastic bottle and climbed back into the van's muted light. There she lay, short, dark hair casting a blonde-streaked curtain over her face. Bound by silken sashes, helpless to the ungentlemanly way he'd taken her—regardless that she'd demanded it. So beautiful, delicate and breakable.

Yet somehow the toughest chick he'd ever encountered. *Watch me,* she spouted off, heading for the stage. *Watch me,* she'd spat, and like that she'd been gone.

A cacophony of emotion whirled like a turbine through him, locking him in place, causing him to stand and stare. Questions, regret...hesitation. All stopping him from moving forward, freeing her. Gathering her into his arms and never looking back.

Looking back...ah yes, how could he not?

Frost clung to the leaf-strewn grass, the sun peeked above the horizon in a heavenly show of brilliant white and pink clouds and she'd roared down his lane like thunder. A raging storm sweeping in courtesy of a motorcycle, helmetless midnight hair whipping in the wind, defiance glimmering her big, dark eyes as she cut across his yard in a direct path toward him.

"Kara?" he asked no one but himself, too stunned to move. It was daybreak. It was a school day.

One look at her kicking that bike into park and Shaun had known it in his gut, in his heart that hammered like a train. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

And where the *hell* had she gotten that motorcycle?

Fear hit him all at once—smacked him hard into motion and he forgot all else. Dropping a precious bucket of Lucy's milk—more like flinging it away—he raced to her. She raced to him. Somewhere in the middle they met, crashing together with emotional force.

God, don't let it be.

He knew she'd been worried this past week. Shoot, as if he hadn't been. After all, her female time had been late and that first night they'd forgotten all about protection.

Gathering her, he swept his hands along her length, instinctively needing to confirm she was all in one piece. "What it is, sweetheart? What's the matter?"

"They know," she wailed, garbling on a sob. "They know. They found the pregnancy test."

"Shit." Shaun went cold inside, waiting for the rest.

"I ditched it in a neighbor's trash can last night but apparently the Cobbs saw me." With a flip of long, dark hair, her cry of frustration pierced the air. "My parents are flipping out. They say I can never, ever see you again or they'll— They're going to send me away from you to a school in New York."

Shaun barely managed to gulp, "Wait. Slow down. The pregnancy test?"

"Oh...negative."

Air he hadn't realized he'd been holding whooshed from him in a gust. "Oh. Thank God." Not that he wouldn't love kids when the time came, but he wanted to make her his wife first. "Okay then..."

Several tense seconds passed, reality sinking in. So her parents knew about him finally. Obviously didn't approve, not that he'd been give much of a chance to prove himself—and Kara had said all along he wouldn't be. From the way Kara had described her mother and father—rich and snooty, and above all, painfully critical of her—it wasn't to be expected that they'd take news of this relationship well. But shoot...

They'd get past that. Learn to like him.

Maybe it was high time she stood her ground and they quit sneaking around. All the nighttime visits. Her stealing her dad's car. He rather liked seeing the sunshine on her face, tear-streaked though it was. Much preferred the idea of knowing where she lived, picking her up for a real date. Telling Nan about her—already Henry had missed out on knowing Kara at all, and painful as it was to acknowledge, Nan didn't have much longer. How he hated keeping the relationship a secret—but he couldn't very well up and admit his girlfriend could only see him in the middle of the night in a stolen car.

There was nothing her folks could do about them anymore anyway. Exactly one of the many reasons he'd made sure they'd waited until she was eighteen to make love.

Didn't Kara realize that? Their power over her no longer existed. "No worries, Trouble—" But suddenly it hit him—indeed, something to "worry" about—and his stomach pitted with searing concern. "The bike?" he ground out. "Where did you get it?"

If her parents were already on the rampage, aware she was stealing their car at night, how—

She didn't have to answer—the hard glint in her dark, liquid eyes said it all. She'd stolen it. He just prayed from someone who wouldn't press charges. "I had to! What was I supposed to do?"

"Crap, Kara, you can't do that kind of stuff! That's a felony! I've told you to just call if you needed me! I'll come get you!"

"No! Do you have any idea what they'd do to you! My father is a powerful man! If he finds out you came near me ever again, he'll have you thrown and jail."

"For what? Loving you?"

"No!" She sputtered, looking frantic. "Yes! He doesn't need a real reason. He just will, he swore it! We're out of options, Shaun! Mother's finalizing arrangements for my immediate enrollment in St. Joan's Academy for Girls. That's a *boarding* school! With *nuns*! Hours and hours away!" She gasped each word, her turmoil punctuated by the stomp of her foot. She clutched his shirt, sobbing. "They don't get to ruin this! They don't get to take away the most happiness I've ever had in my life!"

"They won't, darlin'. They can't. Shhh..." Tenderly he stroked her hair, hoping to reassure her. "You're eighteen. Just come live with me and I'll take care of you, okay?"

All they had to do was ditch the bike. In the woods maybe...

"No, Shaun!" Suddenly tearless, she tugged at his arm, leading him toward the bike. "No! She's already bought the plane tickets. You have to come with me, we have to leave. Right now, right away."

"Leave?" On that stolen bike? Not in his lifetime. Then her dad really would have a reason to see him arrested, or whoever the motorcycle belonged to at least. Ten years in foster care he'd avoided juvy—he'd be damned if he saw prison time as an adult.

Even if her little plan to take off made a lick of sense—which it didn't—he had his truck, which was perfectly legal.

"Sweetheart, just calm down," he tried to reason, still allowing her to lead him. "You're an adult now. Remember August 30th?"

'Cause he sure did...

"It doesn't matter! We have to run away. Now. Once she realizes I'm gone—" Releasing him, she swung her legs over the bike. "Get on, Shaun. Now. You have to."

"How'd you learn to drive this thing anyway?" he pondered.

"It's my brother Trent's. Now just get on."

"You know I can't do that." He'd spent enough of his life going from place to place. House to house and bed to bed. This was home now. Sick as she was, Nan needed him. No way would he turn his back on her. He'd promised Henry, shortly before he died...

He wasn't going anywhere, not ever. This farm might not be in his blood but it was in his soul. As were the parents who had taken him in and taught him what love really was.

"You won't, you mean?" How bitter those words were and from a girl so sweet he would've sworn she understood him completely. But maybe not. "You said you loved me. That you'd do anything for me!"

It hit him then how serious she was. Kara *meant* to leave. "Jesus, Kara, this is stupid. Just think about it. There's no reason to run. So they know. So you stay here. They can't make you do a damn thing. They can't *really* have me arrested. We'll figure this out, whatever it takes, and we can be together. You can go to school here and I'll take care of you. I promise. We'll get married." Leaning down, he planted a gentle kiss to her cheek, trying to urge her from the bike. "It'll be perfect, sweetheart, and —"

"Marry you? *You're* the stupid one!" she scoffed, sneering at the idea. "You don't know my parents! They will ruin you!"

"Kara, just try to trust me—"

The engine roared to life, drowning out the pounding of his heart. "I'm going, Shaun," she threatened, the edge to her voice cutting. "I have to. This is the way it has to be. Either you're coming or not, and it would be a lot safer if you came. If you want to be with me, you have to. There's no other way."

Safer?

What was he missing here? How could she ask this of him, knowing what Nan meant to him? Knowing how sick she was? That Henry had recently had a massive heart attack and died?

"You know I can't leave Nan." Anger pulsed hot, pumping through his body. Snagging her by the upper arm, he set his jaw, determined not to let her go. To lose her—to jail, to boarding school. Not like this. "And you're not going anywhere either. I won't let you."

Hard. Furious. She stared at him as if she'd never set eyes on him before. Then suddenly, with a force unattributed to her, she wrenched her arm free. "Watch me."

With that, she tore out, wheels peeling, flinging dust and stones through the air. Confused, angry, fearing the worst, Shaun stood there and watched her go. Thought about chasing her down in his truck. Dragging her back here.

But then from the front porch, Nan's familiar voice, weak and feminine, called out, "Shaun, dear? Everything okay? Who's that girl?"

"No one." For Nan, he forced a smile. "Everything's fine."

No sense crying over spilled milk, he'd told himself, walking coolly back to the bucket. Kara would be back once she chilled and collected her mind. Tonight most likely.

Of course she would be—Kara always came back. And when she did, he was putting his foot down—no more secrets, no more lies. If they loved each other that was worth sharing with the world.

Except she didn't come back. The days that followed were answered with agonizing silence. She hadn't shown. Nor did the cops or her parents. No desperate letters, no collect calls from a boarding school or even jail.

Swallowing pride, ready to beg on hands and knees if he must, he'd scoured for Kara's home address on the internet and had gone knocking, only to be told by her disgruntled brother Nathan that Kara, "Never wanted to see him again," and if he knew what was best for him he'd, "Leave it at that and face the cold, hard facts."

Kara was a spoiled little rich girl. He, nothing but a dirt-poor farmer. Together they were expensive champagne and cheap beer. Imported silk and scratchy wool. Fine china and a paper plate.

With a sinking realization, he accepted the *real* truth—they were over. Hadn't really been. After awhile, he'd had to ask himself—had those tears been fake? The way her arms clung to him in need, an act?

More than likely she'd taken a few days to collect herself then returned home to mommy and daddy dearest, having seen the error of her ways, and pleaded for forgiveness. After all, he was nothing more than a substitute for a dream. A way for her to pass her nights. A midnight fantasy.

But nothing real. Nothing worthy of light, of standing up for what they had. The rut she left in his driveway had proved that.

And now...

He only knew that he still loved her. Wanted her as much as the day she'd peeled tires out of his life. Wanted answers.

So much, his heart hurt and he couldn't help but dread whatever may come. If she cared, where the hell had she been all these years? Why did she go and not come back?

Deep down, chances were, he was only setting himself up for heartache. Kara Morgan had made herself explicitly clear—she wasn't the sticking-around type. Not at least for his kind.

Tongue-tied, fighting for composure, he went to her and knelt at her side, picking free the knotted sashes one at a time. One thing was for sure, Gloria and jail time be damned, this whole kidnapping fiasco was *finished*.

"You need to go outside, take a piss?" Wincing at his own words, he reached for his t-shirt crumpled on the floor next to her and shook it out. "You're untied. You can cover up with this on."

Shoot, not the most romantic thing he'd ever said to a woman but with his heart drumming a hundred miles an hour, questions twisting in his gut, and her penchant for not answering directly, Shaun figured it was best to start slow and work his way up.

Rolling over, she gazed up at him with huge, soulful eyes that searched him for answers and hit him like a train wreck. God, where did they begin?

Chapter Eight

"How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night, Like softest music to attending ears!" — William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Sheer intensity, the way he stared down at her. Unshakable focus.

Abandoned by her anger, Kara stared back, gazing into those deep eyes, wishing it could be different. That *she* could be different. The past, erased. "Shaun, I..."

She what? Kara couldn't remember ever feeling so lost, so uncertain in her life than she did at her own emotions.

Knuckles brushing her cheek tenderly, Shaun murmured, "God, sweetheart, I'm sorry," and a tugging of the heartstrings shimmered through her body, creating sparks. A warming light radiated from her chest outward.

How – how – could she have just walked away from him?

"I'm sorry too, Shaun. I am."

"Okay...um, bathroom first, talking second. Let's go." Shaun held open the shirt and she ducked her head in, pulling her arms through the sleeves, draping the wrinkled lingerie with comforting cotton. "After that...Kara, I need to know the truth about some things. So, no running off, agreed?"

As if he had any reason to believe a word out of her mouth, Kara realized with striking reality. Aching pride. All those accusations? Maybe he had every right to mistrust her.

Silently she nodded, allowing him to grip her elbows and hoist her to her feet. The t-shirt draped to mid-thigh, wrapping her with the secure feeling clothing provided that she'd never quite appreciated before now. The wondrous scent of fresh-cut grass. Country air. Hardworking man.

Stealing a deep inhalation—and holding it in as if she wanted to keep it forever—she followed him to the back of the vehicle where he reached in a box that sat in the corner, grabbing a handful of paper towels before pushing open the door and exposing the cool moonlit night.

Offering Kara his hand at her elbow, he started to help her down but quickly towed her back in. "Wait."

Shame kicked in her chest as she quickly realized where his second thoughts hailed from—of course he didn't trust her to so much as pee. Embarrassed to look at him, she cast her gaze to the woods and blinked back the reaction that came naturally—defensiveness. "Don't worry. I'm well aware you can outrun me at this point."

"No, your shoes." Bending, he yanked free the laces and kicked off his boots, nudging them toward her. "I know you'll have to clomp around in them but it's better than scratching up your soft little feet."

"Oh, um..." Taken aback, she stepped inside the huge leather recesses. "Thanks."

He helped her down, handing her the paper towels then slid to his butt on the van's rear, crossing his socked feet. Waiting.

Caught off guard by his simple confidence, by the shift in standing between them, Kara hesitated there a moment, unsure of what to do. Grasshoppers chirped in the quiet of the night, the cool air was still.

There he sat, practically barefooted, arms folded over his chest, staring off at the sky as if she hadn't thought seriously about kicking him the nuts and making a break for it. Hadn't in fact bolted on him twice.

Hadn't nearly ruined his life with her dreadful decisions. No clue as to the truth about her.

By the time she marched herself several feet out of eyeshot into the woods, relieved herself and clogged back to the van to find him casually relaxed and waiting patiently, Kara wanted to scream at him. The only thing worse than him hauling her through the city streets caveman style was this...this quiet acceptance.

In the silence, her lies shrieked at her.

"Come sit next to me." He tapped the space beside him when she didn't budge. "Please. So we can figure this out."

Guilt nagged, intertwined deep inside and she fidgeted her toes in the boots nervously. "No. Maybe that's not such a good idea."

In hindsight, having sex with him? Professing her love? Bad plan. Once Shaun knew...

He'd hate her as much as she hated herself sometimes. Knowing her parents would never approve, she'd nonetheless practically handed him over on a silver platter to be destroyed. Because of her, he might've gone to jail. Because of her, their love had been destroyed.

Because of her, he hurt. But she'd had no choice but to break his heart...there'd been no other way to save him.

"Okay..." Rising tall, he devoured the distance between them in three quick strides, no matter that she wore his boots and only socks guarded him from cold pavement as he claimed her by the shoulders. "Kara, listen. In the past twenty-four hours I've made a lot of hurtful assumptions and jackass mistakes, and you've every right to want to shoot me for them. And I'm sorry."

An apology she didn't deserve, not with her track record. "Well...well, I don't accept." Locking her arms across her chest, she swallowed at the tightening in her throat. "You were right not to trust me. You *shouldn't* trust me, so please don't. You should know...I lied to you."

His face flashed with uncertainty, the muscles in his cheeks twitching. "About?" And she knew what he was thinking—the drugs. Her pride threatened to rage but she tamped it down. *Right* not to trust her.

Here went nothing. The truth after eight years.

With a shudder—from the cold or from her nervousness—she forced herself to admit, "My birthday."

"Your—" A filthy word hissed under his breath and his hands drifted from her shoulders, down her arms, suddenly gripping her biceps as if he couldn't stand the thought of letting her go but wanted to shove her away all the same. "That's why you ran off. Why you thought your dad could have me arrested."

"I wasn't eighteen," she gulped, near tears. "And I was too ashamed to tell you. He said...he said I couldn't see you again or he'd pursue charges. Make your life a living hell any way he could. I knew...I knew he could pull stuff. All kinds of stuff to make your life miserable. Money talks.

"I begged you to disappear with me so you'd be safe and we'd be together. But you refused. So, I did the next best thing I could to protect you and made it clear to him I was running from them *and* you, so his concentration would shift to me, not to punishing you. He didn't *want* to make our affair public if he didn't have to, which is why he made that threat. My father's repute in society means a lot to him and I knew he'd keep as much under his hat as possible, save tolerating his daughter—"

"Being with someone like me?"

"Exactly," she choked out. "Exactly. So, I wrote a note saying what an asshole you were. That you had only used me, like they said you would, and that I hated everyone for ruining my life. And I left."

She'd expected anger. Outrage. For him to hurl her away. Instead, he pulled her closer, wrapping an arm at her back and tangling his other hand in her short hair as if he never wanted to let her go. "They didn't report you missing?"

"No. I found out later that Dad told everyone I was away at boarding school. Then traveling. Then working in an art gallery in France. He created a whole fake life for me." Kara bristled at the thought of the lengths they'd go to just to keep their chins up. "They've kept private eyes after me though, maintained tabs on me, and from time to time they catch up with me and try to force me home. That's why I thought it was my mother who'd sent you. We had a fight over the phone recently."

"I see." His voice tensed strangely as he dipped his mouth to her shoulder blade, a kiss lingering there as a big lull made Kara kinda nervous. Finally he asked, "But they're your family. Why didn't you ever go back? At least for the holidays?"

"Because I don't trust them. My parents anyway. Don't feel like they want what's best for me but for them. And honestly...I hate them for taking you away from me."

"Ah, Kara, you shouldn't," he murmured softly, continued to suckle and peck over her shoulder area to her collarbone, as if he wanted to seduce her to his way of thinking. "Please. They do want what's best for you. They just have a hell of an idea what that is, that's all."

"They drive me to these things," she insisted, head lolling at the attention he placed along her neckline. She reluctantly admitted, "But I know they care, I guess. That's what my brothers are always claiming."

"They're right. And anyway, why didn't you come back to me?"

"Pride, I guess. Pride and reality." She drew in a deep breath of courage, knowing these things needed to be said. "I was scared if they found out we were back together, what they might do to you. And I know I don't deserve a great guy like you."

But God, how great being in his arms felt. His strength, that smell...the way he planted random little kisses, growing more forceful with her last statement.

"What you don't deserve are the things I accused you of. I knew better. God, in my heart, I knew better." Bringing his hand around to cup her jaw, he lifted her face to his and rested his forehead to hers. "And the way I treated you, using your body like that... For hell's sake, I acted like an animal."

Despite the heaviness between them, Kara couldn't help her laugh. "That you don't get to apologize for. I wanted that." Their noses brushed, their breaths intermingling. "Liked it," she murmured. "A lot."

"Me too."

Pulling back, she looked him in the eye, appreciating the twinkle she saw there. The weight that had been lifted. And yet, after all that had been said and done, how could it be this easy?

"Shaun, a few hours ago you were convinced —"

"I know what I thought," he practically growled. "Forget it. I was insane."

"But I *lied* to you," she reminded him on a pleading whisper. How that wasn't a problem was beyond her—too good to be true.

"And it was silly. Wild and reckless. Hell, I *could've* gone to jail." Wincing at his words, she opened her mouth to apologize again, knowing that wouldn't be enough. Couldn't be. With a shivering sweep of his fingers over her lips, Shaun cut her off. "But it was also eight years ago and I'll be damned if a couple of stupid little lies is going to keep me from the most beautiful, smartest woman in the world. Spunky too." He grinned. "Don't you know how much I've always loved you? You're the only one for me."

"What about Shelly?"

"You worried about her?" Instantly, he smiled. "Well, honey, she can't compare. Great cook but she's too damn boring. Unlike you, always keeping me on my toes."

Shuttering dewy lashes, Kara smiled. Just smiled.

All her life she'd struggled to measure up in her parents' eyes—but she couldn't, not in the looming shadow of the brother she'd killed. The truth was, they would've traded her if it meant having Charles back. In a heartbeat.

That had always been part of the magic of Shaun—he made her feel good. Adored. Special. Irreplaceable. He could get past the lie easily. Wanted her no matter that an hour earlier she'd been prepared to give lap dances just to stick it to him. And did he think her a slut?

No, just entertaining apparently. Not boring.

And in that moment, his love felt deeper and truer than ever. More unconditional.

As if she had a deserving place in this world.

Opening her eyes back up—opening them wide—she stared through tears at the golden-haired man who was the light to her world, even when standing here in this dark, random parking lot, goose bumps lining her arms from the cold.

"Besides," he grunted, looking suddenly forlorn as his gaze averted. "I'm no angel either."

The words came with such an edge, Kara was suddenly scared. "What's that mean?" Instantly her mind backtracked.

A *couple* of little lies? By her count, she'd told one. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

By God, if he was married to Shelly...

"I shouldn't have said anything." He stared at her a moment, long and hard, as if weighing his options. Analyzing her reaction. "Forget it. It doesn't matter."

"From that look, I'd say it does."

"No. No. Kara, listen to me. It truly doesn't. All along, I kept listening to this nutrattler," he motioned with one finger to his head, "when my every instinct was screaming no, no, no! I knew you loved me, but I convinced myself you didn't. I knew you wouldn't do drugs, but I convinced myself you were. And you...you could've told me the truth. You didn't have to run." Tenderly, he traced her cheekbone with his thumb in the shadowy moonlight. "You see, in the end, none of the bullshit matters, because when I look in your eyes like this, I just know. Just because. I think you do too."

He just knew. To her, no words had ever sounded sweeter, wound such giddy hopeful feelings in her. "Seems that's both our problem. Listening to our heads instead of our hearts."

"From now on..." Pulling back from the embrace, he made an X across his chest. "I swear, heart only. Anything else, we can get past it. Anything at all."

"Heart only," she repeated, making a big cross that mimicked his. "I'll try my very best to always remember that."

"No. Not good enough." Seizing her by the chin, he locked his gaze with hers, his flare in emotion taking her aback. "Promise me. Swear it. Mean it."

Emotion skittered through her, racing on her skin like a trillion little electric sparks. Bringing a smile so true she hoped her face would freeze that way.

This man...could he be any more wonderful?

"I do, I mean it." For good measure, she crossed her heart a second time then held up her hand, pinky extended. "And I swear it."

Hooking his finger around hers, his mouth slammed down hard on hers, lips crushing. Demanding her heart, her soul. Sealing the deal one warm, moist tongue swoop at a time.

Only when he'd kissed her completely senseless—and breathless—did he release his suction on her, their pinkies still entwined. Heart only.

Kara was well aware she was staring at him as if he'd just hung the moon—and in her eyes, he had. "So...what now?"

"Now, my little hostage, I take you back to my place and never let you go again." With that, he swept her out of his boots with a squeal to cradle her in his arms.

"But I don't have any clothes!" Um, and what about her college courses? Her job? *Chrissy?* "Did you even lock my apartment?"

"Yes, I did, and as for clothes, you won't need any." The rough need in his voice was enough to make her forget all about silly logistics as he ducked back into the van. "As for your friend, I'm sure there's someone you can call to look in on her a couple of days?"

"Sure." Not really. Maybe. Definitely not one of her stripper friends or classmates. Too easily people could be bribed.

Which only left one option she could think of—her brother Trent. The only one in her family she'd consistently maintained contact with over the years and, brat that he was, she could trust him. Oh, he'd complain—that was his nature—but he didn't live too far from her apartment and it couldn't be that much of an inconvenience. Of course she *could* call Nathan—they too had been getting close lately but the likes of Chrissy would probably give the straitlaced man a heart attack.

Yes, Trent it was. She'd call him first thing tomorrow, because right now, the next couple of days, she couldn't be Hero. Couldn't be selfless.

Eight years ago Shaun had begged her to stay and nothing would have stopped her from leaving. Now an apocalypse couldn't drive her from his arms. Never again.

Chapter Nine

"My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss." — William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Nathan checked his watch. Seven a.m. Yes, it was damn early, yes it was Saturday, but he did have work to get to and couldn't waste his day calling Kara to be sure she was fine. Some people didn't have the luxury of "weekends".

Knocking their secret knock from when they were kids, so she'd know it was him, he waited impatiently, sure he'd find something wrong.

From inside the apartment, he heard shuffling and padding of footsteps. "Just a minute, hon," bellowed a feminine voice still laced with grogginess.

But not Kara. A friend maybe?

"Wow, you're early today. I was—" The door flung open, exposing a slip of a woman in a silky short-sleeved red robe that gaped open at her chest, long curly blonde hair frizzed all over the place. And good God. She was covered in bruises, everywhere he looked. Her arms, her chest, her legs.

Her beautiful face—half of which was swollen, the other half that of an angel.

"Shit!" She attempted to slam the door in his face but he caught it, shoving it open.

Just like that, Nathan was angrier than he'd ever been in his life. Wanted explanations and damn quick. "Where's Kara?"

If his sister looked anything like this lady, he was going to kill someone. Hell, he would anyway.

Quickly, she spun, giving him her back as she tugged and tightened the belt. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Kara's brother. Who the hell are you? And what the hell is going on here?"

* * * * *

If she slept much longer, Kara was going to get the kitchen sink with her breakfast.

Nan's ceramic dishes, brimming with eggs, pancakes, fried potatoes, bacon, sausage, gravy and biscuits, lined the top of the stove, kept warm by the pilot lights. Juice and coffee waited in carafes on the table.

To think, she was *really* here...they were *really* back together. The excitement had Shaun whipping up enough food for an army. In a scary sort of "Marty" Stewart mode.

Kara would likely think he'd gone nuts. Overboard, to be sure. Granted, he was a man who knew his way around the kitchen—growing up the way he had, he'd had no choice but to fend for himself—but this wasn't Thanksgiving. Not exactly.

But to him, it was better than Christmas morning. Before laying eyes on Kara again, he'd had no idea how empty his life had become. Lonely. Now hope buzzed like bees.

A bowl of fruit might be nice, he reasoned, needing something to do with his hands but unwilling to leave the house to tend the farm. Nervous anticipation hummed through him, nearly uncontainable.

Later, he was going to have to tell Kara the ugly truth—that indeed her mother had put him up to coming after her.

Should have yesterday, but without a doubt, she wouldn't be here right now if he had.

Yes, a romantic breakfast. A nice spring walk. He'd break it to her gently. Cushion the blow every way he could.

Already he'd telephoned Gloria, leaving a message on her cell that things hadn't gone quite as planned but he was handling it and not to contact him for at least twenty-four hours.

Dressed in nothing but his boxers, he paced to the fridge, opened it with a blast of cool air and selected an orange. Waiting was driving him batty. For hell's sake, it was almost eleven a.m.

Didn't matter what time he went to sleep, his mental alarm clock went off the same time every morning—five sharp. Despite exhaustion, staying in bed past nine had proven impossible, no matter how sleep deprived he'd been after that long drive home.

He just wanted to hear her voice, her laughter again. Secure her forgiveness completely.

On the way back, she'd filled him in on all the places across America she'd visited, the random things she'd done and jobs she'd worked—from dishwashing to dog sitting, to being a dog—in a suit of course—handing out flyers. She'd lived in Kentucky, New York, Florida, and at twenty-two had even tried her shot at acting in infamous California. Every once in a while she'd drive off and find a pasture, just to remember him. Didn't dare step through the fence though, she'd recalled with a laugh.

Life hadn't been easy, she'd told him, but it had taught her a lot. In a strange sort of way, he was glad she'd gone off and seen the world. Become her whole self. Now she was studying to become a counselor and wanted to help kids. Regularly helped adults out of nothing but plain goodwill, a trait that warmed Shaun inside more than she would ever know.

Eventually, her words had become slurred and her eyelids droopy. And though he had other plans—such as making love until the sun cropped over the horizon—Shaun had let her drift off, grinning at the soft little wheezing sounds she made as she dreamed. Hopefully of him.

Now he thought about sneaking upstairs, sitting on the side of his bed where he'd snuggled her in for a long rest, and just soaking up her presence. After all the time they'd been sentenced apart, Shaun just wanted to watch her. Be near her. Anything to touch her.

He couldn't lose her, not again. What if? Nothing but a stupid lie had driven them apart—damn him for not believing in her love enough. Not going after her. Everything could have been different. His life, hers.

In the bigger picture, Shaun blamed himself. But he wouldn't let their love be shattered a second time.

Taking the fruit to the counter, he washed it off and pulled out a cutting board, deciding to remove the peel first. Scoring the rind, he circled the orange one way then the other, cautious not to damage the flesh. Then ever so carefully, he stripped away the outer layer, separating the thin-skinned segments one by one and making it a far more meticulous chore than necessary. Anything to pass the time—prayed she'd wake up soon or he'd be forced to break out Nan's china or something weird.

And to that thought, as if God sent, came the singsong call of an angel. "Do I smell breakfast?"

At the sound of her voice, the gentle padding of her tiny bare feet on the old house's hardwood floors, his smile was immediate. His body's reaction all warm and tingly, head to toe.

"Well, good morning finally." Several orange segments still in hand, he turned to find her leaning in the doorway between the living room and kitchen, fairly glowing in nothing but his long, black t-shirt, which grazed her thighs, leaving the rest of her slender legs exposed. That was right—she had nothing but stripper clothes.

And he'd promised her she wouldn't need any, not anytime soon.

All thoughts of reason flew out the window, replaced with images from the night prior. Her body's reaction to him, the way she'd cried his name. How afterward, when he tried to apologize, she murmured, "I wanted that. Liked it."

Recalling those words now, his body came alive with the need to take her—not as an eighteen-year-old makes love to a virgin girl. But as a man makes love to a woman—thoroughly. Indulging in carnal desires.

Lord knew, he'd invested enough long, lonely nights watching pornos to know there was a lot more than the basics he wanted to try. With her.

Right now.

"I've, um...whipped you up a homecoming banquet," he somehow managed to say, suddenly distracted though he was. In the room's sunny light, the peaks of her nipples beckoned though the thin fabric, her chin-length, angular-cut hair a mussed-up combination of brownish-black and blonde, her big, dark eyes dancing in tune with her knockout smile—all making for the sexiest sight he'd ever seen. "Hope you're hungry."

Hungry. That he suddenly was—like an animal.

Mouth watering—and not from the food—Shaun found his interest in breakfast fading and fast. But his appetite...oh, it was raving. There were other things—more fulfilling things—he wanted to eat besides pancakes.

"Mmm, I'm starved. But you're too good to me already."

Attempting to regain control, he cleared his throat, aware of the fruit being squished between his fingertips as she pushed off the oak molding that accented his house.

"Nothing less than you deserve."

Walking toward the stove, she shot him a glance as if he were an alien and clapped her hands. "Fried potatoes? Yummy, my favorite."

And then she went and did it. Licked her lips, heaving him right over the edge as the dainty tongue wetted pink flesh, leaving a glistening trail in its path.

"Kara."

"Hmm?" By the time she turned slightly, he'd lunged and snagged her under the arm with a squeal, shoving her up against the refrigerator hard enough to make the cake dish atop it rattle in protest.

"I have to have you. Now." What followed was a combination of her struggling to get her shirt off and him one-hand fighting for the same cause, sticky juice dripping down his forearm. Finally the garment whipped free, shooting across the room, and he had her pinned, kissing her, the most glorious sight he'd ever seen. All angles and curves and he wanted to taste every inch of her. To thoroughly explore her with his tongue.

Lips devouring hers, he smashed the fruit to her breast, smearing a citrus trail and sweeping it from nipple to nipple then down her belly, around the diamond that glistened there. She arched into his touch, moaning in his mouth as he cupped her mons and thrust the fruit into her folds, bursting pulpy matter. Rubbing it in.

Cock almost painfully hard in his boxers, he broke his lips free of hers and started tasting. Down her neck with nibbles and licks, smearing his tongue over her chest, cleaning the sticky liquid from her breast. Flicking her nipple up and down, savoring the orange-flavored bud, pebbled as he suckled it. Her hands wound in his hair, gripping firmly as she mewed in delight.

"Yes, Shaun, yes!"

Moving to the other breast, he drank up the juice, praising her nipple with little circles until it was fully erect and she was whimpering in delight.

"Don't stop!"

Oh, he wasn't about to. Sliding his mouth over her belly and farther down, he placed a palm to either leg and, with her gasp of expectation, opened her cunt and dove in with his tongue. Sweet, moist heaven. The finest candy.

Nothing that had ever graced his tongue tasted more addictive as he suckled and pulled her flesh into his mouth. Drank her up, exploring every warm niche and recess of her pussy, the many ways he could make her holler little shrieks of delight.

Her cries were a sound he could never grow old of, never get enough of. He wanted them louder, more frequent. Would give his everything to hear her saying his name. Begging for more.

Drawing her clit between his teeth, he coaxed a strangled intake of air from her and her fingers wound, yanking at his scalp as if holding on for dear life. "Shaun, please! Oh...oh..."

Ah, precisely how he wanted her – desperate for him.

Just for fun, he bit down ever so gently, rubbing the nub with his teeth, back and forth, back and forth, lightly grazing. Feeling the bundle of nerves roll beneath the pressure he applied. Pausing to lick away any discomfort, he gathered her pussy cream in his mouth, consuming her essence.

"Come on, baby," he encouraged, wanting her to gush. To ripple and tighten with pleasure. Wanting her to come crashing down so he could delight in driving her to the pinnacle all over again. "That's it, come for me." Ah, he adored how his simple command caused her body to tense.

If he had his way, the rest of the day would be spent in bed with him doing just this—playing her body like a violin.

"Shaun, I need you...need you inside me," she gasped, twitching her hips in his face. "Oh—"

"Shhh... Not yet, baby." For one, he'd taken the condoms upstairs. For two, he wanted this to last. Forever.

Searching out her slit, he aligned three fingers at her entrance, hiking them inside her with one forceful thrust. She hollered her pleasure, back pressed to the fridge as her hips instinctively rode both hand and mouth.

Harder, higher he thrust, delivering tongue flicks and teasing little chews to her nub. Driving her to her tiptoes, swirling his fingers inside her and searching out the special spot in a woman that made her go wild.

In no time her pussy muscles were contracting and releasing, grasping him in quivering reflexes as cum poured from her and she clung to him, helpless to the orgasm that overpowered her.

In that moment, lapping her essence, relishing her every tremble and shudder, moan and whimper, Shaun was on top of the world. Didn't know left from right or his own pleasure from hers as he planted a gentle kiss to her head, gathering her into his arms. "Kara, sweet heavens, darlin'... just...sweet heavens."

Dizzy. Tingly. Floating.

Kara felt like a kid in a spinning contest who'd whirled until she collapsed, now lying on the ground, staring up at the fuzzy white clouds that passed her by. Absolutely lightheaded. On a natural high.

Except it wasn't clouds but his ceiling. Not spinning but the orgasm of a lifetime.

And how she was still standing after the things he'd done with his mouth? Beyond her.

"All right, up you go." Listlessly, she was aware of him lifting her, wrapping her legs about his waist, slinging her arms around his neck. "I'm not done with you yet. Not by a long shot."

Hands grasping her butt, cock jutting between her legs, he carried her. Through the living room, up the stairs she clung to him like a monkey, keenly aware as each step jostled his erection, causing it to dance and rub against her pussy—and spent or not, she wanted it. Yearned for his long shaft buried inside her, aching and craving a little more with every brush of contact.

By the time they reached the bedroom and he deposited her on the bed, her arousal had skyrocketed to an all-time high. Those things he could do to her, that magical place he could take her—she wanted it again. Again and again.

There he was, body stretched and hovering over hers, fists propped at her shoulders, staring down at her with those glimmering dark-amber eyes and deep-set brows, looking so serious despite those sensual lips wet from kissing her. Nothing on this earth was like Shaun Weston, that she knew for fact. She'd seen her fair share of the world—America, at least. And despite everywhere she'd been, nothing she'd experienced had ever felt this degree of wonderful. Then or now.

His little corner of the world in Nowhere, USA—literally, she had no idea what the name of the closest town was, had just happened here one night long ago—this place was *home*. Exactly where she belonged. No more running.

Fueled by that awareness, Kara skimmed her nails over the whiskery scruff carpeting his jaw, little electric frissons shooting up her arm. "God, if I could take back time, I'd never leave you."

"You're here now." Leaning his face into her hand, he planted a soft kiss to her palm. "And I can promise you're not going anywhere."

Ah, that she wasn't. Still, just to tease him, she flipped off, "Like *you* could stop me?"

"I do believe I still have those sashes," he backfired, smearing his mouth over her wrist, down her forearm sensually. "And you were a rather sexy, intriguing sight, bound by them. Drove me nuts, you know?"

"Hmmmm..." At the suggestion, heat flowed through her. Pure lava, bubbling to the surface. "I'll admit, mad as I was, it was rather a turn-on, being at your mercy like that."

"That so? You really meant it? You liked—"

"Do I have to goad you again?" As if to prove her intentions, she arched her hips, bumping his pelvis and he responded by grinding his boxer-clad cock against her bared pussy. Arousal rushed, tingles spread like fire.

"Wouldn't recommend it. Didn't you learn your lesson yesterday?"

"If that was a lesson, consider me your student." Having been witness to how such an action drove him wild, as it had earlier in the kitchen, she licked her lips slowly. Wandered that tongue as if it had nowhere to go, nothing to lick. "And I'm in need of more schooling. Much, much more."

His robust chuckle boogied down her spine.

"You're already in more trouble than you can handle, Trouble. Or should I say, Precious?" In one fluid motion, he caught her other hand, pinning both. Stroking the undersides of her wrists softly, causing shivers to race up her arms. "Mmmm. What *if* I tied you to the bed?"

"What if?" she whispered.

"Mmm-hmm." Smothered in his strong grasp, her wrists felt as though they belonged to a doll and he gave them a threatening squeeze, stretching them higher as if to demonstrate the power he had over her. "Real tight, so you couldn't budge an inch."

"And then?" A thousand little desires flickered through her mind. Never had her heart raced faster, her blood pounded harder, her pussy gushed more than it did at the prospect of him restraining her again. Doing "rough" things to her.

"And then..." He started out slowly, positioning her wrists just so, spread at a wide V above her head, his sharp gaze commanding they stay put as he dragged his fingers down the insides of her arms, over her belly, pausing only to flick the diamond in her navel before dancing on to her thighs, tickling her, driving her mad with the urge to squirm. "Then I'll proceed to make you scream."

"Sounds dangerous. Thrilling." So damn intriguing she'd just creamed her panties—oh wait, she didn't have any on. But who would've guessed? Dirty sex was so right up her alley...since yesterday she was coming to realize a lot of unexpected things about herself. Clenching fists in anticipation, she asked with a sharp inhale, "Just how would you do that?"

He answered physically, sliding his thick, calloused fingers between her butt crack and tracing them over her anus. Stroking lightly, inciting the bud to pucker in response as he gazed down at her, asking with his eyes—could he enter her there?

Make her scream. As she had last night?

Visions of the way he'd taken her flooded, how he'd sunk those two fingers inside the clenching recesses of her anus, swirling and making her crazy. Driving her to come hard and fast.

But he wanted more than that—the whole deal. Kara wasn't dense or blind—any fool could see the wicked intention written all over his face.

Nervousness swarmed, fire sparking throughout her body and her gut clenched in a knot. To let Shaun take her in such a manner...to make love to her in that way.

The thought brought an embarrassing blush to her face—but with it accompanied no hesitation. There wasn't anything she wouldn't give him. Even that.

Besides, something deep and dark in her very soul told her if she enjoyed it half as much as she'd enjoyed his fingers there...

Pussy clasping at the prospect, moisture rolling from her inner recesses, Kara answered in her own silent way, twisting beneath him onto her stomach and baring her backside. "I'm yours, Shaun. All of me."

"And I'm going to make damn sure you don't forget that. Next time you get the urge to dance, it'll be for me."

"I told you I wasn't really going to."

"All the same..." Slow hands wandered over her back, worshiping. Taking her limb by limb and spreading her out, arms again stretched above her head. Legs wide. "God, you've no idea how incredible you are."

To those words, he laid a kiss right to her butt. "Don't move. Three seconds. I'll be right back."

That's what she was afraid of.

He disappeared, leaving Kara suddenly so anxious she didn't dare budge for the temptation to crawl under the bed.

In the silence of the house, the old grandfather clock in the hall ticked loudly. Seconds clicked by, echoing in her head. Her body. She wasn't sure how she could want anything more...yet be so unsure.

Entwining her fingers in the cotton sheet that lined his bed, Kara concentrated on breathing. On not imagining what he was about to do to her. What it would feel like. Or if she would like it. How much...

All but impossible. It was all she could think about.

And where the hell had he gone? Three seconds, her ass.

At least two tortuous more minutes ticked by before he arrived back, tossing something on the bed at her feet. "Ah, the lady missed me, did she?" he cooed.

Miss him? Was he kidding her? Her clit pulsed, the area of the sheets beneath her pussy was drenched, and she was damn close to throwing a temper tantrum.

"Why are you trying to drive me batty?" Sweat beaded on her forehead as he crawled over her, straddling her back. "You were gone forever."

"Three seconds," he reiterated, snagging one wrist and wrapping silken fabric around it. The sashes. He'd gone all the way to the van?

"Liar."

"Don't forget who's the one tying you up. Who's *mercy* you'll be at," he added in a low, threatening growl that made her squirm from blood-boiling desire as he stretched

her arms farther above her head, securing her to the bedpost. "I have to warn you, sweet pea, things are about to get *real* rough."

"Mmmm. Sounds right up my alley." What they had between them now—it couldn't be any more basic, more primal than this. Two lovers, no limits.

And she couldn't get enough, a point proven in pussy juice as he shuffled down the length of her body then swung his leg over, backing off the bed and claiming her left foot. Coarse roping looped around her ankle several times then he pulled her legs wide. "Wait. What's that?"

"Twine, from the barn. We only had two sashes."

"You went to the van and the barn?" No wonder she'd felt as if she were dying here!

His palm landed sharply on her butt. "Quit complaining."

"And if I don't?"

Again he smacked her ass, this time on the other cheek. Harder, causing her to tense and cry out, "Hey!"

"Understand?"

"Yes," she hissed.

"Yes *sir*," he teased, planting another whack to her bottom before zipping around the bed like a lightning bolt, tugging her other foot into place and securing her spreadeagle.

"Fat chance in hell. Besides, 'sir' makes you sound like an old man." Kara writhed atop the mattress, pebbled nipples rubbing the soft sheet as she tested her bonds, trying to tug them loose. Not happening.

"How about Master then?"

"When a pig goes winging past the window, carrying a cow on its back, maybe."

To that he chuckled sensually. "Call me Cupcake for all I care. You're not going anywhere. I'll have to cut you loose first." Palm flattening to her bottom sharply, he pulled back and added three more quick, playful slaps that had her gasping in response. "Now...to make you scream."

She was already about to!

Need flowed hot, her clit pulsing as he settled on his knees alongside her and reached between her legs, claiming that aching nub between finger and thumb, rolling. Tweaking. Tugging. Sliding higher, pressing inside her cunt and swirling. "You are nice and wet. So turned-on, aren't you?"

"You know it," she barely managed. "This is torture, you know?"

"But the sweet kind." With a chuckle, he went back to her clit, pinching and teasing.

Hell yes, the sweet kind. Bittersweet. Biting her lip, Kara resisted the urge to cry out. To buck and go wild against his invading hand.

"I had no idea, really. Not back then," he went on, still tormenting that bud with swirls and squeezes then moving on to spank it, the pads of two fingers ricocheting almost harshly. Every muscle tightened, her breath trapped in her chest as he laughed again. "Not a clue that you'd let me touch you like this. Would enjoy it. But had I known..."

"Wish we both had." Hindsight 20/20—it was definitely different between them now, more passionate, and this, she realized, was what she'd been after all those years ago. Exactly why she'd lied.

She wanted *this*. Not puppy love, not a boyfriend, but a man to quench womanly urges she'd had no idea she possessed. The real, raw deal.

And now she had it. "But," she breathed on a gaspy giggle, "I'm not about to call you Master, sir or Cupcake."

"I don't get a nickname? Not fair. You have multiple, Precious."

Wanted to bring that up again, did he? "Oh...all right, Cupcake."

Kara whimpered as his hand retreated, abandoning her and leaving her to burn as he situated himself between her legs, stuffing two balled-up pillows under her hips and lifting her butt high.

"Even if you won't massage my ego and call me Master." With a devious laugh, his fingers gripped one cheek, squeezing roughly and pulling the muscles to the side. "We both know who's in charge at the moment."

Squirting something cool and jellylike directly on her bum, he smeared it around the bud as he aligned his shaft at her slit. Without warning, both cock and finger plunged into her. Fireworks shattered, tingles rained down. Quivers raced, her body coiled with intensity.

One thrust.

Two...

Three, four...

Again and again he rammed himself deep, setting a steady pace. Driving her higher and higher, finger swirling in the recesses of the taut channel it explored. Coaxing it into relaxing.

Soon, he slid in a second finger and her entire body wound rigid. Her hands bunched in fists that fought the sashes and her pussy clasped at his cock, wanting something she couldn't quite grasp. Wanting to escape the overwhelming feeling...yet not. Milking him for all he was worth. Confused by the unease, the nibble of discomfort that somehow transformed into sheer pleasure as he slid a third digit into the mix.

Kara found herself jerking the sashes with all her might, frantic as she spiraled out of control, falling right off the edge. Bucking against him, gasping his name over and over as she flung into a wild orgasm that possessed every muscle in her body. Caused shudders and quivers and raw heat to take over.

She was spinning, seeing stars...delirious as she melted back to reality a lot slower than she'd pitched out of it. Second by second, the blurred edges of her vision returned, as did her awareness of her body—his fingers stretching and pulling at the gripping glove they were buried in, the strange sensation knotting her abdomen. His hard cock, buried to the hilt in her wet, clamping pussy.

Breathing raggedly, Kara moved against him, testing the position she found herself in—the same one that had just thrown her off a hundred-foot building. Bound, at his mercy. Being pummeled thoroughly.

"That's it, sweetheart. That's it," he praised, his free hand sweeping over her lower back and hip as if he were petting her. "You're so good and ready."

Bracing a palm to her butt cheek, he parted her open and eased himself free, replacing his fingers with his cock while holding her spread wide. The head of his wide shaft edged her rectum, pushing, experimenting...

"Precious, indeed. You're so hot and tight." One intense inch at a time he pressed his way partially inside her rectum and—giving her no chance to completely recover from her orgasm—he caught her clit in a demanding grasp, massaging it in firm circles. "Don't drop out on me now. One more, baby."

Climax, again? For a third time? He was crazy! Need she mention he had yet to have an orgasm of his own?

The natural instinct that came was to whimper. "Shaun..."

"What? This going to take some convincin'?"

I'm spent. I can't.

But the protest never left the tip of her tongue and she shocked herself by tossing off, "Hmmmm. The convincin' part sounds tempting." Quite the orgasm addict she'd become apparently.

Undeniably, there was still a piece of her that pulsed from deep within, yearned and immediately responded to his coaxing, to the cock that demanded an agonizingly slow entry, his penetration limited by taut, unaccustomed muscles.

Who was she to cheat him of his fun?

Any exhaustion that had plagued her retreated, replaced with burgeoning zeal. In an instant of pressure and building heat, Kara knew what she wanted. *Dirty sex*. The fight. The struggle. Just like last night.

She wanted to play with fire.

Egged on by that desire, she yanked at her secured wrists, a newer, more-intense arousal rising to the forefront as she thrashed and ground out, "If you think you can handle me. Might not know what you're getting into though!" Purposely she used his owns words from the evening prior, teeth grinding as harsh fingers dug into her butt cheek, then *smack!*

"That so? Fixin' to give me trouble, are you?"

Of course she was! "Trouble's what you call me!"

"No arguing there, *Trouble*." Shaun followed up his words with a rebuking lurch of his hips, investing himself deeper. Spurring a strangled cry, her pelvis instinctively lurching into the pillows—taking him with her—but immediately she retracted the action, angling her ass onto his demanding cock even though it pinched like the devil.

Better not "bore" him. She wanted that pinch, that clap of his hand on her ass.

"Come again? *Impossible*," she dared, contracting her ass muscles around his thick shaft that demanded wet, warm entry, however slow it may be.

Yes, absolutely she was goading him yet again—hoping to push his buttons, push him over the edge—and hopefully it would work like the charm it always did. "Think you're biting off more than you chew, Cupcake."

He groaned at his new nickname, cock pushing. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"We'll see about that." Smack, smack! to her left cheek, causing her skin to blush with stinging heat.

For her to flip off, "Ohhh. He's getting a little feisty."

"I'll show you feisty!"

"Go for it!" *Smack, smack!* and his hips gave a rotation, his fingers a tug and pull, causing his cock to rotate in the clutching, unyielding confines of her rectum. Her clit to throb. Pinpricks of awareness skittered through her. Pain threatened. Pleasure peaked.

Now searing with need, Kara wrenched with all her might at the sashes that restrained her. Pounded the mattress with balled fists. He slid in deeper, stretched her to unbearable limits. Twirled her clit as if he were taking it on a Tilt-A-Whirl ride. How could anything feel so good yet so unbearable?

How could she be dying for escape and dying for more at the same time?

Wriggling against him, against the prickling need coursing through her, she dug her nails into her palm, holding on for dear life. *More.* Ah yes, how she wanted it. "Come on, bring it on, Cupcake! *If* you can..."

"That so, Trouble?" He gnashed the last word and Kara knew if she turned and looked at him right now, he would be baring his teeth in wild restraint. Again *smack*, *smack*, *smack*, this time to her right side, slightly sharper.

And then his fingers curled into her flesh, nails dragging almost threateningly, cock again pushing for deeper admission. "Almost there. Just relax, baby, let me in."

Followed by *smack, smack, smack,* driving her to jump like water dribbled on hot oil, and his cock gained farther ground. Pursued higher, her clit so swollen under his touch she could hardly bear it.

Smack, smack, smack, a searing iron to cool ice, and she wanted him fully inside her more than anything. Distracted from tiny twinges by sheer, ultimate ecstasy, no longer did she concentrate on how big his cock was inside her but the orgasm already

beginning to radiate from within. Taking him farther in...craving his length...the flat of his hand on her ass...

His body owning hers.

Smack, smack, smack, fanning oxygen to her flames, and easily he slid the rest of the way in, lodging deep inside her, an experience so new to her she didn't know how to handle it. The intensity. The tingles. The need as he began to rock slowly within her depths.

Shaun's...she was all Shaun's. Always had been, always would be. Every last square inch of her body, he'd touched and loved. Made his.

Smack, smack, gasoline on a raging fire as he pinched her clit, his every touch and stroke somehow sharper now. Ringing with frissons of delight. Zapping sensation through her. Launching her closer.

Over and over again, his palm clapping her butt, his fingers working her clit nonstop. Circles, pats, pinches. That big cock retreating then forcing its way deep again, exploding tiny shivers through her body. Creating fireflies in the pit of her stomach.

This time her orgasm did not come out of nowhere but was a gradual flowering of ecstasy that started slow and gained rapid ground, shimmering throughout her like shapes in a kaleidoscope, myriad colors and pleasures, until her body had gone rigid, every muscle went tense as her mind soared higher than she'd ever soared. Whirled amongst the clouds, slowly drifting...returning to reality...to Shaun, stilling inside her with a grunt, his cock pulsing like a heartbeat.

Palms smoothing across her flanks, he gently eased himself free and collapsed on the bed next to her. "Damn, Kara," he sighed deliriously. "I think I passed out there a minute."

"Mmmm..." she agreed.

Reaching above his head, he gave one of the sashes a tug, pulling it free, then with a moan of exhaustion, started to reach for the other, only to drift off. Just like that, sound asleep.

Leave it to a man. No pillow talk for her apparently.

Oh well. Kara smiled sedately, happy to curl her one free hand in his chest hairs and cuddle. Soon, exhaustion claimed her as well.

One minute. Fifteen. She couldn't be sure how long she slipped off for, but as easily as she faded into dreamland, reality surfaced like dawn. No matter the workout he'd just given her—in contrast to how late she'd slept in this morning—Kara just wasn't a sleeper. Not that the position she found herself in—still practically spread-eagle, ass end up over the pillows—was conductive to napping. Nor was the stickiness dripping from her. Or the rumbles her belly had begun protesting with.

Too bad for them she was in no mood to move.

Happy birthday to me. And wasn't he the best gift of all? Entranced, she lay there, memorizing his face. The curve of his full lips, the way sunlight that leaked in through

the blinds glittered off his tanned skin. How his thick, brown lashes curled at the corners, giving off such an air of innocence in contrast to the manly scruff that covered his jaw. How the light golden hairs that patterned his chest curled in little spirals, springing back as she tugged them. His scent, masculinity intertwined with the fresh, earthly scent of home, laced with...what was that? Maple sausage? Pancakes?

Was she so hungry that her lover now smelled like breakfast to her?

Her tummy growled loudly in response, demanding she hightail it back to the kitchen and pile her plate high. With a groan, she resigned herself to parting from him—poor man was so tired, not even her wrestling free of the other sash woke him. Next, it was time for some gymnastics—darn good thing she still kept flexible—as she stretched and bent every which way, muscles strained to the limit as she worked free the twine binding her feet to the bedposts.

"Ow! Come on!"

Definitely not an easy task—picking free the knots was time-consuming and annoying—but eventually she managed and crawled from the bed, heading to the adjoining bathroom.

Slightly achy down there as well—talk about getting a workout—she took a couple of minutes to clean herself then pulled on his heavy flannel robe, which was, at best, twice her size. Rolling up her sleeves, she went to pay him the same favor, removing his condom and bathing his soft cock with a warm washrag. Despite coming three times, Kara couldn't resist the urge to pet him…just to test if he'd wake up. He murmured but his eyes didn't bat.

Too bad really.

Snagging the quilt, she pulled it up over him and tucked him in with a kiss then headed to the kitchen to pile her plate high. When she accounted for the feast he'd made, Kara couldn't help but blink and stare, blink and stare. Exactly who had he been expecting? Paul Bunyan and friends? But her surprise soon gave way to fierce hunger and she snapped out of it, stacking pancakes and sausage.

She'd really worked up an appetite. Plus...a girl could only hope she would need her energy.

Chapter Ten

"Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say 'Ay,'
And I will take thy word; yet if thou swear'st,
Thou mayst prove false; at lovers' perjuries..."

— William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Shit. Again? Rolling over in bed next to the buxom redhead he'd enjoyed thoroughly ravishing last night, Trent grappled for the phone. What the hell was that girl's name anyway?

Second damn time he'd been woken up this morning. Didn't these fools understand the meaning of Saturday? The one day a week he wasn't forced to endure having his skull split by the alarm, strap on a monkey suit and put up with his father all day. "Yo? This better be good."

"Trent, it's Kara. I need a favor." Trent got the distinct impression she was chewing, which sent his stomach rumbling.

"See, I told Nate you were fine." He yawned, eyes heavy. "You're a big girl. Can take care of yourself." Just as he'd told his panicked big bro more than once already today. The guy was a worrywart and a tight ass if he'd ever met one, unlike him and Kara—they both had a wild streak of independence about them.

He supposed that's why he and Kara got along so famously, as opposed to the rest of the family. Once he'd forgiven her for stealing his first bike, that was—and after all the trouble he'd gone through to hide it from Mom and Dad too.

"Nate?" Muffle, muffle, chew, chew. "What's he worried about?"

"I don't know." God, he wasn't awake enough for this shit and now she had his stomach roaring for food when his fridge was likely empty. Last time anyone had gone shopping for him was what...two weeks ago? Damn maid had quit. Said he was too sloppy, just like his ex. "Something about Mom not seeming right lately," he grumbled. "You going missing, which you're clearly not. Oh...and a busted-up gal named Chrissy he's all up in arms about."

"Oh."

"Oh what? Call him, would you, and peel him off my back? And what the hell did you want anyway?"

"For you to check in on Chrissy. Her boyfriend beat her up recently and I've been talking care of her. I worry when she's alone too long."

"Nate's taking care of that task it would seem." Yawning again, he crossed fingers and toes he could get out of this. He had a nameless redhead waiting. And no intention of rising from bed until at least two p.m.

"Yeah, well," Kara sighed. "That worries me. I don't think Nathan and she are exactly cut from the same cloth, if you catch what I mean."

Seriously? "So what? Nate's already there, so she's fine." He grumbled at the thought of standing, even for food. "Where are you anyway?"

"It's a long story. Nate's still there? Since when?"

"I don't know. When the sun was coming up?" Trent could almost smell her coffee and desperately wanted to fall back asleep before he was completely awake and his day was ruined. "Call me when the sun's set and dish, okay?"

Kara laughed. "Sure, promise. But if I need you to, will you check on Chrissy later for me?"

Sounded like a ball of fun, babysitting some spineless, likely sad woman. Not exactly his cup of tea. "Sure, honey. Sure," he agreed anyway, saying a quick goodbye then clicking off the phone to roll over and snuggle awake his redhead. Time for some more self-indulgence—after all, there was more than one way a man could be hungry.

* * * * *

Ding, dong... Ding, dong...

Who the hell could that be?

The creaky, old doorbell rang throughout the house, taking Kara by total surprise. Shelly maybe?

God forbid. A neighbor? Coffee mug frozen midair, she sat glued to her seat at the kitchen table, not about to answer dressed as she was. Besides...ugh, she was so full she must look pregnant. Who wanted to move? Her stomach moaned in happy agreement as Kara held her breath, hoping whoever it was would go away and fast. Instead, the doorbell rang again, followed by knocking. Persistent, weren't they? Maybe she should answer.

The Weston farm wasn't exactly on the way to anywhere, ergo it was assumable it wasn't a carpetbagger banging down their door. So what if it was important?

Maybe Shaun had called a preacher or a judge, she thought laughingly.

She contemplated going upstairs to wake him, but to get to the steps she'd have to walk past the glass-paned front door. Wait...didn't old houses like this have a secret stairwell hidden somewhere?

Probably, but she had no idea where and wasn't about to give herself away while rooting through closets until she found one.

Ding dong, ding dong!

Back to plan A—hopefully whoever it was would go away if she sat there long enough. That or they'd wake Shaun.

"Shaun Weston! I know you're in there!" called out a feminine voice, and again Kara's first thought was of Shelly. The other woman. "Quit ignoring me this minute!"

Wait. Kara's world came screeching to a halt. Was that —

"Shaun Weston!"

Her mother.

Kara went achingly cold inside, paralyzed at the thought. Unease crawled across her skin, her heart tying in a knot. What could she be doing here? Want with Shaun?

The truth swallowed her like quicksand, gagging the air she tried to breathe in.

Her mother *had* put Shaun up to coming after her. That's why he believed all those awful things.

Worse, he'd out-and-out lied to her.

To Kara, there could be no greater betrayal. It was one thing to doubt in her. But to side with her parents? Quite another.

Oh God, why, *why* didn't she see what had been right in front of her face all along? So foolishly she'd let herself believe he'd come because he cared.

Of course it'd been her mother. Weeks ago, bitter with resentment after her mother had yet again tracked her down, trying her damnedest to push her into some Ivy League school—no different than trying to buy her soul, in Kara's opinion—she'd blurted out she didn't need the family money to survive. She made plenty of money working at the strip club.

So stupid of her, Kara realized now. But put her in a conversation—much less a room—with her mother or father and it was like clicking a lighter. Her defensive side flared a dangerous shade of red.

As it was now.

Nearly jumping from her skin when heels began quickly clacking across the wraparound porch, she thought about diving under the table. Dashing in the likely haunted basement. Anything not to have to face the woman who had given birth to her, not after all this time.

Speaking of which, wasn't this a birthday gift sent straight from Satan?

The way they'd left things that night her mother found the pregnancy test...what was left to be said?

She'd called her a dirty slut and Kara had retorted by calling her a bitch, only to receive a sharp slap across the face. But that wasn't the worst of it. It was the look in her mother's eyes—pure disdain. All her life, nothing but pure disdain. Kara was nothing but property to her parents—the little unwanted girl who'd killed their cherished firstborn son.

Then and there, in that moment of utter umbrage, Kara had sworn to be and do anything but what they wanted. Better to be what they expected—a slut—than their miserable puppet.

No, she would not go to prep school. Would not attend an Ivy League university and earn a useless degree so she could marry some rich, influential asshole who would belittle and cheat on her, like her father did her trophy wife mother.

Would not let them rip her away from the man she loved.

But they'd accomplished that anyway, now hadn't they? As a result, she'd run from them ever since, avoiding calls, avoiding visits, even when she'd become an adult and no longer needed to.

And here was her mother, face-to-face for the first time in eight long years. Round two, ready to begin.

* * * * *

"Fuck." Too late—to stop his swear. To stop Gloria. Shaun popped out of bed at a dangerous speed upon hearing that woman's voice bellowing his name.

Why hadn't she listened to him and stayed away?

Dressed in nothing but a pair of flannel pajama pants he'd quickly thrown on—but not fast enough—Shaun came to a halt directly behind Kara. "I know what you're thinking and you've got it all wrong."

"Oh, do you? So you didn't flat lie to me? You want to tell me how I should feel too?" Swallowed up by his big robe, shoulders squared, fists balled, she stood motionless, looking like the tiniest version of a fighter he'd ever seen. He wouldn't cross her path right now for any amount of money.

But he had, hadn't he? Ten-thousand dollars, half payable never. He wouldn't take the rest of Gloria's money if his house burned to the ground. Nor would he allow her to follow through with her plan.

In the checker curtained window of his kitchen door, there the bitch stood. Regret washed over him in a tidal wave. Agreeing to her outrageous plan, buying in to her story in the first place...he was a jackass. A total jackass.

Dammit. He should have just told Kara the truth and been out with it.

"You've every right to be upset." He took a step forward, almost afraid to get too close. "At least listen to me, let me explain."

"Don't bother. I get it." It was evident in her voice—she was battling tears. "In fact, it all makes perfect sense now."

"No, you – "

Not waiting for an invitation, Gloria swept the door open, looking sweet and feminine in her apricot-colored sun dress and complementing cream scarf, yet somehow dominating the room with her presence. Setting a white leather briefcase on

the kitchen table, she crossed her arms and faced them down with a dazzling, deceptive smile.

"Just come on in, Mother Dearest." Kara's words dripped with sarcasm. No rush of hugs, not any warmth at all. That was what concerned Shaun the most—how could any "loving", worried mother set eyes on her long-lost daughter for the first time in years and not break with emotion? At least not the kind that counted.

"You'll have to excuse us," Kara went on, shooting him a pointed glare. "We weren't expecting company. At least, *I* wasn't. But Shaun did cook a nice big breakfast."

Ah, crap. "Trust me, she wasn't invited."

"Trust you?"

"No, I certainly wasn't invited. Nor, Mr. Weston, was I certain if I'd find you here. But stay away? Have you lost your ridiculous mind?" Gloria's critical gaze swept the length of her robe-clad daughter, no doubt taking in her mussed hair and kiss-swollen lips before shooting his way. "Well, this is a fine disaster. I said seduce her *if* you must. Not bring her home and play house."

Kara gave a sharp intake, face etched in pain as her anger blazed, full of questions. Demanding answers. "Shaun?"

"Do *not* listen to her. I promise you, I can explain." God, all he wanted to do was pull her in his arms and erase this mess. Go back in time and be straight with her in the first place. Instead, teeth gnashed together, he ground out a slow, pointed, "She's misleading you. Just as she misled me." Shaun laid hard eyes on the woman whose information he'd foolishly trusted. "Turns out I don't work for liars."

"Oh, I see." Gloria's diamond earrings and glistening golden hair bobbed as she crooked her head, giving a little exhale of amusement. "But you sleep with them? She's bewitched you."

"What?" Talk about rubbing a man the wrong way. Shaun took a step forward, determined if nothing more to protect Kara from feeling bad about herself. "Now you hold on just a minute. This is my house and in it you'll treat Kara with respect. You've no call—"

"Mr. Weston, excuse me for interrupting, but I assure you, whatever excuses she's given, you need to be the reasonable one in the matter. The question of trustworthiness lies only in her. *She* told me she was stripping, no one else. Why would she tell such a disgusting falsehood about herself?"

"No, Mother. I told you I worked at a strip club."

"Semantics." Gloria's hand traveled to the briefcase's shiny gold lock, fiddling insinuatingly. "You've made a mess of things, Mr. Weston, but this can still be fixed. You can do what's right. For her, for yourself. Need I remind you of the money in question?"

This time's Kara's reaction was more of a flinched gasp that made him jerk back as well, slapped with the truth of what he'd done. "Oh, you're kidding me. She paid you?" She sounded as if she were choking to get the words out. "To seduce me?"

"No. *No.*" Shooting Gloria a warning look, Shaun insisted, "She convinced me you were in trouble—"

"Yes, with ten-thousand dollars. Kara, you know better than anyone this man is no different than the rest. They all use you, remember?" The demure smile she cast actually scared Shaun, it was so cunning and devoid of true emotion. "You're my daughter. A Morgan. Let me help you."

Said the queen with the poisoned apple.

"She isn't going to be a Morgan much longer." Wasn't, as he recalled, even using that name. "Just get out. Now."

He motioned to the door and Gloria huffed, glaring in a way that screamed she would not be thwarted.

"I see. So the arrangement is off." It was a statement, not a question. "Tell me then, why doesn't she know the whole story?"

The bitch—she'd said that on purpose, just to make Kara doubt him further.

That was the deal breaker. Turning on him with an accusing glare, Kara demanded, "There's more?" With a strangled cry of frustration, she bolted past her mother and from the house.

"Kara! Wait!"

"Oh, let her go," Gloria waved off. "She won't get far. She's barefoot and isn't even dressed. Now you and I need to address the five thousand dollars you owe me."

Yeah right—robe or no robe, shoes or no shoes, Kara's wasn't one to let her attire—or lack thereof—stop her. "Kara! *Please!*" he hollered, tearing off after her, determined not to lose her again if he had to chase her to the moon and back.

It was not, however, nearly that difficult.

A mere ten feet or so away, at the bend in the porch, she stood dead still, arms limp and hanging at her side as if in shock. "You knew about this then too?"

She sounded so small, so hurt.

Devouring the distance between them, he claimed her in his arms, surprised when she didn't fight him. "Sweetheart, I swear to you, all I—" Then he saw what she saw. In the driveway below waited her mother's Roll Royce and a higher end minivan that boasted an emblem reading *Tidewater Rehabilitation*, *An Institute of Hope and Well-being*. Kicked back against the silver-blue vehicle, clearly awaiting their patient, stood two men in scrubs.

Gloria didn't mess around, did she? But he'd be damned if he let her get away with this—there was nothing wrong with Kara. Not that Gloria and her husband didn't cause themselves, damn them!

"So, the plan is to have me committed?"

"I won't lie. That was the plan. But not anymore."

"Tell her that. Since you two are such great buddies."

With a huff, she attempted to shove his arms away but he was holding on for dear life. "I will, okay. Now listen to me. I need you to give me your trust, Kara. Your just-because love and trust. Can you do that?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, Kara, I'm not. What I told you was the truth—every last word. I needed to know what happened to you. Needed to see you one more time, to convince myself we were over. But we weren't. There was just a little more detail I was nervous to admit, but I swear, I was going to confess all today. Exactly why I had you make that promise and promise you did. Heart only, Kara. Please."

Her gaze, wide as a hoot owl's, she stared up at him as if she were seeing him for the first time—as if he'd gone mad—and he could've sworn the only thing on her agenda was slapping him good.

Instead, she drew in a ragged breath and jerked her head. "Because when I look in your eyes I just know," she whispered, exhaling hard. "Okay, fine."

She wasn't exactly doing backflips but Shaun would take what he could get.

"You know I love you, sweetheart, I do." His protective side flaring a dangerous shade of red, he took her by the shoulders, gripping the small bones possessively. "Your mother and I are going to have a little chat." Then, fighting for control of his voice, turned her toward the door. "I want you to go inside. Right now, Kara."

"Oh no she's not." One hand rested lazily on her hip, Gloria stood, blocking the way. "She's coming with me, to a home where she can get help."

" $Mom_{\iota}I$ -"

"Ignore her," Shaun cut her off. "Walk past and go inside. Lock the door. And, Gloria, so help you God if you try to stop Kara, it'll be the first and only time I hurt a lady."

"No," Kara protested, crooking that stubborn chin at him. "You know, I think I'd rather stay here and hear what you have to say."

"I'd rather you be safe and sound inside." He hitched a thumb toward the van. "Who knows how much she bribed those jokers?"

"But-"

"No buts."

"Fine." Casting him a frustrated glare, Kara pulled away and walked stiffly past her mother. "It's much funner when you're bossy in the bedroom," she flipped off, flashing her mother an insolent smile. "Master."

"Remember that later." He grinned, waiting until the door clicked shut behind her to turn his attention to Gloria. "Let's get one thing clear—she is not doing drugs."

Folding her arms, Gloria fortified her stance, looking ready for war. "How can you know for sure?"

"My mother was an addict, so trust me, I'd know."

"Clearly she's a sex addict then."

A scathing remark that almost made him laugh, considering their morning. "They don't generally institutionalize people for that."

* * * * *

Tidewater Rehabilitation. Kara was mad. Livid really. Hurt and altogether insulted. This was the lengths her mother resorted to in order to pin her under thumb—labeling her crazy at whatever cost?

Considering that, she should *not* find her mother's snide comment downright hilarious. All the same, poised in the windowsill, ear pressing the thin gingham curtain to the cool pane and straining to hear, Kara couldn't help but snort back laughter—trying her best to hold it in so they wouldn't realize she was eavesdropping.

A sex addict—if she stuck around Shaun much longer, maybe. He could be the cause and the cure.

A cutting thought, taking into account just how let down by him she felt. Of course if she been him she wouldn't have dared admit the truth as well. Last night, all considering, she might've murdered him.

Three sharp heel clacks radiated off the porch and Kara could almost envision her mother's waggling, well-manicured finger. "Well! She certainly has you wrapped around her little finger, you foolish man. Don't you see this 'protective' thing you have going on is only going to hurt her in the long run?"

As if what her mother was doing could be considered an attempt to help her?

And yet...some nagging, annoying little part of Kara knew she actually believed she was. That Mother *thought* she was acting in her best interest—if only she had a clue what that was. Or ever had.

Just like Shaun had pointed out last night—her parents did love her, in their own funny way. Why else? Why else indeed.

Shifting her weight, Kara tucked a strand of escapee hair behind her ear, anxious to hear how Shaun would respond.

As if reading her thoughts, Shaun bit out, "You know, last night I reminded Kara that you love her. But about now, I can't quite tell..." he hesitated as if carefully weighing his words, "if you truly care and you're just too cold-natured to show your daughter some empathy and understanding. Or is this whole mommy-to-the-rescue act a sham? Maybe she's right, you *do* just want her tucked away so she isn't an embarrassment. I mean really, an art gallery in France?"

He gave another long pause, letting those stinging words sink in—and into Kara they did. Not about her parents but Shaun. His stance. Whatever he'd done up to now,

whatever lies he'd told, with that kind of statement—his tone belying his disgust—how could she not count him on her side?

"But this I *do* know," he continued almost forcefully, "Kara is not stripping. She is not doing drugs. She is not a sex addict. Your detective was *wrong* and if I thought for one second something was truly off-kilter with her, I'd seat belt her in that van myself. But there isn't."

Thank you, Shaun. Kara opened her mouth, yearning oh so much to back up his little speech with a few defensive words of her own, but her mother's scathing response yanked her back to reality.

"And you're so sure, having been around her for what...less than twenty-four hours?"

How true that was.

Something in Kara sank. Had it really only been a day?

For a man who'd thought so little of her yesterday, *why* defend so adamantly now? Of course she'd proven him wrong at every turn. But he had claimed looking in her eyes was all it had taken. That he knew the truth in his heart. She wanted to believe him, to offer the same unconditional love despite everything that had happened. But some nagging, doubtful voice in her head had to wonder—

"Perhaps," her mother suggested, "the wrong head is doing your thinking for you." Touché.

Luckily, Shaun knew just the thing to say to whack those doubts into the outfield. "You're wrong, Gloria. I *know* your daughter, always have, and a lot better than you. It didn't take me long to realize the idiot I was being. You see, when you told me about Kara, it wasn't her I was seeing, not really. All I could think about was my mother, what that lifestyle did to her. In a way, really it was her I went after—" His voice broke and he cleared his throat, finishing with, "Not Kara."

His mother. "Oh Shaun," Kara whispered to herself. She'd been so caught up with what he was doing to her, she hadn't stopped to really think about the awful things he'd been through in his childhood. How that must've impacted his actions when so misled. No wonder...

Feeling as if a missing piece had just been fitted into the puzzle, Kara shuttered her lashes and wrapped herself snug in his warm, oversized robe, placing herself in his shoes. Yes, in hindsight...she could see his reaction. Understand a little better—it hadn't been entirely about her.

"My daughter, Mr. Weston, has not been reasonable since she was thirteen," her mother protested, sounding almost pouty. "Naturally, I expect the worst."

"From my standpoint, I'd say you invite the worst and deny the best parts of her."

Oh yes, how true that was. Squeezing her lids shut a little tighter, Kara decided she couldn't have said it better herself. Too bad it would never change.

"Pray, what's that supposed to mean?"

"I remember Kara telling me this story about her childhood once." Kara's eyes flashed open—wide open—as he gave an ironic grunt. "About how she received the Presidential Academic Achievement award in fifth grade. Your husband couldn't bother to attend the ceremony and when she returned home to show off the certificate, she was reminded Charles had all 'A's. No mediocre 'B's for him."

He remembered that? She hardly did herself...and yet the moment was one of many that defined her. Her childhood came flashing forth, flipping through her mind images one by one. A lifetime of never being enough.

"No more." Shaun's threatening edge punched through the air. "Here's how it's going to go—you're going to get in your car and leave, and make sure your goons follow."

"Of course I'm not."

"Of course you *are* because, guess what? I know your plan—I was part of it, after all. I know you're bribing judges and doctors. I know you know Kara isn't crazy or any degree of it. So you try to commit her, try to take her away from me, and I'm going to the cops with the story. Or maybe the newspapers. Didn't you mention your husband wanted to run for some political seat? I may be a poor dirt farmer but I can make a mighty uproar. Your choice." Soft thuds, accented by the occasional squeak ambled across the floor boards toward the kitchen. "You lose this one, Gloria. Walk away."

"Well, I see then. Anything else you have to say, Mr. Weston?"

His footsteps drew to a pause.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is, and you'd best hear me." In the early morning breeze birds chirped, innocent to the battle occurring. The air seemed to charge and Kara's breath hitched in her throat in anticipation of what he would say. "You have a genuinely beautiful, highly intelligent, wholly *good* daughter in there. People call her Hero. *Hero* and for a reason. She's got the biggest, kindest heart I know. Wants to help troubled kids like I was, make a difference in the world. If that doesn't say something, what does? And no, she won't accept your conditional handouts. She's finding her own way, which, to my way of thinkin', only reflects her strength. Need I mention those dazzling eyes, that heart-sparking laugh and great sense of humor? For hell's sake, I'm pretty damn sure she's as close to an angel as a man—or mother—can get."

An angel? Her? She wanted to scathe...but...

No longer could she let herself.

His words had ignited a slow, flickering heat, one that washed over her skin, her heart and soul, warming her and growing stronger with every compliment he made. No one had ever stood up for her like that before. Made her feel so cherished.

And deep down inside, she knew she deserved it. That it was true. Hero. It was an appreciation she'd worked hard for years for, in many different ways, but only now, hearing the praises Shaun sang, did she truly realize *who* she was.

Suddenly, some buried, hungry part of her released...let go. Tears dripped down her cheeks, not of sadness but of happiness, never more pure, never more poignant.

It didn't matter that her mother made no reply, didn't matter that she was more than likely concocting some dismissive retort at that very second.

What did matter was the truth. The ultimate, essential *truth* Kara had somehow managed to dismiss her entire life—that she *was* good. Was worthy and deserving. Every time Shaun gazed down at her with that adoring look, she'd felt it inside her, nagging away to be released.

The truth...the one she'd been trying to cover up throughout her life, in some misplaced attempt to punish herself for her brother's death, led by her parents' example.

"Mr. Weston, I do love my daughter," her mother spoke finally. "I want what's best for her."

"Yeah well, only Kara knows what's best for Kara. You ever hear that saying you don't know what you got 'til it's gone?" Shaun posed to the silent woman he'd just put in her place. "Well, Gloria, that might be your mistake. But it won't be mine." Then he walked away, calling back, "I intend to marry that girl."

Did he now?

Chapter Eleven

"Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry."

- William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Shaun found her in the dining room, staring into nothing, moisture streaking her face. As he walked into the room, hands stuffed in the pockets of his flannel pajama pants, her wide, dark gaze shifted to him. "You don't have to say anything."

"Like hell I don't." He wasn't letting her slip away on some stupid technicality, not this time. Not ever again.

"No," she reiterated, her voice unreadable as she drew herself to her feet, hugging her chest. She nibbled at her lower lip, slowly contemplating him. "I heard everything, so you really don't. But I do have something that you need to know."

So she'd been listening? Dammit...what he had to say, he wanted to say to her himself. "Kara, I know I lied, but you have to believe what I told your mother. Every word of it is the—"

"Truth," she finished for him, sauntering his direction. "Cupcake, give *me* a chance to speak."

"Okay." She came to stand in front of him and laid fingers to his bare chest. Tapping two little taps. "I'm all ears, sweetheart."

Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath, and when she opened that stunning black-coffee gaze again, the happiness that glimmered there gave him renewed hope. "There's one other thing I failed to tell you last night," she started slowly, punctuating her every word. "Today. It just so happens to be...it's my birthday."

It's my birthday.

Arching on tiptoe, she planted an enduring kiss to his cheek, soft, sweet lips on gruff stubble that sent sparks detonating down his spine on a mission to reach to his cock. "What?"

He'd expected her to say lots of things—how dare you...fuck you...maybe even thank you, to name a few—but not that. Not this lingering kiss, her mouth brushing over his cheek, meeting his mouth with, "My real one. So, don't you want to give me my present?"

Oh, did he ever. "Heard everything I said, did you?"

Grinning, she nodded and he would have loved nothing more than to drop to his knees right then and there.

But this was their second chance—to make things right, to start out right. And dammit, this time they would. "Come on, Kara, you're not upset? Because—"

"We really have to talk?"

"We have to talk."

"Okay. How about this? You *lied* to me." Backing off her kiss, she hitched an accusatory finger his direction, one that made his breath catch. "But...I've lied to you too. And you were right last night."

"Nothing a man likes hearing more." That brought a smile. "I was, wasn't I?"

"Don't let it get to your ego. But yeah..." Crooking that finger, she swirled it around her ear—sign language for crazy. Gaze twinkling. "Head not heart. We'll both consider this good practice."

"So, it's your real birthday, huh? Pretty ironic."

"Pretty convenient." To that, her brows waggled in suggestion.

He knew what she expected, what she wanted—starting with that proposal he'd bigmouthed off about to her mother. "Hmmmm...seems to me taking the surprise out of it is no fun."

Enlisting every bit of willpower he possessed, Shaun took her hand in his. Gazing at her—this woman who he wanted to be his world through eternity—he squeezed her fingers. "Soon though. Real soon."

This time, he was doing things right. Thoroughly. With a ring.

Turning her arm, he laid a kiss to her open palm then wrist, and her immediate response was to curl her fingers about his chin, caressing. "Better hurry then. After all this time, I expect to be made an honest woman out of."

Oh, he had no intention of waiting, not too long at least. His luck, if he did, some idiot thing would happen to throw them off course.

Only this time, he was unshakable. *They* were unshakable.

Shaun yanked her to him, looping an arm about her waist and drawing her flush against him. "It really is forever this time."

"No this time about it. It's always been so."

And in their hearts, official proposal or not, they both knew it as he swept her off her feet and into his arms, dashing through the dining room door that led to the foyer and up the stairs, leaping like a frog just turned prince, full speed ahead to the bedroom.

* * * * *

"So, what do you want for your birthday?"

Depositing her on the bed with a flop, Shaun leapt over her, whisking open the oversized robe she wore without preamble.

"Do you have to ask?" Instinctively, Kara parted for him, spreading her legs, angling her arms wide, posturing herself for him. "I think it's rather obvious."

"Not really. But maybe I want to hear you say it."

"However you want to use me," she whispered. "I'm yours for the taking. I belong to you, every last inch of me, Shaun Weston."

No more would she allow self-doubt to rule, no more would she run.

After eight years and just as many states, Kara knew where home was. Right here, in his arms.

"Seems like more of a gift to me. But I swear," came his gruff reply as he drank in the sight of her body, sweeping that golden gaze up and down her length until his eyes met hers and locked in. "That's a privilege I swear not to abuse."

Wasting no time, his mouth crashed down upon her left breast, enveloping her nipple and drawing it sharply past his teeth. Feasting with tongue and teeth, both licking and teasing as he grazed the responsive area, nipped down then switched up his exploits, bathing her with sensual affection.

The need that hit Kara when his hot mouth collided with her sensitized skin was like a lightning bolt that made her body go rigid beneath him, every muscle knotting, her fists clenching, just trying to bear his glorious touch. Somehow craving more, wanting what she most definitely couldn't handle. Not at the moment.

To her dismay, his teeth tugged at her nipple then retreated, and Shaun wrenched back, throwing himself from the bed and landing gracefully on his feet. "That's just the appetizer. I'll be right back. Jiffy quick."

Oh, she'd heard that before!

"Shaun!" Her squeal of protest rent the air. Not now! Who cared about condoms, anyway? He wanted kids, didn't he? "Come back!"

"One thing! And don't you dare move! No peeking!"

Oh fun!

Not.

"This is my birthday," she pouted.

"Exactly." Behind her, she could hear him rummaging. Had no idea what he might be up to—hardly wanted to wait to find out—but she forced herself to lie there patiently for him. To trust in him, promising herself Shaun would make whatever he was doing worth it.

That or she'd seriously give him that kick she kept swearing to.

The air in the room seemed like ice to her hot skin as she anxiously anticipated his return, straining to hear his every movement, gauging what they might mean. Three steps to the right, some sort of metal squeaking. More heavy footsteps to the left, a drawer opening.

Moments later—and much quicker than earlier, thank God—he returned, pouncing back on the bed at her side and crawling over her. "Now, birthday girl, close your eyes."

Doing as she was bade—almost—Kara shuttered her lashes, tremors washing over her body. Her heart tickling anxiously. Just *what* was he up to?

"All the way," he insisted. "And don't open them until I say."

"Not fair." Sulking, she pressed her lids shut against any light, fighting to keep them that way as something cool and tiny—an quarter inch wide, if that—with an angular edge, traced ever so lightly over her chest, traveling across her breast, lightly scratching. In the darkness that encompassed her, Kara struggled to place the item that was almost sharp but not exactly, that left a path of fiery tingles wherever it swept. Over her breasts. Around her nipples, encircling them and they puckered fiercely in response. To circle the diamond in her bellybutton, traveling south...

Between her folds. And then the object seemed to change shape, laying flat and encircling her clit, a pointy knot protruding at the top.

A ring.

"I've noticed you've taken to using the Weston name."

"I—yes..." Her lashes fluttered, the temptation to open her eyes proved nearly unbearable now that she knew what he was up to.

But then again, not precisely.

"Eyes closed," he reminded. "Now...what do you say we make that binding?"

"It already is. I had it legally changed. But if you're asking—"

"I'm asking." Kara sucked in a sharp breath as his mouth suctioned over the ring, pulling her clit through the band. Drawing sharply, nursing the bud with strong suckles. Milking her into madness. "Marry me, Kara Morgan. Be my wife, the mother of my children. My everything. Swear it to me."

He followed that request by again tugging her hot flesh through the cool metal. Asserting exquisite pressure.

Clutching at the sheets, Kara gasped, trying to find the words he wanted as waves of pleasure slammed into her, blurring the edges of reality. "Shaun...oh yes..." She cried out, "Oh yes! I will!" Over and over again as her clit swelled inside the ring, the intense way he sucked at the nub driving her to a rapid pinnacle. "I will, I will!"

Just when she thought she could have exploded into oblivion, he pulled back, dropping the ring to her belly. Leaving her lying there, breathing hard, a needy pile of mush as he again insisted, "No opening those eyes now, birthday girl."

The next thing she knew, his fingers were instigating there way between her butt cheeks, wet with lube as his pinky pushed into her anus and she mewed with delight.

Slowly he circled the digit then retreated, returning a second time with something bumpy and unknown. Little balls it felt like, hard and round and silky with lube as he pushed them inside her a tiny bit at a time. Every muscle in her body clenched, including her anus, which pulled and pinched at his finger and whatever unknown operation he refused to allow her to open her eyes to.

When he was apparently satisfied, he slipped his finger free, leaving the balls behind as he lifted her butt cheeks in his hands, aligning his cock with her pussy. Driving in with no preamble, with such force it threw the ring from her belly, she felt Shaun scramble to catch the piece of jewelry before it was lost in the sheets. "You're not going anywhere!"

"No, I'm not..." Sucking in a sharp breath as he plunged in a second time, she smiled when he snagged her hand and entwined it in his, the ring between them. "Not in this lifetime."

"I meant the ring," he chuckled.

"I know." Despite his warnings, she opened her eyes, locking her gaze with his. "And I meant what I just said."

With a silent nod, he slid the ring on her finger where it belonged—a beautiful, simple marquis diamond in white gold—then enveloped her hand in his, holding on for dear life. "Happy birthday, Kara love. My precious little Hero. May we always be happy."

"We will be. But just so you know...I'm a horrible cook."

He threw back and hooted. "That's okay. You're everything else that matters to me. I'll only say it one more time. Shelly, now I'm real sorry if I've hurt her but it was always you. Always."

He took her then, hard and fast, with sure thrusts that rapidly drove her to a pinnacle. Only when she was arching against him, breathing hard with need and demanding more, did he reach between her butt cheeks, giving the balls a slight tug then another, sending her cascading into a powerful orgasm.

Every inch of her ignited, wound with searing ecstasy as her pussy pulsed and he drove onto her over and over. Toyed with those balls, slowly, torturously removing them.

Fiercely she came, thrashing and biting down on her lips to keep from screaming as the chain-thingy pulled completely free, leaving her swirling...falling...crashing...

And he buried himself in her, spilling his seed.

No condom, she realized then with certain completeness. An easy smile. For a guy like Shaun—the randy young man who'd nonetheless refused to make love to her until she was eighteen—she knew with unwavering confidence his commitment couldn't be more solid. Just how much he believed in her.

Tenderly he leaned down, kissing her on the forehead before he bothered to withdraw, stretching alongside her.

"Mmmm...." Kara smiled. "Just what was that?"

"That was me, christening the family heirlooms. New and old." His smoldering amber eyes rested on her hand. "That...that was Nan's. Really special to me. And

now...it's ours." She noticed he did not say "mine" or even "hers". *Ours.* How she liked the sound of that. "And this..." He brought his right hand up, holding in it a long, dangling pearl necklace. "For Cinderella to wear to the ball."

"Oh my God." Her gaze flashed from the pearls to him then back. "Those are real, aren't they?"

With a slow grin, he nodded. "Yup. I'm a scrimper and saver when it comes to spending money on myself. So I'd managed to set quite a chunk of cash aside out of the money Henry paid me for working on the farm that year. When you told me it had been your birthday, I bought the necklace first chance I got to go to town. It's been waiting in my dresser all this time."

Real pearls and he'd stuck them up her butt? Insanity! How would she ever wear them anywhere, ever again, without thinking about...

But then, that was his intention, wasn't it? Some wicked part of Kara had to laugh, picturing herself in years to come, dressed up for some fancy dinner party or musical, remembering right now. This moment forever—the day, hopefully, they'd made their first child. The day she became his forever, in every way. "Oh Shaun, I love you. But next time—"

"Next time I'll make you come harder than ever." Slowly, he pooled the necklace on her belly, his lazy grin spreading as he abandoned it there. "My creative side comes out, being with you. Suppose you'll just have to adjust."

"Well," she huffed, thinking she certainly wasn't going to turn that down—expensive things, as she'd learned in her lifetime, weren't all they were cracked up to be anyway. "You make a convincing case."

To that, he chuckled low and deep. "Sex addict, aren't you?" Teasingly, his finger roamed along her jaw, leaving shudders in its path. Awakening her anew. "Is there any hope?"

"Never," she laughed.

"Perfect. Just the way I want you." Tugging her hand to his mouth, he planted a kiss to the ring, turning serious. "Forever isn't long enough to love you, Kara Weston. Happy birthday..."

Epilogue

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea.

My love as deep; the more I give to thee,

The more I have, for both are infinite."

– William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

One hand holding her cell phone against her ear, the other resting on her protruding belly, Kara walked toward her brother's grave, her feet kicking up the dancing leaves that littered the cemetery grounds in the bright, sunny fall morning. Shaun strolled beside her, holding a huge bouquet of sunflowers—one of the many crops they successfully raised on the farm this summer.

"It's me, Mother. I wanted you to know, I've made a decision. I'm keeping the check." The envelope had arrived the day before, delivered via official courier. Two hundred thousand dollars, along with a note.

Congratulations on the marriage. Love, Gloria

Kara, being no fool, realized of course the gift was one with strings—her mother couldn't possibly have her daughter living like a dirt-poor farmer. It was, in essence, yet another invitation back into the lifestyle of the rich and miserable.

She'd cashed the check first thing this morning anyway.

"I'm so glad," her mother cooed. "I hardly thought you'd turn it away, being in such desperate straits. It'll tide you over until perhaps you can convince that man to sell off some property. My daughter deserves nice things."

The last sentence brought a smile. Her mother, she realized, wasn't about to change. But Kara had. Kara no longer needed to prove—or disprove—herself to anyone. "Actually, we're not considering selling the farm. Shaun and I have decided to make it into a home for misplaced children. We're going to start our own nonprofit organization and dedicate our lives to creating a difference for kids in the foster care system. Yours was our first donation to Nan's Haven, so thank you."

"Oh I... Well. That's so...nice." Judging by her sputtering, Kara had definitely taken her by surprise, just as expected.

"Yes, it is. Just imagine how positively this will reflect on Daddy and his political career, his daughter being a philanthropist. Perhaps you can throw us a charity dinner." Kara cast Shaun a knowing grin, loving the way his eyes met hers with a twinkle.

"Listen, I have to go, Mom. But perhaps I'll meet you and some of your girlfriends for lunch soon. I'm sure they'll want to her all about Nan's Haven and help out too."

"Why...yes, of course."

"Bye, Mom." Being rich, Kara had figured out, didn't have to be such a bitch. It was all what she made of it. Strings were okay, long as she was the one holding them.

Maybe...just maybe...she and her mother could get along after all. Perfect or imperfect, Gloria did love her. She realized that now.

Family. Unlike Shaun, she'd always had plenty of it—a mom and dad, three brothers. But she'd always felt as if she were problem tacked on to the end of it, not a part of it. Had resented the whole lot of them and wanted nothing more than to get away.

But being with Shaun, having his baby growing inside her, family had taken on a whole new meaning. Never had she wanted it more, perfect or imperfect. Shaun had taught her the value of love, true love like Nan and Henry had given him.

And she wanted to give that to other children, lots and lots of them, because when she saw his smile, his happiness, she was witness to the good those wonderful people had done for Shaun...

She could give that too. And would. So, she was done with questioning her own worth.

Charles may have had the best grades, the most potential, but in her eyes, he had something else even more important—a heart of gold. He'd given his life for her, and now she would give hers for others.

He wanted to see his sister run faster, be better, and by God, she would, and in the way that counted most. She would continue to be a good and giving person. Lay resentment and past hurts completely aside.

"So," Shaun posed, interrupting her deep thoughts. "You didn't tell her about the baby."

"No...not yet. But soon. One bomb at a time." With a short laugh, Kara traded the phone for the bouquet. "She's going to be all over us like flies on honey. But maybe that can be a good thing."

"I like that positive thinking."

"Yeah," she nodded, "me too." Dropping to one knee, Kara set the beautiful yellow flowers on her brother's grave. "Hey there."

As if his spirit were saying hello, a cool fall wind bustled around her, renewing Kara's smile.

This time, there would be no tears.

"I sleep at night now," she whispered. "It's so great." Pausing, she searched for the right words, knowing what she came here to say but finding the depths of what she wanted to express couldn't be captured in a simple sentence. "So, um...I guess I wanted you to know how happy I am. To finally say thank you for saving me. I know I haven't

said that to you before because I guess I was never truly grateful. I always thought you made a mistake...but you didn't, Charles. *You didn't..."* Gulping back emotion as Shaun stooped down, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing, she laid a hand to her belly. As if he could sense her emotions, the baby fluttered inside her. Her son. "His name will be Charles. Charles Henry."

About the Author

Slip between the sheets with Alyssa Brooks, erotic romance author.

Author of fun, flirty and contemporary erotic romance and erotica, Alyssa Brooks currently writes for several publishers including Ellora's Cave. She resides in Amish country, Pennsylvania, where every day is a little crazier and the house gets a little messier. Taming her bad-boy husband is a never-ending task, but Alyssa's become a pro at giving him plenty of incentive. Proud mom to a young daughter, two stepsons, and a puppy that has a particular taste for shoes and unrolling toilet paper, Alyssa loves her hectic existence and is ever grateful for her awesome job as an author, where with a little research she can become anyone, doing anything, and fall in love over and over and over again. The imaginary sex is great too!

Alyssa welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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