



*Lust Unmasked*

*By*

*Lillith Payne*

## **Lust Unmasked by Lillith Payne**

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### **Lust Unmasked**

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**Dedication**

For my husband, my unmasked lust.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Chapter One**

The noise level in the house was just short of deafening from the orchestra doing their sound checks, and Lara was thankful to slip away to the guestroom she had been assigned. According to her watch, she had just enough time to lie on the huge blue silk-covered bed for an hour before showering and changing into the ridiculous costume Maureen Pierson had chosen. The maid assured her Ann would come back in an hour to wake her and help her into the yards of fabric that would be her dress for the evening. Lara decided not to view the dress until after her nap, hoping she'd feel stronger.

Kicking off her shoes, she tossed her jacket on the chair and lay across the soft coverings. The down-filled duvet fluffed around her as her weight hit the cover. She lay there for all of three minutes before resigning herself to the fact that her headache wouldn't go away of its own accord. Forcing herself up, she moved to her purse and pulled the dreaded white tablet from the case. She swallowed it dry, hoping it would ease the throbbing in her temples. The pill stuck in the back of her throat, and she moved to the carafe on the bedside table. With the aid of a full glass of fresh water, the pill finally made its way down her throat. Relieved, she again dropped onto the bed.

If it hadn't been for the party about to start she would have toughed it out, knowing most of her pain was due to the long trip she'd endured in the last forty-eight hours and the three time zones she'd traveled through. Belatedly, she remembered the antihistamine she took

somewhere over the Rocky Mountains. It helped her to breathe on the stuffy airplane and made her drowsy enough to sleep for the rest of the flight, having to be roused by the steward just before landing in Georgia. That was when the headache had set in, along with the terrible sinus pain.

She was relieved there was a car waiting for her just as Maureen had promised. She knew her driver, Philip; settling into the back seat of the luxury vehicle, she let him take her to her destination, appreciating that she wasn't stuck in the back of a stuffy cab with no air-conditioning. It had happened before, and this was much nicer.

*Just get through tonight and you can have a week off,* she promised herself. Arriving at the townhouse in the center of Atlanta, she found the corner of her lips twisting as vague memories of the renovation floated back to her. Just when she started to feel better, they arrived. Again she was shuffled into the home, her luggage swept away and a note pressed into her hands:

*Lara,*

*Rest and relax for an hour. Ann will help you into your costume. I'm so looking forward to this evening. I have you to thank for my beautiful new home. Enjoy the compliments—you've earned them. I hope you like your costume. See you tonight.*

*Maureen*

Lara reread the note and knew she couldn't beg off, headache or not. Instead, she'd suck back the pain and tiredness and put on her best smile. Maureen Pierson was a wonderful and kind woman, and Lara had enjoyed working with her. *Just a few minutes of sleep, that's all I need,* she kept telling herself. Finally she closed her eyes, and sleep overcame her rapidly.

Her dream was hazy, filled with a man's hands pulling her close to his body, his chest hard and firm against her back. His breath moved the short hairs on the back of her neck with each word he spoke. Lara crossed her hands over his, holding them to her. The peaceful feeling inside her was something new, foreign. He seemed to sense it somehow and pulled

her tighter to him. His words were a mere whisper; she really couldn't make them out, only the intent that he was there to protect her.

When the realization struck, she knew she had moved his hands from her shoulders to her breasts. His strong fingers cupped her, pulling on her nipples until they hardened under his touch. The awakening it created inside warmed her. She knew he was aroused, could feel him pressing against her back. Like his hands, he was large and hard, strong and pulsing against her. She felt herself go slick inside, knew the moist heat was slipping from her body. Lara moved against him and heard him sigh.

She wanted to twist around and see who was creating this feeling of well-being, but he wouldn't let her. Instead, he just kept whispering, "I'll protect you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant Pierson looked at his reflection in the mirror before him. If it wasn't his Aunt Maureen asking him to wear this ridiculous Rhett Butler suit, he would have refused. But the soft spot he held her in allowed her to override his better judgment sometimes. He took one last look at the black suit with a silver brocade vest and shook his head. Knowing tonight was important, he'd acquiesced. Hell, he'd even managed to get there with time to spare. That alone should be reason enough not to have to wear the damn mask Harold had lain beside the suit in the guest room he'd used to shower and change in.

The black thing looked hot; he cringed at the thought of wearing it all night. One large hand swiped through the top of his thick black hair as he debated his options. He grabbed it, thinking he'd misplace it somewhere downstairs and that would be the end of it. He'd enjoy the housewarming she was giving to show off her new home in the heart of Atlanta and head back to his ranch tomorrow.

Stepping into the hallway, he heard laughter coming from the room across the hall and wondered who'd been assigned to sleep there for the weekend. Probably another of Maureen's prospective brides for him to



survey. He shook his head and wandered downstairs. As he moved away, another round of laughter came from behind the closed door, and he wished he was inside with whoever it was; at least he or she was having a good time. The endless hours stretched out before him.

In the last year his definition of a good time had changed. Once the first man to buy a round, he now found himself home early most evenings. Sports on the television and a book in his hand ended most of his days. He told himself it was just the move and getting settled. There was so much work he wanted to do on the ranch, he'd been content to skip his once often trips to the city. Even tonight, he'd rather have been home. The prospect of Maureen matching him with another of Atlanta's belles was annoying. They'd had the same talk every time they met since his return to the area. His assurances of his well-being fell on deaf ears. Maureen had decided it was time for him to take a wife. He shook his head at the memory of their last go-round.

Grant had been thinking about marriage himself, but he'd never admit it to his aunt. He hadn't even gotten his own mind wrapped around the concept yet. Instead, he always took the fallback position. He was polite to the women he was paired with and still hadn't given any of them a second date. On the first date he'd impressed upon his perspective mate his thoughts on being matched up, but acknowledged he took each date to appease his aunt. Most of the women understood his subtle message, *I'm here under duress—don't get any lasting ideas*, if they were smart. A few had decided he wanted to be the sought-after one, and several campaigns were launched for his affections. None had succeeded.

Grant knew deep inside he'd know when he met the right woman; it would be his choice in his time. Until then, tonight was a party, and he hadn't been to one in a long time. *Relax and enjoy it*, he told himself. *You're stuck here anyway!* The sound of a woman's deep and throaty laugh from the room across the hall floated past him again, taunting him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lara awoke to find Ann placing a tea tray on a side table. "Feel

better, Ms. Rhodes?" Ann enquired. Lara stretched as she forced herself to move from the warmth of the bed. Her headache had lessened, thank God, as well as the sinus pain. Maybe she would make it through the evening after all.

"Much better, Ann, thanks for asking." She took the teacup that was offered and smiled. "I thought we decided months ago that you'd call me Lara?"

"Yes, miss, I mean Lara." Ann returned the smile she was receiving. "Too many years of training," she teased. "You have enough time for a quick shower, and I'll be back to help you into your dress."

"What was the final decision?" she asked, a conspirator's smile on her face. Ann blushed, then shook her head.

"What else could it be?" She and Lara both laughed at the question. Of course the theme of the housewarming would be the Civil War. While other time periods had been discussed, both women knew Maureen well enough to understand her preoccupation with the era and accepted her decisions gracefully.

"How bad is my costume?" Lara asked, one eyebrow cocked. Ann studied her thoughtfully before answering.

"Trust me, it could have been worse! Maureen is wearing emerald green to offset her red hair and green eyes. Think Scarlett O'Hara and the draperies!"

"Oh God, she didn't!" Lara's mind instantly conjured up an image of Carol Burnett dressed like Scarlett O'Hara for a skit on her old comedy show, the green velvet gown still holding the curtain rod straight across her back. She pulled back a smile behind her teacup. Lara sneezed several times in succession, Ann blessing each one. Automatically she moved across the room and closed the windows.

"No, but close. Harold and I toned her down a little, actually. She'll look stunning tonight, and so will you. Go shower and I'll get the dress ready."

Lara handed her back the empty cup and accepted the half of sandwich she was handed. Knowing it was going to be a long night, she had to get something in her stomach. Her head cold was almost gone, a

cold she blamed on her cross-country flight earlier in the week.

\* \* \* \* \*

Under the hot pulses of the water, Lara closed her eyes and remembered a hazy version of her dream. She didn't have to let her own fingers wander down to understand the heat that poured from her body. Using the soft washcloth, she soaped her whole body, giving special attention to her sexual want. Moments later, she knew it was a vain attempt. Her release was as elusive as the man from her dream. Instead, she turned on the cold water and pushed back the memory. There were other things she had to focus on tonight; self-satisfaction would have to wait until later. Much later, she realized.

Returning from the shower, she sat in front of the antique dressing table and applied fresh makeup. This should have been the best part of her job—she'd always enjoyed the housewarming, getting to show off her newest accomplishment. But somehow, it was all getting old. The constant traveling had once seemed exciting; now it was boring and a waste of her time. Even in these modern days of cell phones and computers, she spent too many hours sitting beside strangers on airplanes and not being productive. Soon she knew she'd have to find one place and settle down. If she expected to have any version of a normal life, she wouldn't find it on the run. While she still liked the variety of her job, Lara was feeling restless.

Lately, designing interiors for everyone else had become tiresome. When, if ever, would she find a house to make her own? More importantly, would she ever find her Mr. Right to share it with her, along with all her dreams of a family? She knew when the time was right for her she'd start her family, with or without the perfect mate. But deep down, she wanted a husband to share it all. With a sigh, she deepened the blush on her cheeks, knowing she was pale and looked drained.

Thinking back over the time she'd spent with Maureen designing the new interiors, Lara realized she'd come to respect her as a person and valued the friendship they'd built along the way. It was the same with

Ann and Harold. They had been with Miss Maureen since long before her husband had passed. Ann was an assistant of all sorts, and Harold was the butler. While nobody had ever assigned those titles to the two, Lara knew how fiercely they loved and protected Maureen. Her teasing with Ann wasn't meant to be malicious, as she knew they both cared about her.

A soft knock on the door and Ann was back. She was dressed in a bronze-colored gown of silk complete with hoop skirt. Lara thought she looked wonderful, the color offsetting her brown hair and light brown eyes.

"Beautiful, Ann, simply beautiful," she told her and watched the older woman blush.

"Harold thought so too," she whispered as her cheeks reddened. "Now, your hair has to go up," she added, changing the subject.

While Lara put the final additions on her makeup, Ann maneuvered her golden brown hair into a twist and anchored it to the back of her head with an endless number of pins. She left the ends hanging down and used a curling iron to twist them into a wild assortment of curls that hung at different lengths. When she was done, they both surveyed the new hairstyle in the mirror.

"Perfect, just perfect."

"Thank you, Ann. I never would have thought to do that." Again, she sneezed several times and watched Ann in the mirror.

"You never spend time on yourself, always running around to make something perfect for someone else. Tonight, you need to relax and enjoy the party." Two more sneezes and two more bless you's from Ann.

"Damn, I thought this cold was getting better. Ann, are there lilacs in the floral arrangements?"

"No, Miss Maureen was very careful to make sure there weren't. Although she couldn't very well cut down the neighbors shrubs, but she did try..."

They both smiled at the visual image that conjured up. Lara could picture Miss Maureen sending Philip next door with a large pair of pruning shears in one hand and a blank check in the other.

Ann described her version, which was grounded in reality. "I

found Miss Maureen in the garden, staring up at the wall. It took some time to talk her out of trimming what hung over the wall." Lara smiled when she remembered how fierce Maureen had become about caring for her during their time together.

"I'll be all right, don't worry." Several sneezes later, Ann brought her a fresh glass of water and set her purse on the dressing table.

"Maybe you should take one of your allergy pills? Do you think it would help?"

"Probably, but I took one on the plane and I've already taken a headache pill since I got here. I don't want to overload my system."

"Well, it's up to you...but most of the downstairs will be opened up tonight. Traffic flow and all that nonsense!" Lara knew Ann bristled at the thought of strangers working in her kitchen. She'd seen the attitude with clients before and knew to tread lightly in the woman's space.

"I suppose if I don't drink any alcohol it would be all right. Please tell Harold to make sure the waiters only serve me sparkling water tonight, Ann."

"I'll make sure of it myself. Miss Maureen wants you to enjoy the party, not sleep through it."

Lara took the pill and resolved not to drink during the party. It would be for the best, she decided, knowing she might make a few contacts for future jobs tonight. Best to keep a clear head.

"Will you be all right, or should I get Miss Maureen?"

"I'll be fine, don't bother her. I'll just skip the champagne." She let her eyes meet Ann's in the mirror and laughed aloud. "All right, let's see the dress. What kind of undergarments will I need?" Lara asked as she moved to her suitcase.

"Only undies and hose," Ann told her. "The bra is built into the dress. Miss Maureen knew you'd never go without one, and it's cut to...maximize the effect." Ann let her words trail off as she pulled open a mirrored closet door, giving Lara her first glimpse of the dress she would wear for the evening.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, walking to meet Ann halfway across the room. "It's, it's beautiful." Lara was almost afraid to touch the silvery

blue silk dress that Ann displayed. They both knew it would highlight her blue eyes.

"You'll need to try these on; Maureen wasn't sure which would be more comfortable." Ann pulled two pairs of matching shoes from cloth bags and handed them to Lara. Under her silk wrap robe, she wore only black lace panties. Immediately, she went back to her suitcase, taking a new pair of beige thigh-high stockings from the package, and proceeded to pull them up the length of her long legs. She slipped into the first pair of shoes. They were a plain pump with a slim heel. They fit well, but she slipped them off and tried the second pair. These were similar but with a chunky court heel and ribbon bow that tied across her instep.

"These feel much better," she said aloud, stopping to tie the second ribbon in place. "What's next?" she asked, laughing at the stages of clothing that were now lying on the bed.

"If this were really Civil War times, you'd have several layers to get through. Just be thankful this is the new millennium. Bra's built in, so you only need the half slip."

Lara balanced one hand on the bedpost as she lifted each leg into the center of the slip. Ann pulled it up and adjusted it round her waist. Lara moved from the bed, getting the feel of the minimized hoop. She swung side to side several times, teasing Ann about not bumping into things for the rest of the night. They both stopped laughing as Ann gathered the gown and dropped it over her head, smoothing the material over the slip.

Lara had to position her breasts in the front of the gown and hold it up and in place while Ann slowly worked the lacing down her back. With each tug they both readjusted the silk and continued. After what seemed like hours, Ann finally tied the last of the string at her waist in a double bow. Lara shifted inside the garment, making it her own. Both women were silent as she walked to the mirror for her first look at the gown and how it made her look.

The color offset her natural tawny glow. While the bodice was off her shoulders and the sweetheart neckline much too low for her liking, Lara knew she looked good. The large puffed sleeves were encrusted with

lace and tiny seed pearls, matching the bodice of the dress. The design drew the eye towards her small waist, now much smaller after being laced into the dress. The skirt fell from her hips, an overskirt of the same material edged with lace and pearls. It was stunning, and Lara never would have imagined she could look like this in any gown. Somehow, it reminded her of a wedding dress she had seen as a child and instantly fallen in love with. While it wouldn't be the dress of her choice today, it would be fun to wear this one. With one deep breath, she turned to Ann.

"Simply beautiful, Lara. It's a shame we all have to wear masks until midnight."

"Masks?" Lara asked, another element of surprise added to the evening.

"Yes, and no real names until then either."

"No real names either?" The two women laughed again. "Well, who shall I be tonight? Has Maureen decided on a name for me?" She spoke with kindness and affection for the elderly woman she'd come to love.

"Actually, you're to be Mabel until midnight."

"Mabel. Let's see, Mabel?" Lara stared at her reflection, not sure she was really seeing herself. A smile crossed her lips. "She's been at her Gilbert and Sullivan records again, hasn't she? *The Pirates of Penzance*?" It was amazing what you learned about a person while designing their home. Maureen's collection of old records was given high priority when redesigning the den. Ann laughed aloud.

"She thought it might take you a while to figure that one out."

"And who is to be my Frederick?"

Ann looked away. It seemed she knew exactly who was to be her date, but it wasn't her place to tell Lara.

"Well?"

"I'm not sure; she's changed her mind several times in the past week."

"I see she's still trying to find me a husband."

"She means well."

"I know, I know." Resigned once again, Lara smiled at Ann. "If I'm

to be Mabel, let's hope my Frederick is handsome and charming. Although I feel more like Cinderella in this dress."

Not for the first time in the last weeks, Lara thought about Grant Pierson, nephew of Maureen. She'd heard stories about him but never met him. Even more surprising was that she'd never seen a picture of him. Miss Maureen had told her he rarely allowed himself to be photographed, and the few pictures of him she did have were from his youth.

"Ann, is Grant going to be here tonight?"

"He's supposed to be." Ann shook her head. "I don't know who he's to be tonight. Knowing Grant, he'll probably just be himself." She didn't meet Lara's eyes as she spoke.

"And Maureen will allow that?"

"Maureen won't have a choice. Grant can be very persuasive at times. He told Maureen he's himself tonight or not coming at all."

"I wish I had his kind of courage."

"Just have fun tonight—you've earned it. The house turned out wonderfully, considering all you went through. Maureen is thrilled and wants to show off her new home and you at the same time."

"All right, Ann. I'll play along." She slowly turned in front of the mirror once more. "Is everything in place?"

"Yes. Here's your mask." Ann took a hatbox from the closet and pulled back the cover and layers of tissue paper. She presented Lara with a silk half mask, adorned with the same lace and pearls as her dress, which would cover her eyes. Ann pinned the mask into Lara's hair before letting her take a look in the mirror.

"Oh my! If I didn't know it was me under here, I'd never guess."

"You're stunning, Lara. Do enjoy tonight." Ann moved forward and gave her a light hug. "You're ready, and it's just after nine. Ready for your entrance?"

"I thought Maureen was supposed to be the one making the entrance?"

"She's greeting her guests and lapping up the compliments. Come; it's time to go."

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Let's go."



Ann left her at the top of the grand half-circle staircase and disappeared down the back stairway. From her position, Lara saw Maureen for the first time. Ann had been right, she thought—she was just short of Scarlett O’Hara. But somehow it worked for the aging society hostess.

With one deep breath, Lara pulled on the long matching gloves and started down the staircase. She was halfway down when a tall, dark-haired man moved beside Maureen, handing her a champagne flute. She watched them for a moment, then continued down the rest of the stairs. Music played softly in the background from the formal parlor. It was all so surreal. Her memory flashed back to her dream, and Lara felt a warm rush circulate through her.

## Chapter Two

Three steps from the marble foyer, Lara paused, Maureen catching sight of her before she reached the bottom step.

"Mabel, you look stunning, my dear. Simply lovely." Lara reached a hand to Maureen and became engulfed in a warm hug. "I was afraid you wouldn't like the dress?"

"How could I not like it? It's beautiful. You're so kind. I feel like a princess."

"You look like one too. Come, I'll introduce you."

With those few words, Lara—or Mabel, as she was introduced—was brought into the receiving line, being introduced as each newcomer arrived. The man behind the three-quarter black mask was staring at her. She didn't want to be rude, but she did ask his name. Maureen ignored her question. It was quite apparent Maureen had not introduced them on purpose. When he moved away with a woman dressed in blue, Maureen told her Grant was here this evening, and she wanted Lara to meet him. Until then, she was to enjoy the party, dance and be merry and accept the compliments on the house as they came.

"But if I'm Mabel, how will anyone know I'm really the decorator?" she teased.

"What better way to get an honest opinion of your work? After midnight...you'll see. Moreover, I want you to remember, Grant is here to meet you tonight. He's just bought a farm outside Athens, and I want you to decorate it for him."

"What if he has other ideas?"

"We'll simply change his mind." With a wave of her hand, she dismissed Lara's question as silly and mindless.

Lara knew the tactic. Dismiss rather than deal with at the moment. If she didn't feel a genuine fondness for the woman, she'd find her exasperating.

"Go ahead; I've kept you here long enough. Circulate, but remember: you're Mabel until midnight, and then I want you to meet Grant." Maureen turned to receive another guest, and Lara knew the discussion was over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Slowly she moved away, avoiding the waiter who passed with a tray of drinks. Lara made her way towards the dining room and met Harold. He handed her a glass and winked at her, adding a compliment about her appearance before heading back towards the kitchen.

*Silly*, Lara thought. She knew every square inch of the townhouse, yet tonight it all seemed new. Wandering from room to room, her sparkling water clutched in her hand, she was admiring her own handwork and design choices when she turned directly into a black wall she knew hadn't been there previously. "Excuse me. I'm sorry; I wasn't watching where I was going."

"No harm done," he told her, turning as he spoke. His silver-gray eyes penetrated through her, as if he'd stripped her naked with one glance. Lara felt the heat creep onto her cheeks and was at once glad to be somebody else for a change.

"I'm Frederick tonight, and you are stunning of course, but what name has Maureen assigned you?" His gaze followed the length of her unadorned neck to the rounded tops of her breasts the dress forced forward towards him. He continued his appraisal past her slim waist and down the length of her.

Lara stiffened at his open perusal. She was used to men watching her, but usually they weren't so blatant. Two could play the same game,

she decided, not answering until she had taken a long look.

With his black hair and silver eyes, it was a shame his three-quarter black mask hid his full face, although it only accentuated his chiseled jaw and a luscious set of full lips. Kissable lips, Lara decided. He stood tall in his black evening suit, his brocaded vest almost a match to the color of her dress. *If only he weren't wearing that stupid mask*, she thought.

"Tonight, I'm Mabel," she finally told him.

"I suppose since Maureen went to such great lengths not to introduce us earlier, she's decided on a mate for you already."

"And you have a problem with that?" Suddenly Lara was surprised at the tone of her own words. Never was she flirty, always calm and cool under pressure. Then she remembered a vague image from her dream. Heat rose through her chest towards her cheeks. Somehow this man, this Frederick, had a way of making her feel like an awkward teenager again.

"What would you say to a walk in the gardens? We could sneak off these masks and..." Frederick's lips tilted into a mischievous grin.

"Sorry, no can do. It would spoil Maureen's fun, and she went to a lot of trouble."

He studied her at length, just to the point of being rude. "All right, Mabel, how about a dance then?" He took the glass from her hand and placed it on a side table. Lara held back a gasp but moved from his reach as she took the glass and placed it on a passing waiter's tray. Only then did she turn back.

\* \* \* \* \*

He watched her with strained curiosity, not sure what to make of her. Grant knew he was supposed to be waiting until midnight to meet the fabulous Lara Rhodes, interior designer extortionate. He also knew his aunt wanted him to hire Lara to complete the farm he'd recently purchased. That remained to be seen. He'd wandered through the townhouse several times in the past few weeks, liking the final product. While it wasn't his taste, he knew Lara had listened to his aunt's wishes

and gracefully toned them into a beautifully comfortable home. His aunt's likes ran towards heavy silks and velvets in dark colors. While some of those were reflected, she'd managed to use them as accents to classic pieces, the end result something he knew Maureen was thrilled with.

Frederick took Mabel's hand as they moved into the grand foyer and turned her in a complete circle before pulling her into his arms in the entry of the living room. There, all the furniture had been taken away, leaving room for dancing on the terrazzo floor. She settled a very proper ten inches away from his chest, her hand locked in his. He waltzed her around the space several times before pulling her closer. When she relented, it wasn't without a serious look to her masked face. She was deciding something, he knew, just as he had when he saw her come down the staircase. Mabel was a perfect fit against Frederick, her height accommodating his in all the correct places.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're quiet, Frederick. Something wrong?" She watched him carefully throughout their dance, noting the seriousness that seemed to tighten his jaw. An impulse to run her finger along the strong chin passed through her, and her fingers tightened in his.

"Yes. I want to know who you are, without the mask." He pulled her closer, and she breathed in the scent of him. Clean with a hint of citrus, he assaulted her senses.

Lara closed her eyes and let her head fall against his shoulder for a moment. Realizing she was relaxing too much, she straightened, pulling away from him.

"Is your wife here tonight?" she asked boldly.

"No. If she was I wouldn't be dancing with you."

*Great, Lara thought, a no-answer answer.* She tried again.

"Does that mean you left her home or you're not married?" Under his three-quarter mask, his lips turned into a smile.

"No wife."

"No husband," she added before he could ask. Suddenly she was

completely embarrassed. Lara felt the flush work its way up her chest across her shoulders and sting up her neck. Her cheeks heated, and she was suddenly grateful for the mask. His laugh was a welcome relief. Also a wonderful sound, deep and rich. Lara felt he was a man who didn't laugh often. His body language told her she was right.

"Well then, Mabel, since we're both adults and unmarried, what would you say about leaving through the side door and finding someplace quiet where we could get acquainted, without these silly masks?"

Lara eyed the tall stranger, and for reasons she couldn't understand, at the moment wanted to do just that. "Sorry, can't. Like I already told you, Maureen would be terribly disappointed. She went to a lot of trouble for this evening; I can't spoil it for her."

"How do you know her? I thought by now I knew most of the beautiful women in Atlanta?"

"Smooth one, aren't you, Frederick?" she teased. "Not until midnight, then ask me again, all right?"

He nodded his consent but pulled her closer. Lara hadn't realized he'd danced her towards the garden doors. Once there, he paused only to retrieve two glasses from a passing waiter and motioned her outside.

On this warm spring night, a slight breeze blew through the garden. Lara knew this was why Maureen had bought the old place. It was rare to have a townhouse with a yard, especially one as large as this. She'd redesigned the gardens as well as the interior. She was also aware that on the other side of the new brick wall was a hedge of lilacs in full bloom.

Frederick pressed one of the glasses into her hand, and she drank greedily from it without thinking. She was hot, not warm. It wasn't so much the dress or the air temperature, but rather being close to this stranger. He could be dangerous, and Lara instinctively pulled back. Maybe it was the mystery of what was behind the mask.

"Tell me something about you, something important?" he said.

"You first," she teased, her head cocked to one side. The garden was lit with luminaries along the brick paths, setting it aglow with low

light.

"All right, I like horses. Can you ride?"

"Yes, I can. Rather well, too." She let out a slight laugh, wondering where it came from. She sipped from her glass, trying to concentrate.

"Your turn," he told her.

"All right, I hate to fly. And I've flown through three time zones to get here today. Not something I'd like to experience again in the near future."

Lara wandered down the path towards the cement pond and fountain area. She sat on one side of a bench placed several feet away. Frederick followed her, hesitating to sit beside her as her skirt took up much of the bench. Lara realized and laughed aloud as her hands tried to tame the hoop skirt that wanted to expose her legs to him.

"I suppose that's one way of keeping a distance between us." Laughing again, she moved to the edge, her dress clearing half the bench, her hand automatically holding the material against her legs.

In the moonlight, she knew he watched the light reflect off the long column of her neck. She wanted him to touch her skin, to feel the warmth under his touch. He moved to do so, lightly running his index finger along the length of her throat, startling her. Lara pulled slowly away from his finger, the place he touched heated.

"Your turn—tell me something else." She wanted to keep the atmosphere light, as her own emotions were heavy within her. An ache started in her crotch, and she knew her lower lips moistened.

He seemed suddenly serious. "I want to make love to you, right now, right here, party be damned!"

Lara swung around to face him, not quite sure she'd heard him correctly. His eyes were intense under the black mask, their silver blazing towards her. Danger came to mind, as did something else. Lust. Pure, unadulterated lust, along with want and craving. She'd never really desired a man as she did this stranger. "Sorry, Maureen wouldn't like it."

"What would Mabel like?" Frederick moved closer, his hands on her bare shoulders.

She could feel the warmth of his breath on the back of her neck as

he spoke. Taking a deep breath, she didn't turn to answer him. It took all the willpower she could muster not to twist around and press her lips against his. Just for an instant, she wanted to know how they would feel against hers.

"Mabel would like nothing more, but then she disappears at midnight. I'd have to live with her decisions." Somehow she hoped he would understand her taking the coward's way out.

"A woman with a conscience," he mumbled. Suddenly he stood, taking several steps away from her. "I think I should take you back to the party."

"You go; I'll be along in a few minutes. I like the garden at night."

"I'll keep you company."

"No. I mean, please go back to the party. I'll be along."

He nodded and turned, leaving her alone in the moonlight.

Lara sat for a long time, wondering what it would have been like to have him touch her. Finally with a sigh, she stood and straightened her gown and felt the bow on her right shoe had loosened. She reached to tighten it, laughing slightly as she fought with the hoop skirt to reach her foot. Lara was startled when Frederick appeared beside her once again.

"I thought you'd gone inside," she said, her voice breathless to her own ears.

"I couldn't leave you alone in the moonlight. I tried." He watched her for another moment before moving before her and kneeling.

In the dim light, Lara could only see his full lips, and she tingled inside at the thought of how he might make her feel with them. She tried to avert her gaze from his and found herself looking down into his eyes. If only the black mask wasn't obscuring his features. Dark hair, silver eyes and a wonderful set of lips with a strong jaw. That was all she could see. Somehow it wasn't enough.

"Let me...," he said and reached for her foot. Lara blushed and moved her leg forward after sitting back on the bench. Frederick took her ankle in his hands, warming her skin wherever he touched. When she thought he'd retied her shoe he leaned forward, capturing her lips under his, for one brief second, then two, then three. He didn't plunder into her



mouth with his tongue, rather tasted her lips as if he were creating a memory. Pulling back sharply, he cleared his throat.

"I'd better fix this for you." His hands hadn't left her leg; instead they were now feeling the strength of her calf and working their way towards her thigh.

"Frederick..."

He pulled back sharply, turning his attention to the ribbon tie. When it was fixed, he looked back once more. A strange smile crossed his lips as his eyes darkened. "The skirt may have been designed to keep me away from you, but where there's a will..." He didn't say the rest of the words.

Instead, she watched him glance around the garden behind her. Apparently satisfied they were alone, he moved the skirt upward and slipped under it. In a brief flash, Lara felt his lips press against her core as his hands slipped along her thighs. Her breath halted when she felt him, and she knew he could feel the heat pouring from her body, a heat he'd created on the dance floor. Lara moved her pelvis forward without thinking, reaching to him, allowing him better access.

A second intimate kiss against her and his fingers moved her panties, pulling them aside so his lips touched her skin. His breath was hot against her, and she wanted more; her sigh told him so. He covered her clit with his lips and lightly sucked, then took long swipes of his tongue along her pussy lips. She felt them pulse at his attention, and he licked her again.

If she wasn't so caught up in the feelings he was creating she might have laughed, realizing her hoop skirt hid him completely. He continued to lick and suck her until her body gave him what he worked for—her climax. When she came, her hand automatically dropped to her lap, gently holding him against her core. She heard his groan from under her skirt. His touch softened but didn't end, lightening until his lips were just a feather against her pussy.

With one last stroke of his finger he moved from under her skirt. His eyes were intense when he looked back at her, his lips curving into an incredible smile of satisfaction while he straightened his mask.

Lara knew if it was light out, he'd see her whole body had blushed, then heated to a dark crimson.

As if he read her thoughts he pulled back, whispering only, "I had to know." His mouth covered hers, and she tasted her own essence on his lips. She pushed the kiss further, rhythmically sucking his tongue between her lips until all her taste was gone. Hesitantly, he moved away, leaving her alone in the garden.

It took a long time for her to gather her wits about her and slowly return to the party. Never in Lara's life had she had such an intimate moment. A chill ran through her as she remembered the feel of his breath against her, then the touch of his lips through her lace undergarment. "Oh God," she groaned to no one but herself.

Back on the terrace, she accepted a glass from a passing waiter and drank it down. *If this is a dream, she thought, don't ever let me wake.*

Mabel was introduced to several men and danced with a few. None of them were anything near what Frederick had been, and she wondered if they could smell the scent of her sex. She found her eyes scanning the room to locate him with each pass on the dance floor. He was nowhere to be seen, and she was disappointed and relieved at the same time. While she knew she couldn't have taken his invitation, she had wanted to. A glimpse of him dancing with the woman in blue suddenly depressed her.

Excusing herself, she accepted another glass of champagne to have something to do with her hands, finding she was fidgeting with the lace. The dress became extremely heavy and hot. Her head felt like the hairpins were anchored into her scalp. More than anything, she wanted to pull them out and let her hair down. She wouldn't, of course—it would ruin the effect.

Instead, she moved towards the library, smiling at faces hidden behind similar masks as she went. Relieved the room was empty, she finished the wine and set the glass aside. The buzzing inside her head had nothing to do with allergy pills or alcohol; it had to do with the man who brought her to orgasm with a few swipes of his tongue. Lara hadn't heard the door open, but she felt she wasn't alone.

Turning only halfway, she saw Frederick standing in the doorway.

There was no thought behind her movements, only a need she wanted to satisfy. Lara moved towards him, reaching behind him to turn the lock. After that was done, she moved into his arms.

His acceptance was immediate, pulling her towards him, angling her towards his mouth. Frederick's lips were warm and tasted of wine with a slight hint of tobacco. He wasn't hesitant, his mouth covering hers, his tongue invading. She took what he offered, fought for some control of the kiss. It didn't happen; instead, he moved her back against the door. Pressed against her, she could feel his arousal through all the layers of clothing they both wore. A groan escaped her lips as he moved to place a line of light kisses along her throat.

"You've had me in this state since you entered the party tonight." His voice was raspy and hard, almost as hard as he was against her. His muscled shoulders were tight under her small hands, his large calloused fingers running along the neckline of her gown. A shiver ran through her as his lips brushed against the tops of her breasts presented for him by the style of the gown.

"The woman in the blue dress..."

"An old family friend...nothing sexual, nothing like you, Mabel." His left hand held her waist, pulling her tightly against him. His right hand moved to feel the weight of her breast.

Another sigh; Lara wasn't sure if it was him or her. "We shouldn't..."

"I know, but I can't seem to help myself. Tell me who you are?"

"No, I should go. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have led you on." Lara started to pull away, her back coming against the bulk of the wooden door behind her.

"Don't go—it's an hour until the unmasking. Let me have you, Mabel, before it's too late. Before it all changes." His kiss was urgent, and Lara knew she wanted him. More than any other man she'd met in her thirty years. And she understood his comment about it all changing after midnight.

"We shouldn't," she managed before letting her hand drop to his waist, holding there only for a second before letting it slip lower. Holding

the length of him in her palm, all restraint was lost. She knew it and he knew it. None of it mattered. Lara used her free hand to drag his mouth back to hers, taking the long, soulful kiss she wanted.

Frederick lifted her away from the door, moving several steps until she was pushed up against the back of the damask-covered sofa. He turned her away from him, bracing her belly on the sofa back, his hands fumbling as he realized how she'd been laced into the dress.

"Damn," he muttered, his hands moving to pull her skirt up. "Another way to keep us apart."

Lara knew she should stop this, had to stop it. His lips were on the back of her neck again, his words hot in her ear. Her legs were pressed against the material of his pants, grinding back against his erection. While she couldn't make out each word, his intent was clear, and Lara had never felt so excited and sexually aware. His breath warmed her as well as the words he spoke, telling her what he'd do with her once he managed to get her out of the damn dress. His hands stilled behind her, and for a maddening second she thought he would move away. Instead, he tossed a black leather wallet onto the sofa in front of her, his hands moving under the material that kept her from him.

Frederick's hand moved along the base of her neck, down between her bare shoulder blades to push her over the back of the sofa, fighting with the hoop skirt to get to her. She felt his hands on her skin, felt the temperature difference in the room and knew she was bared. An instant later, his fingers moved against her, lightly pinching her buttocks. One part of her mind told her to pull away, run away. Instead, she moved against his hand, the heat he was creating deliciously forbidden. In a flash she felt him pull her panties aside, felt his hardness against her.

"I'll protect you, Mabel," was all he whispered before he tore the black scrap of lace from her legs. A second later, he nudged her thighs apart with his knee and inserted himself inside her pussy in one smooth motion.

She'd been ready for him, slick and hot, wanting his invasion deep within her. Lara caught her breath as he entered her from behind, her hands going to brace herself against the furniture. She'd never felt so full.

Never imagined it could be like this. A part of her wished she was facing him so she could watch his expressions, and the other half of her was thankful he'd turned her back to him, keeping their mystery alive.

Frederick kept one arm around her waist, the other on the back of her neck as he moved slightly away from her, only to slip back inside her again. For long, torturing minutes he took her this way, slowly and rhythmically, whispering the whole time, occasionally fighting with the material of her dress. His cock was hot inside her body, stretching her.

When his hand left her neck and reached around in front of her, he fought the material to touch the moist lips of her pussy. She groaned in delight. Moving over his hand, she directed him where she needed to feel him. An instant later he moved his hand away, putting his fingers to her lips. Greedily she sucked them into her mouth, tasting the moist heat she'd dripped onto them.

He groaned this time and pulled his fingers from her mouth. Again, he found her center and stroked her as he moved behind her.

"Mabel..." was all he managed to say, and she knew he was losing control. On that one last thread of sanity, she moved back against him, her hand finding his through the layers of fabric, directing him to her clit. With one light touch and one last deep thrust of his cock in her pussy, they both lost control.

Lara dropped onto the sofa back, Frederick following her. For long seconds neither of them moved. Slowly, he moved away from her, pulling himself from inside her, tugging the multiple layers of silk back down to cover her. She didn't move, only tried to center her breathing. Lara knew he was dressing behind her. She heard his zipper, metal against metal, and knowing she couldn't face him, straightened her mask to hide behind. Instead, she managed to straighten up and tried to smooth the dress around her. His hand reached in front of her, retrieving his wallet.

Frederick turned her by her shoulders, forcing her to look directly into his silver-gray eyes. No words were exchanged, only one last, long kiss that made Lara melt inside once again. If he'd told her he wanted her again, she would have given herself.

Instead, he moved away, pausing to pick up something from the

carpet. Standing before her, she saw he had her black lace underwear hanging from his fingers.

Lara knew there was no way she could hide her embarrassment, and she didn't try. She took a breath and squared her shoulders.

Frederick took the material and pushed it into his jacket pocket. One last soft kiss on her mouth and he moved away. A kiss she would remember all her days, warm and tender, filled with longing for what might have been. It was goodbye.

"Mabel, if you ever..." He didn't finish his thought; he moved to the door and slowly unlocked it. He gave her one more smoldering look and disappeared from the room.

Lara ran to the door, fumbling with the handle until she knew it was locked. Only then did she let her hand rise to her mouth, her other hand quick to cover her pounding heart. "Oh my God, what have I done?"

Never in her life had Lara lost control. And certainly never with a stranger, no matter how good-looking. Always, she knew her partners for a long time before anything physical transpired between them. The few who had waited her out had been a disappointment. Never before had she felt such outright lust and want for another human being. It was too much to comprehend; it stripped her to a raw essence she hadn't known was possible. She felt more female than ever before. Her lower lips still pulsed of their own accord, as if they were telling her to do it again. Her hand dropped and she stroked herself through the layers of material, remembering how each stroke of his cock made her wet and needy.

The clock on the mantle chimed midnight, time for Cinderella to leave the ball. As quietly as possible, she opened the library door and checked the corridor. Relieved to find she was alone, she moved quietly to the back staircase and went directly to her room. There she kicked off her shoes and dropped facedown on the bed. Only when the tears started to sting behind her eyes did she force herself to get up.

Untying the back of her dress was impossible, and she gave up. Her head was fuzzy and her mind clouded, and for a second time she admitted it had nothing to do with alcohol. "What's wrong with me?" she said to nobody else in the room. Of course, she'd just let a total stranger

make love to her in someone else's home during the party of the year. "Oh God, what have I done? Who was he?"

Lara pulled the pins from her hair, massaging her scalp as each one was pulled free, finally releasing her from the silvery mask. The woman who watched her in the mirror seemed so foreign, not the same woman who'd stared back at her all these years. Slowly, she moved away from the mirror, afraid of what she would see if she really looked. She pulled back the quilt and dropped onto the bed, dressed except for shoes. Lara realized her dress and hoop pushed upward, showing her bare buttocks to anyone who would enter. She should be humiliated and she was, but something inside her also felt empowered and alive. Lara drifted off to sleep with the memory of his scent clinging to her skin, the touch of his lips on hers a sensation she'd never forget.

### Chapter Three

Grant moved beside his aunt just as she asked Ann to check on Lara. She didn't seem surprised when she was told that Lara was asleep in her bed, fully clothed. Grant continued listening to the women talk.

"So, have you found my mystery decorator, or has she fled at the thought of working with the family again?" he teased his aunt.

"No. She's asleep. Poor thing, I knew she didn't feel well, and then I pushed an antihistamine on her. The lilacs, she's allergic," Ann added.

"Well, you'll meet her tomorrow at breakfast. I've got guests to attend to." With a kiss to the air in his general direction, Maureen moved away.

Grant asked Ann which suite Lara Rhodes was assigned. She told him Lara was across the hall from him. To his surprise, he found himself sneaking up the back stairs to check. At the unmasking she'd been nowhere to be found. Somehow, deep inside him he'd known she wouldn't be there, not after what they'd done in the library. Instinct told him he'd met Lara.

Grant had left the library and gone back to the garden. He was startled by his own actions tonight. Something about Mabel had drawn him to her in a way he'd never experienced before. While he had a reputation for being a confident bachelor, it was widely known he meant to stay that way. But tonight, for a brief time, he saw his future in Mabel's eyes. Damn Aunt Maureen and her stupid costume parties. Why couldn't she have thrown a staid cocktail party like anyone else would! Shaking his



head at the thought, he knew precisely why: because she was Maureen Pierson, and that made her different. It followed the bloodline. Never had anyone been able to call him conventional or staid.

In the past, it hadn't bothered him. Only tonight he'd met a woman he understood had the power to change his life. He was exhilarated and sickened at the same time. Now all he had to do was find out who his mystery Mabel really was. "It couldn't have been," he said aloud to the empty hallway.

He'd gone from having a most erotic experience to a moment of dread when neither Maureen nor Ann could find her for the unmasking. Quietly, he opened her door a few inches. No need to enter her room; the sight of her still dressed lying across the bed was enough to tell him he was right. Mabel was Lara, or Lara was Mabel. Grant was angry and annoyed with his aunt and furious with himself. If only he could manage to wipe the smirk from his lips, he might work up enough angst to be mad at all three of them. Instead, he was somehow calmly sated.

He stared at her nude ass and long legs still encased in silk. The rest of her upper body was hidden by the gown. His first impulse was to go to her and bite her ass cheek, to leave her with his mark. Nevertheless, he understood if he touched her again, it would have consequences. He closed the door quietly behind him and rejoined the party, watching it from a distant corner, realizing how empty his life had become. He hated Mabel and Lara all the more for pointing it out so vividly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later, he still couldn't sleep. At first, he thought to drive home and not let her even see the ranch. As the idea raced through his mind, he dismissed it immediately. Grant slipped across the hallway and checked on Lara. She was still facedown on the bed just as he had left her. He was about to move away but instead found himself in her room, beside the bed.

Standing over her, he reached to untie the back of her gown. His large fingers fumbled with the double bow fixed at her waist. When it was

finally free, he carefully pulled the lacing apart, releasing her from the tight gown. A slight groan came from deep within her, and he pulled back quickly. He thought to undress her completely but decided against it. He knew she'd be able to free herself in the morning. He didn't resist letting his hand wander along her leg and up her thigh. He used his index finger to lightly tease between her buttocks. Her legs relaxed, allowing him further access. He ran his finger between her nether lips and brought it to his lips, her scent and taste now embedded in his memory. He knew he could wake her, but he'd still have to deal with her in the morning. The morning, the idea of morning had him nervous as a school kid on his first date.

Only the fact she didn't know who he was, that they hadn't taken off their masks, saved him. Grant decided to just see what would happen in the morning. He hesitated only once to run his hand through her long hair, feeling the soft texture catching on his calloused fingers.

Returning to his room, he knew once they met in the daylight she'd recognize him. He cursed his hereditary silver-gray eyes, knowing she'd take one look at him and run as far and as fast as she could. If he'd inherited Maureen's green eyes...but he hadn't. His eyes always set him apart from the norm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lara awoke to complete darkness. She was disoriented and her head was pounding once again. As she dragged herself up on the bed, her gown fell away from her chest. She knew someone had been in her room. How else would the dress be untied? Ann? Maureen? Suddenly it all came back to her.

The tall dark stranger, the garden, the library... Tears stung once again behind her eyes, and she let them fall as she struggled to free herself of the gown. Once she let it drop to the floor, she worked on the ties at the waist of the hoop skirt. It too fell to a pool at her feet. Staring down, Lara knew she had only her stockings left on, and she tugged them off without thought to tearing. She bolted for the shower, letting the steam absorb her

tears. If only she could get rid of the twisted smile that kept forming on her lips.

Her stomach rumbled as she dried herself and she remembered she hadn't eaten. The bedside clock told her it was still the middle of the night. The thought of food wasn't appealing, but she also knew her headache wouldn't go away without it. The only thing she was sure of was that she wasn't going to take any more pills. The ends of her hair were moist from her shower, but she didn't care. Her face was finally scrubbed free of the layers of makeup. She pulled her robe tighter around her waist and belted it snugly, wishing she'd brought her old flannel robe instead of this silk wrapper that was easier to pack. The nightlights were on in the hallway, and she made her way quietly down to the kitchen.

*Just something to eat*, she promised herself. *Some crackers or maybe a cup of tea, something to stop the pounding inside her head.* Lara was surprised to see the lights on in the kitchen as she turned the corner. At first, she thought Harold might have left on a light for any guests moving around. That was when she heard the refrigerator door open and close. She thought to retreat, but her stomach rumbled and she forced herself forward.

From the doorway, she saw a tall, dark-haired man from behind, his back bare. Wide tanned shoulders slimmed to a smaller waist, then disappeared under the waistband of a pair of faded denims. His face held the beginning of a five o'clock shadow. He was barefoot. Her gasp must have been louder than she realized, for all at once he had turned and was facing her. For long minutes neither said a word.

Finally, it was the man who broke the silence. "Hungry? I'm making bologna and American cheese. Mustard or mayo? There's leftovers from the party if you prefer something else." His voice was familiar but his face wasn't. While his hair was very dark, his eyes were shielded by the overhead light. Lara noticed the thick lips and the chiseled jaw. A sick chill ran through her, and she couldn't move.

"I don't think we met earlier tonight. I'm Grant, Maureen's nephew. And you are?"

Lara relaxed. If he didn't know her then it must have been someone

else. It didn't make what she'd done any better, but for the moment it eased her nerves.

"Mustard, but only a half, please," she answered, moving slowly into the room.

"Were you here for the party? I don't remember seeing you."

"I didn't feel well; I went to my room early. Jet lag."

"It can be a bitch...excuse me, a pain," he finished, his eyes glancing up to her from under long black lashes, hidden from her in the low light.

"You were right the first time—I hate flying, and jet lag is a bitch." She started to relax, and he seemed to as well. "I'm Lara, Lara Rhodes. I did the interiors for Miss Maureen."

"So, you're the interior designer I was supposed to meet at midnight. You did the gardens too?"

"Yes." She accepted the half of a sandwich he handed to her and took the napkin she offered him. They both moved to the end of the counter, sat side by side and ate. Lara took small bites of the sandwich, waiting to see if it agreed with her stomach. When it did, she finished the rest, enjoying it.

"Want something to drink?" She moved away and pulled open the refrigerator door. "Milk, wine, water?"

"Milk, please."

Lara pulled the gallon from the door and went to the cabinet for a glass. She pulled down a mug and filled it with water before handing him a glass. Lara moved around the kitchen with a practiced ease, having spent a lot of time here with Maureen while the renovation was going on. After she dropped the teabag in the water, she set the mug in the microwave, moved back to the counter and set about rewrapping the cold cuts.

"How was the food at the party? I didn't get a chance to eat." She was looking for a neutral topic, hoping she'd found one. While she glanced to him several times, she cursed the lighting, knowing if she turned on the overheads, it would be obvious why.

"Not bad, but I wasn't hungry when it was served." He studied her

as she retrieved her mug from the beeping microwave and watched her spoon a heaping serving of sugar into the cup. She had to concentrate on not letting her hand shake.

"Are you aware I've just purchased a farm and Maureen wants you to do the interiors?"

Lara smiled and felt as if her heart melted. He continued to keep his eyes averted. "I should think you'd have something to say on the topic."

"I like what you did for her; maybe you should see the place before deciding."

"Maybe. I'm not sure I want to stay in Atlanta much longer. It might be easier if I referred you to somebody else." She tried not to stare, but she couldn't get her earlier encounter out of her mind.

"Maureen will be disappointed if you don't at least check the place out. She'll hold me responsible for running you out of town." Something about his voice met her on a base level. He sounded strong and yet kind, so familiar. Lara pushed the thought away as well as the impulse to touch his bare shoulder. She wanted nothing more than to run her hands along his skin and feel the texture beneath her fingers. *Get a grip, girl*, she admonished herself silently.

"It's your home; you should have it done to your liking, not hers."

"Yes, I agree. Will you at least take a look at it? I could drive you over tomorrow morning and have you back in time for supper; it's less than a two-hour drive?"

As she leaned past him to put the milk away, she caught a hint of his scent, decided she liked it and knew her body blushed red from the roots of her hair to her toes. She had to turn away before he saw.

\* \* \* \* \*

Only he did see, and it endeared her to him once again. Dangerous woman, Grant decided. Maybe it would be best if she didn't do his new home. For the first time he wondered if he could live in a home that she

had designed without her.

"Why don't we talk about it tomorrow? Thanks for the sandwich." Lara fled as quickly as she could while carrying the hot teacup without spilling it along the way. If she'd been smart, she would have left it in the kitchen and bolted for the front door. Only she knew she couldn't do that. Bad enough she missed the unmasking. Now she had to decide if she could stay in Atlanta and do another project. It wasn't the work that bothered her, instead the idea of running into "Him" and not knowing it. And from the little she'd seen of Grant Pierson, he might present a whole other set of problems.

Lara knew as adults, we all make our choices and live with them. This particular decision would haunt her. She'd wanted this man, this total stranger, "Frederick," and she'd had him. Now she had to move forward. Somehow, that didn't seem like an easy task. He'd touched something inside her she hadn't even known existed until earlier tonight. Putting it back in its place would be difficult. Not knowing who he was, there was no way she could begin to trace him. Best to just let him go and bury her secret as a treasured moment when she finally felt alive. Getting back to normal life seemed her only alternative.

A brief thought of asking Maureen who he was passed through her, but she dismissed it. Any questions and the man would be packaged and waiting on her doorstep when she got home. That would never do. *Just let it go*, she kept telling herself. *Just let him go. Enjoy your one crazy moment in time.*

Lara remembered his whispered words, "I'll protect you," and sighed. At least he'd kept some semblance of sanity, and she was thankful for that. Lying on the large bed alone, she pulled the extra pillow to her chest, remembering each thrust and touch of his hands and lips. Then she realized how close the moment was to her earlier dream and got a stranger feeling in her stomach. With a groan she rolled over and smothered a slight scream with her pillow.

## Chapter Four

Lara was surprised when she woke much later that morning feeling refreshed and renewed. She held back a smile threatening to cross her lips as she thought about her "Frederick." Pushing him to the farthest corners of her mind, she showered and dressed and was downstairs for breakfast with time to spare. She helped Ann finish the prep work for the meal and enjoyed hearing the details of the party she'd "slept through." Neither Ann nor Harold seemed surprised, both accepting her jet lag and antihistamine combination as the cause. Besides, it would be a foreign idea that anyone would miss any part of one of Miss Maureen's famous parties on purpose. Lara agreed, changing the subject back to the gala event.

She was standing at the far end of the handsomely appointed cherry wood and stainless steel kitchen reading the newspaper when Grant Pierson wandered in. Deep inside, her stomach twisted at the sight of him, and she turned so he wouldn't see her blush at her thoughts of stroking his bare chest last night. After all, he'd been kind to make her a sandwich but left no doubt in her mind it was simply that. Years of breeding and manners prevailed. *Get a grip, girl*, she told herself once again. Pretending to scan the newspaper for any early gossip about the party, she eyed him through her dark lashes.

He was tall, tanned and slim with magnificent shoulders. His strong legs were encased in washed-out denim and battered cowboy boots. The teal green polo shirt he wore must compliment his eyes, she

decided. She had no real way of knowing since he wore dark-tinted sunglasses, but she assumed he carried the signature green eyes as Maureen did. His voice was strong and smooth, yet he teased with Ann about too much wine and too bright morning light. His excuse was accepted, and he took a mug of hot coffee.

“Lara, how are you this morning?”

“Much better, thank you for asking. I seem to be back to my old self today.” She smiled, disappointed she only saw her reflection in his glasses. “And you?” It was an odd moment, for during their kitchen meeting last night he’d seemed totally in control. Not for a second had she thought he’d had too much to drink. Something didn’t fit, but she didn’t have the energy or inclination to try and figure it out.

“I stopped to see Aunt on my way down. She suggested if you were up to it, we drive over to the farm and let you have a look.” Lara glanced around the room, noticing Ann and Harold were openly watching them. “She’s made me promise to have you back in time to dress for supper. Just a small gathering tonight, quite informal, I’m told.”

“Are you sure, Mr. Pierson? I mean, you are free to choose who decorates your home. Just because I’m here...I wouldn’t want you to feel obligated in any way.” She hoped her tone conveyed the right amount of formal politeness.

“My name is Grant, and I agree, but why not come and see the place? If it’s not right for you, maybe you can suggest someone who would be?”

Slammed into a blank wall, there was no way she could refuse his offer. “If you’re sure?”

The small smile spreading across his lips was comforting in some small way, though she couldn’t decide why.

“Go ahead, Lara. If you stay here all afternoon, Maureen will have you writing thank-you notes and updating her scrapbooks,” Ann told her. “I’ll fix you a lunch to take along.” Looking to Grant, she added, “Did you know that Lara rides? I get the impression she’s quite at home in the saddle.”

Nobody in the room moved, breathed or said a word. Grant finally



burst out laughing at Ann's comment. Harold followed, and they all watched Lara's cheeks burn bright red. Ann, on the other hand, was oblivious. "What did I say this time?" she asked Harold, who smiled at his wife and put his arm lovingly around her.

"Nothing, my sweet. Why not pack these two a lunch while they get ready." He kissed her temple and moved from the room with a large coffee carafe.

"It's settled then. How much time will you need to get ready, Lara?"

She looked to Ann and knew she'd get no help from her. Resigned, she closed the newspaper and looked up at his sheltered eyes. "Ten minutes?" She glanced down at the jeans and sweater she wore.

"Fine. Don't bother to change; we'll have time for a ride before we come back this afternoon. Just bring your riding clothes with you." He didn't add she looked too good in the denim that encased the long legs he'd admired last night or that the red sweater highlighted her skin tone. He felt his face heat at the memory and turned away.

"Ann, we'd love lunch—you know I don't keep much at the place." Pausing to place his mug in the dishwasher, he disappeared up the back staircase.

"Go and enjoy this nice day, Lara. Why be stuck in the house with all us old people when you could spend the day with Grant?"

Her eyebrows rose at her words and she scurried out of the kitchen. Lara knew when she was beat.

Upstairs, she paused at Maureen's doorway before knocking.

"Come in."

"Miss Maureen, I'm so sorry I fell asleep before the end of your wonderful party."

"It's my fault, dear; I knew you'd have a long day of traveling. Not to worry, Ann told me Grant is going to take you out to see the ranch, and that's much more important. Go and enjoy your day. I'll see you both at supper tonight."

"Thank you. You're very kind to understand."

Maureen only waved her away and turned back to the newspapers

scattered about the bed. Lara knew the subject was closed. She headed back to her room and looked at the woman staring back at her from the bathroom mirror. Who was this strange creature? Who was the woman who'd allowed a total stranger to ravish her last night, and why had she felt it was right in some way? She was just justifying her behavior to herself, she decided.

Lara grabbed her purse, tossed her riding pants and boots into a smaller bag and pulled her sunglasses tight against her face. Maybe the glasses would hide her emotions. Something had to. After last night, Lara was still muddled about everything that had happened. That she'd allowed to happen, she corrected.

In a flash, she remembered she'd taken the first step. She'd locked the door and moved into his waiting arms. She'd been the one to drop her hand to his waist and then to brazenly lower it to his hardness. She wanted to let out a scream of angst and knew she couldn't. All she did know right now was that she had to manage to keep it all together until tomorrow afternoon, when another flight would take her home to New York. *Maybe that's where I left my common sense and my morals.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant was waiting in the foyer, where he took the light case from her hands.

"All set, these your riding clothes?" She could only nod, and he moved to the front door. "Ann, we'll see you later," he called. Harold appeared in the doorway with a large wicker basket, handing it to Grant.

"Enjoy your day," he told them. "We'll see you both for supper." Then he was gone.

Grant eyed Lara from under the glasses he refused to take off. He knew once he did, Lara would be gone from his life, and it was too soon to lose her. Not until he figured out why he was so drawn to her. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Yes, of course." Lara moved beside him on automatic pilot. She let him hold the door to the dark green Range Rover and sighed aloud.

“Still jet-lagged?” he asked, sliding behind the driver’s wheel.

“No. Not really.” She didn’t elaborate and he didn’t push. Instead, he navigated through the mounting Saturday traffic and didn’t push her for conversation until they were away from the city limits.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Have you ever been to Athens before, Lara?” His question roused her from her thoughts. He’d glanced at her several times wondering if she was remembering the party.

“Only circled it several times while waiting to land. Tell me about your ranch—you said it’s about two hours from here?”

Lara listened to his voice as he drove; he was listing the positives about his new ranch. He told her the main house had eight bedrooms and nine baths. The kitchen was outfitted with emerald pearl granite countertops, stainless steel appliances and light oak cabinetry, some with leaded glass doors. There was a formal living room and dining room, but he liked the back den much better than any of the formal rooms. A balcony ran the width of the upstairs hall with a straight staircase descending from the center. He mentioned there was an in-law suite, as the realtor called it, but he felt it was more for a live-in housekeeper. The master bedroom suite was on the lower level, but he wanted that changed. He’d use the space for a game room with a pool table and probably a bar area. He also wanted a swimming pool with cabanas or a small pool house and a sauna area.

He talked about the home with a strange air. He’d gone on to tell her about a fifty-acre lake on the site, and how he’d managed to purchase the sites on either side of him, quite effectively blocking out any neighbors or outsiders who might intrude on his privacy. Lara got the idea that privacy was a big thing to Grant, but she wasn’t sure why.

When he talked about the stables and barns she saw life come back to his smile. He became animated when he described the twenty-four stall stone shelter that was original to the site. There was acreage for paddocks and trails, and he knew he wanted the quarters over the stables to be

redesigned to house the staff he'd need to keep the place running smoothly. He mentioned two other homes that were already there, both the subject of his privacy-oriented land grab. Eventually, he'd get around to redoing them for visitors and staff. For now, his main focus was to get his home comfortable and livable. The rest would come later.

Lara asked pertinent questions she would ask any prospective client and wasn't surprised when he paused before answering some of them.

"Please, whatever you do, no velvet! Let Aunt Maureen have the full state's supply of it," he teased. "I'm much more at ease with leather and suedes. Remember, this is going to be a working horse ranch, no white anywhere!"

She laughed at the image of him tracking through a white-carpeted room with his boots on and cringed. He laughed again, and she felt peaceful.

"One thing you must be prepared for, Lara." His tone had changed, and she knew this would be important.

"What should I be prepared for?"

Grant cleared his throat and pulled back a grin. "The house, it's...it's horrible." He shook his head with disgust.

Lara wasn't sure what he meant by that. "Horrible how? In what way?" She turned in her seat as far as her seatbelt would allow, studying his features as best she could. The edges of his lips spread into a wide smile, and at once, she wondered what his kiss would feel like against her skin. It was obvious he hadn't shaved—his whiskers were fuller than last night. A chill ran through her as she imagined Grant's face buried between her thighs. Then she wondered if he'd bring her to a climax as Frederick had?

"Promise you won't hold it against me?"

"I don't know; tell me and find out." She watched his large fingers tighten on the leather-wrapped steering wheel and then relax. In that instant she wanted to know what they would feel like touching her intimately. The image flowed through her, and she turned away quickly.

*What's wrong with me?* she questioned herself silently. *Suddenly I'm*

*man crazy.* She closed her eyes and could almost feel Frederick pushing into her, stretching her beyond anything she'd ever felt before, taking her to a place she hadn't experienced and hadn't known could exist. The tears stung behind her eyes, and she was glad she'd pulled on her dark glasses too.

"Lara, are you all right?"

She pulled herself together enough to answer but didn't turn back. "Yes, I'm fine. What's wrong with the house, Grant?"

He drove several miles before finally answering her. "It's pink!" His facial expression didn't change as she turned back to study him, not sure she'd heard him correctly.

"It's what?"

"It's pink. I told you it was horrible. If I lived in Florida, I could handle it. I don't, I live in Athens, Georgia, and I don't want to live in a pink home."

"Pink..." was all she managed to add.

"The couple who built it were transplants from Washington state and thought since they were in the south it should be light and airy. Their choice, not mine or apparently the builders. It's pink stucco, Lara. I hate it. It's fussy and feminine. Not that there's anything wrong with feminine, but I can't spend the rest of my days living in a pink house. Surely you can understand..." He glanced at the traffic as he pulled off the main road and she chose to look around her, noting the exit number and landmarks.

"How long did they live in it before you bought it?"

"Not at all. They divorced while they were building it. It's never been lived in. I'm living in the quarters over the stable right now. Please, Lara, if you take the job, promise you'll make it better."

"This I've got to see." She followed the road he was taking, watching for any sign that would tell her where she was. "Grant?"

"Yes?"

"Pink?" She laughed aloud, embarrassed about her unprofessional stupor. "I'm sorry, but it's the way you say it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wait until you see it—you'll say it the same way. It's not just that it's pink. A subdued or subtle pink I could handle, but this is more like a Pepto-Bismol pink. I'd have nightmares if I had to live in it. Could you imagine how warped a child or two would be spending their formative years there? Why, they'd never have any friends! Parents would think I was running a bordello." He laughed openly with her. He liked that she understood his dry sense of humor—most women didn't. What surprised him was the concept of his children. He'd never allowed himself the luxury of thinking in those terms before. Lara had changed that too.

"So you bought it for the land and the stables, not the house?"

"Yes, I thought you understood that. I was able to get a copy of an old photo of the original house. It was a big old white farmhouse with wrap-around porches and trees that shaded it. There were several stone fireplaces." He paused, slowing the truck but not stopping. "Lara, there's not a tree in sight of the pink house. It stands like a neon sign; if it blinked it would read, 'I don't belong here.' Sometimes it screams at me. It's the stuff nightmares are made of." He laughed only after she did.

"How do you picture it in your mind, Grant? Surely you've thought about what it should look like, what you'd want to drive up to each night?"

He let out an exasperated breath. Grant knew he had to be honest with her, but he chose his words carefully. "Up until twenty-four hours ago, if you'd asked me, I would have said it should make me feel like I was back in Texas. Now, I'm not so sure."

"What changed in the last twenty-four hours?"

Grant wanted to tell her she had happened. That before last night he'd never entertained the thought of doing anything to the house that wasn't completely for him. Now he understood if it was to be a home, his partner should have a say in it too. But telling her she was his intended partner wasn't a good idea, just yet, especially under the circumstances.

"Ask me again on the way back to Maureen's, after you've had a chance to see the place."

He made a right turn off a secondary road and traveled through

large stone pillars holding wrought-iron gates. The road wound left then right around the lake. In the distance, she could see the stone structure he'd told her was the stable. As the road turned left again, she would get her first look of the house in the distance, a great looming structure of pink stone.

Lara got a case of the giggles at the first sight of it. By the time he pulled up in front of the house they were both laughing.

"You didn't make this up," Lara told him as she released the seatbelt and fumbled with the door handle.

"Hell, I don't even really like the style of it." He walked to her side of the vehicle and reached for her hand. "Come, I'll show you why I bought it."

Lara let her hand slip against his. It was strong and warm yet not clammy. He directed her around the back of the house and down the lawn towards the great stone structure she'd glimpsed on the way in. His voice became animated as he told her about it. He noted Lara listened intently, trying to learn more about him. As they wandered through the acreage that separated it from the house, he came alive. His knowledge of horses and breeding them was one of his focuses in life.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the far end of the stable, four of the stalls were occupied. Each animal greeted him with a toss of the head or a snort. Lara watched Grant soften visibly as he introduced her to each horse, her hands reaching to the animal to introduce herself. Sadie was a golden Palomino with white mane and tail. Grant told her she was the oldest horse he owned and was named after a nanny he'd had as a child. Then there were Turk and Hercules, both American Saddle horses. Turk was a chestnut and Hercules a bay. Both of these horses had been named before he purchased them. Finally, he brought her to Apollo, a stunning Arabian in solid black. The horse nudged Grant's shoulder when he turned his attention to Lara, obviously not happy that he wasn't the center of attention.

He continued to give her a glimpse of the breeding program he had

in mind, and Lara realized he'd found himself when working with the horses. She questioned him about his ideas and wasn't surprised when it lead to an in-depth discussion of blood lines and artificial insemination. He seemed surprised when she told him she'd once witnessed a foal being born.

Grant pumped her for information, and she only offered that after ballet lessons at ten and ice skating at eleven, she'd managed to talk her parents into riding lessons at twelve. She added that she'd been hooked from the first ride and spent four years taking lessons and three summers caring for the horses as her summer job.

"What made you stop riding?" She hated that his eyes remained hidden behind the glasses. Her hand went back to Sadie's nose.

"I gave it up at sixteen," she told him. "Most boys in Forest Hills didn't understand a girl who rode horses and mucked out stalls all summer because she wanted to. They didn't date a girl like that either." She turned back, her laugh honest.

Lara threw back her head laughing, obviously remembering something she didn't share with him. Grant went on to explain his goal was to have the farm up and running by next spring. As the gestation period for a horse was eleven to twelve months, he still wouldn't see any foals until the following year. She was aware it was preferable for foals to be born in the spring. They needed less stable space and food and had the advantage of roaming outdoors to nibble the grasses to supplement their diets.

Back out the far side of the stable was a side staircase. He motioned her up the stairs. "This is home for now. Are you hungry, or would you rather see the rest of the place?" He pushed open the old wooden door with leaded panes of glass.

Everything in the old space was painted a neutral tan or was left as natural stone. Every shelf or space was crammed with books, so many Lara didn't have time to read the titles. Worn leather couches in burgundy and black flanked the fireplace, with an old trunk pulled in the middle as a makeshift table. An efficient kitchen at the far end of the room and a dining area between it defined the living area.



Several upholstered chairs took up the empty corners, one with books stacked precariously around it. Behind it, Lara noticed the strong reading light. Grant had gone to the kitchen and was rummaging through the refrigerator. She slowly circled the space, liking that he kept the exposed beams. This was where Grant Pierson lived. Still, something didn't seem right. She wandered to the far end of the room and down the small hallway only after asking Grant for permission.

"While you're here, make yourself at home," he'd told her. "Are you thirsty? If you're hungry we have the lunch Ann packed."

She told him no and moved to the far end of the apartment. There were two medium-sized bedrooms and a bath that could be accessed from either room. One was a standard guestroom, the other obviously his bedroom. Up against the far wall was a king-size bed, minus a headboard. Several bureaus were pushed into the corners, leaving only a small walkway around the bed. This was a man who needed a bigger bedroom. Back in the living area, Lara watched him from the distance. He moved easily for his size and bulk. The only strange thing was that he still hadn't taken off his sunglasses.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Is there another apartment on the other side? Something's not right from the stable downstairs."

Grant smiled. "Yes, the caretaker lives next door. His apartment accesses from a rear stairway."

"Grant, could I...never mind. Shall we see the main house?"

Grant stopped to watch her, and she wondered if he'd ask what she'd started to say. Instead, he moved towards the door. He must have decided it might be better not to know. "Better to get the worst out of the way on an empty stomach, Lara?"

"Something like that."

Walking back to the pink house, their conversation was light and Grant informative about the area. His hand held hers lightly as if it was the most natural thing for both of them. He told her he now owned all but one hundred acres since combining the three lots together. He also told her he had bid on the last lot across the lake from him. If he managed to

grab it, he'd have no intruders using his lake.

Lara suddenly realized she knew nothing about him. Upon reflection, she realized Maureen had always been quite careful not to say specifically what he did for a living.

## Chapter Five

Arriving back at the main house, Lara circled it several times. It was basically a large “H.” Instantly she knew what the floor plan inside would look like. “It’s not you at all, is it?” she murmured, more to herself than to him. She took one last walk around it before meeting him back at the front entrance. “Is it pink inside too?” she teased.

“Worse—wait until you see what they did to the master bathroom. Then you’ll know why I want my bedroom someplace else.”

Opening the front door, Lara knew her earlier impressions had been accurate. The foyer was large and airy, the staircase beautiful. The formal rooms were as he’d described, and the kitchen she wouldn’t touch. Maybe some wallpaper for texture, but nothing more. The small, beige suite downstairs was beyond suitable for a live-in. It had a private sitting room with a fireplace and a mini kitchen. The bedroom was large and airy, as was the attached bath. Closets weren’t a problem either. Again, she’d only add color and texture. She smiled when she remembered her first apartment in New York. It would fit twice in this large space.

He walked behind her towards the master suite. Grant made her close her eyes as he threw open the double doors. Lara couldn’t squelch the gasp that came from deep inside her chest. She stumbled into the room, unaware of the thick carpet. Pink carpet! Everything in the room was some subtle shade of pink. The bedding, the walls, the curtains were all pink. Turning, she looked to Grant, who had a strange expression on his face.

"Not very masculine, is it? Do you think this was the last straw? No wonder they divorced."

"I don't blame him; even I couldn't sleep in here. It's rather like a large stomach, or..." Lara never finished her thought.

Grant burst out laughing and moved towards her. She was against the great wall of his body before she realized what he intended. With one hand wrapped around her waist and the other drawn through the length of her hair, he pulled her quickly to him, his lips descending on hers.

For several long, drawn-out moments Lara didn't move. She didn't breathe, think or react. She only felt. She felt his muscled chest against her, felt his strong arms holding her, felt the hardness in him pressing against her. Felt like this was where she belonged. A small moan escaped her lips, and he deepened his assault on her open mouth.

Grant pulled away first, his eyes still covered by the glasses. Lara wanted to reach up and tug them from the perch on his nose, but he took a step back. Clearing his throat, he smiled.

"I'm not sorry. I've wanted to do that since last night in the kitchen." End of subject. He moved towards the closed doorway at the far end. "Think you're strong enough?" He opened the door and moved away, going to sit on the windowsill at the far corner of the room.

Lara was still dazed from his kiss. Slowly she moved towards what she knew would be the master bath. "How bad could it be after this?" she tried to joke. The words were barely out of her mouth when she found out. The master bath. It too was coated in layers of what looked like Pepto-Bismol. The marble was pink with gold veining. All the faucets were gold and fashioned to look like swans. Mirrors covered the walls on all sides of her. She knew a lot of money was put to bad use in here.

Slowly, she moved back to the main room. Her gaze couldn't avoid the large bed that had been built on a platform several steps higher than the floor. She knew the brass banding would provide low-voltage lighting to the steps. The faux fur bedspread in dark pink was topped with several pillows of varying shapes and sizes, all some shade of pink with gold trim. While it was terrible to look at, she found she couldn't look away. That was when she saw the large mirror affixed to the inside of the

canopy. She didn't have to go further to realize the view it would reflect. She glanced towards Grant and realized he was fighting to holding back his laugh.

"Rather like a car wreck," she told him. "I want to look away, but I can't!" Grant was watching her. "I'm sorry; I didn't know it could get worse." Her deadpan expression lasted several seconds before the smile crept to her lips. She tried to pull it back, but like the giggles in the truck earlier, she had no control. Soon she heard his deep laugh, and it seemed somehow soothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant had an instant visual of her lying naked on the deep pile of the pink fur bedspread, her hair spread behind her. He hardened immediately and moved from the window.

"I'll get your things from the truck. How about a ride before lunch?" He didn't elaborate. "Wander around all you want—I'll be at the stables when you're ready." Grant knew if he really wanted to, he could have her, right there in the awful pink room. Every time he touched her, she responded.

"I'd like to see the other houses," she started, her voice hesitant.

"All right, we'll ride later." The double meaning of his words wasn't lost on her this time.

"Thanks. Give me just a few minutes."

\* \* \* \* \*

When he left the room, it seemed instantly empty. Lara made a second trip through the space, noting some of the good points. Upstairs, she saw how three bedrooms on the west side could easily be transformed into a grand master suite. Her only problem was as she visualized it, she saw herself sprawled on the bed, Grant beside her. Shaking off the image, she left quickly. He was leaning against the truck when she returned to the front door, pulling it shut behind her.

Lara moved beside him, her arms crossed in front of her. In a completely serious tone, she spoke quietly. "Grant, even I'm not good enough to make you comfortable in that."

"I know, Lara. I'm wondering if it wouldn't be best to destroy it and start from scratch?"

"Definitely more expensive. Let me think on it a while. Can we see the other homes, now?"

He only nodded as he walked around the truck. Both were quiet while he drove her around the east side of the lake.

\* \* \* \* \*

The afternoon sky had cleared and the air smelled clean and fresh. It reminded her of Frederick, and she pushed the thought of him away. Back in the truck, she asked Grant about the next house he would show her. She was told it used to be a neighboring farm until his purchase. He figured the old house would make a good place for his workers to live. And he told her in depth the many positions that would employ full-time workers. When they turned onto a new dirt path, Lara saw the house in the distance. A white farmhouse, typical of what was built in the late twenties.

Grant told her the structure was sound according to the engineer's report, but it needed a facelift. Once inside, Lara agreed. Some basic updating to the kitchen and baths, lots of paint and wallpaper would breathe life back into the old place. It had six bedrooms and four baths. The kitchen had been modernized twenty years earlier but was solid. There were large, mature trees shading the front porch and an ample deck off the back of the house.

"This wouldn't take much, just some dressing up," she mentioned.

She wandered around the outside one more time and stopped to study the pink house in the distance. Somehow, it looked more like a hotel than a home. Back in the truck, he drove her around the lake to a third home. As they approached, Lara pulled back a breath.

Grant put the truck in park and Lara was out of the vehicle before

him. She'd started to walk around the house, and he waited on the front porch. When she met him at the front, he opened the door and she smiled, her eyes glancing up.

This house was much different from the others. A long, sleek ranch designed as a log home, its entry was carpeted with aged slate and the walls had been left alone to show their log structure. To the right was a long staircase that led to a second floor. She moved to the left and found herself in a huge room, a warm room with a field stone fireplace centering the far wall. The exposed beam framing was intact, leaving the twenty-five foot ceiling open. Several ceiling fans were positioned about the space. It was warm and cozy, a family home, she decided.

She followed the open floor plan towards the back of the ranch and found a huge eat-in kitchen with lots of glass and wonderful natural light. It was old, but new appliances and counters would refresh it. There was a formal dining room to the side. She only stuck her head in for a moment; a wasted room, she decided, maybe a home office. Back in the kitchen, she couldn't help but run her hands along the logs, visually inspecting the chinking as she went.

Grant leaned in the doorway, watching her but not saying anything. She opened the double French doors to a large slate patio with a BBQ area. Lara saw several seating areas in her mind and a pool farther down the lawn. This was where Grant belonged, she decided, not the pink mausoleum.

Keeping the thought to herself, she smiled as she moved past him, wandering down the long hallway. She passed several bedrooms and baths, old but nothing really wrong with them that some updating wouldn't fix. At the far end of the hall was one final closed door. Grant had followed her but hung back. She turned for approval before opening it, and he only nodded, his eyes still shielded by dark glasses.

Lara pushed open the door and fell in love. The master suite was a dream. Its log walls had been preserved as well. The cathedral ceiling wore its timbers with pride and slipped into a glass wall that overlooked the lake in the distance. Going to the wall, Lara saw the stone stable in the distance. She knew from her outside perusal that the windowed wall

would make this room. The room was large enough for Grant to have a king-size bed and furniture without being tight. She pictured a seating area before the stone fireplace on the sidewall. The floors were natural pine and were lovingly taken care of. The master bath was adequate and the closet space minimal.

She left him briefly, going back to the hallway several times before she spoke.

"Grant, what do you have in mind for this house?" She stood beside him in the doorway, her gaze drawn to the outside. A large magnolia tree was planted in the far exterior corner and had grown to shade half the wall.

Turning when she didn't get an answer, she found herself locked against his body again. She didn't pull away; instead she moved against him, relishing the feel of him. His kiss was different this time, urgent and needy. He moved against her, his hands sliding across her back, down her hips. One hand held her to him as his other hand moved between them. His kiss deepened when his fingers grazed against her femininity through the denim she wore. A gasp caught in her throat, but she didn't pull away.

Instead, she melted against his touch, moved to access it better and knew he felt the shudder that ran through her when he pushed her over the edge into the abyss with only a few strokes of his hand. He lightened his kiss, but not his hold on her. His lips to her throat, she ran her hands through his black hair. Grant pulled away when she reached to take off his glasses.

Lara stood stick still when he pulled away, her hand coming to her lips. She took a long time before she turned back, averting her eyes from his direct gaze. The heat on her cheeks still flamed, and she watched a smile broaden across his face.

"I'm not sorry I kissed you this time either, Lara." She thought to protest but knew she had no right after molding her body against his. "Come, I'll show you the loft."

He left her alone in the empty bedroom to gather her wits. She found him upstairs in the loft, his back to her as she climbed to the top of the stairs. "Grant?"



"Lara?" He didn't turn, and she pulled back her initial thoughts of professing her need for him. She moved around the large airy space, opening closet doors and checking out the attached full bath. In the far corner was a complete kitchen; although compact, it was functional.

"I'll be outside if you need me."

Lara slowly moved from the loft, stopping on the stairs several times to view the downstairs. Outside, she all but ran to the back of the house. She needed air and distance from him. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess. How could she react to him in this intimate way, especially after last night? It was all mixed up inside her. Frederick last night, Grant today. What was wrong with her? Again, she sensed his presence more than heard him join her.

"Are you ready for lunch? We can eat out here."

"Yes, that would be fine," she managed but couldn't turn to look. "I'll be right back."

He moved away, and Lara wandered down the grassy slope towards the lake. Across the lake she saw the aged stone structure, then turned to look back at the house. Grant joined her shortly, carrying their picnic basket and a blanket. He didn't ask, just spread the blanket beside the lake and started to unpack their lunch. "Lara, you've been quiet, too quiet. Have I offended you?" He handed her a crystal glass of wine, which she accepted.

"Grant, this has been such a strange weekend for me." She hesitated, not knowing how to proceed. Finally, she decided to change the direction of their conversation. Lara lowered herself to the corner of the blanket and looked towards the lake. She pulled on her professional smile and set about asking more questions about the way he lived and what he expected from his home.

Grant only hesitated when she asked if he saw himself with a large family and how much room they might need to accommodate his wishes. She watched him pause before answering. "Originally I thought it would be a bachelor home; now I'm not sure. Things have changed rapidly around me."

"Changed for the good or bad?" It was driving her crazy that she

couldn't see his eyes, couldn't read his expressions fully. Finally, she told him. "Grant, the glasses..."

"Yes, I'm sensitive to the light," he added before she could finish her thought, effectively ending the discussion.

Lara only smiled and nodded her concession. She picked at the food Ann had packed, while he ate as if it would be his last meal.

"If you get the last piece of land, is there another home on it?"

"No, it's vacant. There are no structures at all. I'm planning on leaving it natural, for trails and paths."

They were quiet for a long time, Lara accepting a refill of her wine. Without the antihistamine today, she knew she could tolerate the alcohol and not make a fool of herself. The silence wasn't uncomfortable between them. Grant stretched out across the blanket from her, his head cradled in his hands. Lara thought long and hard before she spoke, hoping she would be able to make him see her vision.

"Grant, I'd like to discuss something, but please keep an open mind." He nodded for her to continue but rolled onto his side, his hand propping his head. "Do you have to live in the main house?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," he answered, wondering if she'd read his mind.

"This house, this structure, seems more you than any of the others. Could you be comfortable here? You still have a view of the lake and the stables. Somehow this seems to suit you much better than the pink house."

"I'd thought about it but hadn't really made any decisions yet." Grant seemed stunned she understood him so quickly. She'd known he'd tried to remain unattached to each structure as he showed them. Yet, here she was, realizing he'd be more at home in the simple log home than the fussy main house. "Why, Lara? What makes you bring it up?"

"I'm not sure; somehow this just seems to suit you."

He turned away and started to repack the remnants of their meal.

"About ready for a ride?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, of course. Let me help you." Lara moved to help him gather the debris and realized she'd been staring. How could she not, stretched

out like he was? She was embarrassed and turned away. Lara knew if they stayed lying on the blanket beside the lake she'd move to take him against her, and she wouldn't be able to stop touching him once she started.

As they walked back to the truck, Lara hesitated. "Grant, I'd like to have one last look around. I'll walk back to the stables, all right?"

"All right, Lara. I'll saddle the horses; meet me there when you're ready." He closed the back of the truck and moved behind her. His face buried in her hair, his arms pulled her close to his chest. "Take all the time you need," he said at last, his fingers lingering against her hair for a moment more.

When he moved away she felt cold. She didn't move until she knew he'd driven away. Only then did she sink to the ground, her heart pounding inside her chest.

*Oh, God, what am I doing? Last night, and now Grant.* For a long time she stayed there, sitting on the grass and staring at the home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her back to the lake, Grant watched her from the distance. When she finally rose and started back, he moved into the stable. He'd finished saddling two of the horses when she returned from changing into her riding clothes. That was a distraction of another kind—her appearance in the skintight pants and black leather boots. He hardened at the sight of her.

"All set?"

"Yes. Who am I riding?" She patted the Arabian's nose to let him scent her.

"Sadie. She'll give you a good ride, but she knows her place."

Lara turned back to the beautiful brown horse. Grant watched her small hand stroke the animal, and he was instantly jealous. "Hello, Sadie, I'm Lara. It's nice to meet you. Will you give me a ride today?"

Grant mounted his black stallion and watched as Lara made friends with the animal. He directed her towards an existing path, letting her go first, admiring her "seat" on the horse. He shifted in his saddle and knew

he was in trouble with this woman, deep trouble. He also knew the longer he waited to tell Lara why he wore the glasses, the worse it would be.

## Chapter Six

Lara was enjoying the ride Sadie was giving her; as the horse was obviously familiar with the path, she let the animal take the lead. Her thoughts turned back to last night and then to Grant's kiss in the bedroom. Two men in one weekend. What had gotten into her? She hadn't realized how far they had gone when Grant moved beside her, motioning her to head towards the lake.

"We'll water them here. What do you think of my lake, Lara?"

"It's beautiful. Have you named the place yet? It will have a bearing on the type of renovations you make."

"Ask me again on the way home, Lara." His tone had changed. Something had happened, but she wasn't sure just what or when.

"Grant, you asked me here to see the place, to give you my opinion. It's beautiful, but I think there's a different option."

"Go on," he prompted.

"Personally, I think you should make your home in the log structure. The view is magnificent, both of the lake and the stables in the distance. For the second house, I agree with you—it would make a perfect place to house your workmen." She hesitated before continuing. He watched her intently as she pulled a breath before going on. "As for the pink house—"

"Go ahead, Lara. Just tell me what you're thinking."

"I think it would make a better guesthouse than home. With minor changes it could become a bed and breakfast sort of place, easily run as a

guesthouse. It's not you, Grant. Beyond the color, it doesn't feel like you. It's formal and stuffy, and you're not. You're not what I expected at all."

"Neither are you, Lara." His smile melted her heart just a little. She watched as he took a blanket roll from his saddle and laid it on the ground by the water. His hands came around her waist and helped her from the horse. Then he took the horse's reins and dropped them over a nearby tree branch. He dropped to the blanket and stretched out in the afternoon sun.

She sat beside him, pretending to look at the environment when all she could focus on was the huge bulge at his crotch. She'd felt him against her and knew he'd be long and thick. From the material stretching, she could tell he was already erect. In that moment of time, Lara made a decision that would change her in all ways.

She moved closer to him and dropped her lips over his. His hands immediately came to hold her close, one stroking her back, the other running through her hair. He gave her control, of the kiss and their situation. Lara loved the way he kissed her, patient and loving one second, hot and demanding the next. She was horny, and this was a one-time opportunity she wouldn't pass up.

Boldly, she moved from the embrace and started planting small kisses along his throat. Her fingers fidgeted with the buttons on his shirt, each one opened a small victory. She let her tongue and lips swipe over each patch of skin she revealed. When her hand landed on his belt, his hand dropped over hers.

"Let me—I want to," she said, with more confidence than she knew existed inside her.

"You don't have to," he whispered, followed by a halfhearted laugh.

"Yes, I want to." She fought with the heavy leather of his belt and the buckle and steadied her hand as she lowered his zipper over his erection. He wore no underwear, springing to life, full and thick in her waiting palm. Lara licked her lips as she settled to lie over his legs, leaving her mouth hovering above his cock. One hand moved his length forward and back. She smiled when her motions brought forward a shiny drop of pre-cum. Lara lowered herself further until her tongue swept the droplet

of moisture from the head of his cock. A second lick and a third had her using her tongue to make patterns on his hardened length. She realized she was doing something right—his body was responding, his hips jutting slightly upward.

She didn't care how long they were there; only the experience counted. He groaned when her lips covered his cockhead, her tongue flicking against the sensitive underneath. With each lick and swipe, she took more of him between her lips. Lara engulfed him and receded repeatedly, each time accepting more droplets as her reward. She kept one hand on the base of his cock, directing him where she wanted him. The other moved to her own breast, pinching her nipple through her sweater.

"Lara, you'll make me come," he whispered.

"Wasn't that the point?" she asked, lifting momentarily to smile at him. Another decision made, she paused and unbuttoned the front of her sweater, letting it fall from her shoulders. She didn't unfasten her bra, rather lifted her breast from the cup, her fingers tugging and pinching her nipple until it budded harder. Her mouth dropped back over his cock, sucking him from the base to the tip.

Lara became lost in the motions she created. She could feel his body tensing and swallowed him deep down her throat. When she felt the first spray of his cum hit her tongue, she pinched her nipple harder, forcing her own mini orgasm as she swallowed his. She held him tight between her lips until he finished, and then she licked him clean.

Lara let her body drop back over his legs, finally relinquishing her hold on his cock. She used her arm to shade her eyes from the sun while trying to figure out how to gracefully get out of this situation. After a bit, she realized she didn't care. She'd wanted to suck his cock and she had. While baring her breast hadn't been part of her original thought, it didn't matter. When he said her name aloud, she finally managed to sit up, resting on her heels as she slid the material of her bra over her bare breast.

"Why not come closer," he said, his hand reaching toward her.

"I think that's enough for today," was her weak reply. She fumbled with the buttons and realized her sweater was off kilter, so she had to unbutton the whole length and start again. Lara felt the heat on her cheeks

and knew they were as red as her sweater. "I guess we should head back—I don't want to miss supper with Miss Maureen." What else could she say—*yes, strip me and fuck me here, beside the lake?* Embarrassed by her boldness, she defaulted to time. "I'll let you put yourself back together," she told Grant, turning so she couldn't see his face. Right now, she didn't want to see what his expression was.

She was in her own private hell. Last night she'd let a total stranger lick her pussy in the garden, let that same stranger fuck her from behind in the library, and today she'd sucked Grant's cock, he too a total stranger. "What's happening to me?" she whispered, pushing herself to stand. It didn't matter; she was leaving Georgia as soon as she could, and she wouldn't come back. That was the only solution that made sense to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lara wandered towards the lake's edge and saw her reflection in the water. Suddenly she didn't know the woman staring back. Tears overcame her before she could stop them. Not just a few that ran from her eyes, but large tears that rained down her cheeks, halting her breath and racking her body. Grant was behind her instantly, turning her against him.

"Lara? What's wrong?" She accepted the warmth of his body, held onto him as if her life depended on it. "Lara, tell me, please."

"I can't," she sobbed. "I can't believe it myself."

"Lara, please, it can't be that bad. Talk to me."

"I don't even know you," she managed to get out. "What I did to you was so intimate, and you're a stranger."

"Maybe that's better. We all have moments of lust. I've no right to judge you." She pulled back from him and realized she still hadn't seen his eyes. "Lara, please. Whatever you tell me won't leave this place, ever."

"I'm so embarrassed. I can't believe I did it. Worse yet, I wanted it!" She gathered her control as best she could, taking the blue bandana he offered her as a handkerchief. She let her legs fold under her, coming to rest beside the lake. He moved and knelt beside her, her chin resting



between his thumb and index finger as he studied her. She turned away, embarrassed by her disintegration before his very prying eyes. "Thanks." She pulled the blue cloth through her fingers. "You should take me back. I'll find someone who's got their act together to do the project for you, Grant."

"Lara, nobody touches the houses but you. Understand?" Her expression told him she'd heard him, she just didn't understand. "Lara, tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can fix it?"

"No, Grant. I'm an adult. I did something I am embarrassed about, and I just have to put it in perspective."

"Do it again and we'll find perspective," he teased.

"I'm not just talking about you, today." He watched as she dried her eyes and squared her shoulders. "I'll be okay; I'm sorry to dissolve into tears like that. I just don't know what's wrong with me this weekend."

"Lara, we need to talk, and not about your tears. There's something you need to know." She straightened and watched him. "You first."

Somehow she knew it was right to talk with him. Not knowing why was frightening, yet she decided to trust him. "Last night...at the party, I met a man." She paused to draw a breath and turned away from him. "I took some allergy pills because of the lilacs and stupidly drank with them. I...I made a fool of myself with one of the guests," was all she could say.

"And? What's the problem? We all make fools of ourselves sometimes. It happens to the best of us. Why, if you ask Aunt Maureen about New Year's Eve, nineteen eighty-nine, she'll blush deeper red than her velvet curtains in the library." Neither of them commented on his reference to the library. Lara looked exasperated.

"God, Grant, if only it were that simple. I let him...have me in the library during the party." He didn't flinch, didn't pull away from her. Instead, he pulled her against him, his arms holding her tight. "I've never done anything like it. The few men I've been with I've known for ages before we got serious. Than there he was, this total stranger hidden behind a black mask, and I was drawn to him. I can't explain it."

"Lara, it's all right. Everybody has one of those moments in their lives." He pulled back and smiled, adding, "Well, at least if they're having a good time."

"You don't understand, Grant. God, it gets worse." She pulled away, rising to put distance between them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant's mind was starting to work overtime. What had he missed? "Tell me, Lara—you've gone this far. Believe me; I've no right to judge you." He stood and moved beside her, leaving a definite space between them, afraid how she'd react if he pulled her to him once more. With her back to him, her voice was barely audible. He moved closer to hear her.

"You, Grant. After letting a total stranger touch me last night, today, less than a day later, here I am with you, letting you kiss me too. And what I did, I've never...I mean...oh forget it."

"What's wrong with that? It was absolutely your choice just now. I didn't ask or push you to suck my cock." A small smile crossed his lips, but he pulled it back. "Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed it and would look forward to it again. Are you embarrassed? Or was I supposed go further?" He glanced downward, thinking it through. "Have I offended you, Lara, have I misunderstood? Not once today have you pulled back from my touch. I assumed you were interested or at least curious. Tell me, Lara—it's the only way I'll know."

\* \* \* \* \*

A long silence dwelled between them before she was able to speak the words aloud. "You weren't mistaken. I didn't pull away from you. Don't you see—what kind of person does that make me? Last night, and now I'm drawn to you like a moth to a light on a dark night. God, Grant, I don't know what's happening to me. This kind of behavior is totally out of character for me."

His hands moved to her shoulders, and he pulled her back against

him. "Don't worry, Lara, I'll protect you," he whispered. Grant stayed still with her in his arms, and Lara wondered if he'd launched the beginning of something wonderful or the end of what might have been.

Lara froze against him. The air around them went still; even the bees didn't dare to make a sound. He didn't move, kept her against him, seeming to wait until she reacted.

Lara let the words swirl through her brain before moving. She felt so safe standing against him, as if he would protect her and life could be good again. But when the words echoed again, she knew. Frozen with fear, she knew she had to know, had to satisfy the question that leapt to her mind. The only question that screamed to be answered. Slowly she turned, her right hand moving to the earpiece of his dark sunglasses.

"Lara, kiss me first."

"Why, Grant?" She felt a panic like no other in her entire life.

"Please, Lara, one kiss, and we'll talk."

Grant drew her to him, his lips barely grazing against hers until she surrendered, opening for him as he deepened their connection, his tongue sliding against her teeth, teasing her lips, fighting with her tongue.

Lara felt him harden against her and pulled back. Her hand moved to his waist, and she hesitated. Grant took a breath and moved his hand over hers, placing her over his hardened state. Lara stilled her hand against him; he felt hot even through the clothing. She knew what she was about to unveil, but she didn't want to admit it. Her free hand rose to his glasses, and he didn't stop her.

\* \* \* \* \*

At first, Grant thought to move away, but he knew she deserved the truth. He drew a deep breath just before she removed the glasses from his face. His eyes closed automatically from the difference in light, but as he slowly opened them he saw her staring.

Her mouth had fallen open in the perfect oval, and he wanted to kiss her. Instead, he stared, letting her see his silver eyes. Letting her grasp what she'd finally pieced together. She started to shake in his arms, her

hand still pressed against him. Grant wasn't sure what emotion she was feeling at that moment, but he knew anger would surface soon.

"You son of a bitch!" Lara tossed his glasses to the ground and pulled from his embrace. She ran to the horses and grabbed Sadie's reins.

Grant watched her mount the horse, pausing only to stare down at him briefly and add, "You're a bastard, Grant." She pulled the reins and rode full out away from the lake clearing.

Only when she was well out of sight did he walk back to his horse. He followed at a slower pace, hoping the time and space would help her cool down.

At the stables he found her taking care of Sadie. Her face was streaked with tears and her hands shook with anger, yet she was gentle with the horse. She knew he was there and ignored him.

"I'll take care of the horses; you go shower and change. I'll be up in a while and then we'll talk, Lara."

"I rode her; I'll take care of her."

"No. I'll take care of the horses, Lara. Please, I'd rather you not be here just now. I know you're angry and upset and you have a right to be, but you've forgotten one thing. You haven't once stopped to think about my side of the situation. Please, Lara, just go upstairs and change, and then we can talk this through."

"No. You'll take me back to Atlanta, where I'm going to get on a plane and never return here again." She dropped her hands from the horse and stormed from the building.

Grant hadn't a clue as to how to make the situation better. His only idea was to give her some time alone and let her calm down, although after witnessing her small display of temper, he knew that might take a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lara showered quickly after making sure both of the bathroom doors were locked from the inside. It was ridiculous to be afraid of him finding her in some state of undress, especially after last night. She

unlocked the doors and fled to the guestroom, pulling on her clothes as quickly as she could. When she moved into the living room she saw his bedroom door was ajar and heard the shower turn on.

Drawn to his room, she stood in the doorway, her gaze glancing around the room. In the far corner stood a chest of drawers. She noticed something that hadn't been there earlier. Something black. Lara drew a breath, listened to make sure the shower was still running and crossed quickly to the chest. Her worst fear was confirmed. Next to a black leather wallet, a ring with keys and several bills folded under a silver clip, lay the black lace underwear that Frederick had torn from her body last night in the library just before entering her and fucking her from behind. She backed out of the room, knowing she had to get out of Athens and Atlanta.

She was devastated and annoyed with him. He'd known all along and worn those stupid glasses to hide it from her. She would have been all right if the memory of him buried deep inside her hadn't surfaced.

Lara left the apartment, dropped her bag in the back of the truck and walked back to the lake. There she sat, trying to understand what exactly had happened. She'd taken a gamble last night and lost. Oh, she'd carry the memory with her always, but now, it had changed in her mind, clouded by his reluctance to tell her who he really was. She wondered, if she'd known earlier would she'd still wanted to give him head?

The confirmed bachelor, he'd probably wanted no further contact. She tried to laugh, wondering when he realized it was her and how he'd reacted. He must have been horrified. With Maureen already pushing them together, he'd had no choice but to bring her to see the farm. She sincerely doubted he ever intended her to design the spaces, rather only wanted to appease his aunt.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant watched her walk from the stables as he dressed quickly. He was as confused as she must be. In his past, women had been for fun and entertainment. Lara Rhodes had changed that perspective. Now as he

looked over his farm, he knew it would be nothing without her beside him. The only thing he could do was face her. Maybe they could work through it. Shaking his head, he knew whatever lay ahead, he'd brought on himself.

## Chapter Seven

"Will you talk to me, or do you just want me to take you back to Atlanta?" He moved next to her, dropping to the ground several feet away. She didn't turn to him.

"Yes," was all she answered.

Grant didn't know if it was a yes to talking or going back. "I'm sorry, Lara. I should have told you last night."

"Yes, you should have." Her voice was tight; he knew she was fighting for control. "How could you spend all day with me and not tell me? I don't understand. Did you bring me here to appease Maureen or to...get seconds?"

Lara seemed to be about to say something else but hesitated. Last night they had willingly come together. The seduction was mutual. If the party had had a different atmosphere, things might have been different. He'd never know now. Today he had no one to blame but himself. He remembered her baring her breast to him, moving so she was just out of his reach and fondling herself. Embarrassed heat chased up her throat and cheeks. The surprise lay when he had to hold back the smile tugging at his lips.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lara straightened and felt a moment of emboldened power like never before. Even if he dumped her now, she'd never forget the feeling of

taking charge, never again wait for a man to make all the moves. Lara had sexually freed herself today. As she glanced over her shoulder, Grant continued.

"I didn't know what to do. I just knew the minute you found out, I'd lose you. And, Lara, I don't want that to happen."

She turned to look fully, stunned by his words.

"I told you earlier the last twenty-four hours had changed my life; now you know why. It was you, Lara. You changed everything. In the blink of an eye all my plans were a shambles. Nothing seemed to matter anymore if you weren't a part of it." He held her look, not turning away. "I know you must hate me and I deserve it, but please, Lara, don't throw away what we could have because you're embarrassed."

"Embarrassed! Is that all you think I am? Yes, embarrassed, and confused. And most of all angry!" She turned from him. "You were accurate when you told me you had no right to judge me." Her hands pulled at several blades of grass beside her, and she mutilated them between her fingers. "God, Grant, I can't believe this is happening." She fell silent, and he waited her out.

"Lara?"

"In the stables you said I wasn't seeing your side. The only way I can see your side is to think once you figured out who I was, you figured you'd appease Maureen. When I left you could go on as if nothing happened."

"Something did happen, Lara. We both know it, or neither of us would be in this particular state right now." She glanced at him. "If it was just a moment of madness, we both would have known it. It wasn't. I was drawn to you before I knew who you were, and you can't deny you were drawn to me. Only this time I didn't want it to end. I'm a confirmed bachelor, Lara. Until last night, when you walked down the stairs glowing like a princess. Everything I worked for, planned for all these years was gone in the blink of an eye. A single glance at the stairs, and my life ceased to exist as I knew it."

"Grant, I don't understand. How long have you known exactly and how did you figure it out?" Lara stretched out beside him on her belly, the



lake ahead of her in the distance. Grant moved to lay beside her, a decent three feet of lawn separating them.

"After midnight, the unmasking. At first I figured you'd slipped away. That it was just one moment in time. But Maureen couldn't find you to introduce us. She sent Ann to look for you. When she came back, she said you'd fallen asleep." Lara only studied him. "I was in the room across the hall, Lara. Last night, before the party, I heard you and Ann laughing as you dressed. It all came together—your voice, your not being there at midnight, and finally the fact the decorator I was supposed to meet had fallen asleep."

"Did you loosen my dress?"

"Yes, but not until later. I did check your room just to make sure I was right. I never got past the door. The color of your dress was enough. Later, when I couldn't sleep I went back to your room. I thought I might wake you, and while I was debating what to do I remembered trying to get you out of the gown in the library. I realized you couldn't get it off without help. I didn't take advantage of you, Lara; I only loosened the lacing so you'd be able to get out of it when you woke."

He hesitated, adding, "All right, I did stroke your legs, but I didn't go near as far as I wanted to. I could have woken you and fucked you, but instead I walked away. Trust me; you'll never know how much restraint that took." He gave her a sheepish look as a light blush of red crept up his neck and landed on his cheeks.

"Thank you, I think. You were right; I couldn't get out of it by myself. I figured Ann had slipped in while I slept and unlaced me."

Lara thought about what he'd told her; Grant seemed surprised he'd been that honest with her.

"Grant, why didn't you say anything last night, in the kitchen?" She wasn't prepared for his lips to curl into a smile and the laugh that followed it.

"Darlin', do you have any idea how sexy you looked last night when you walked into the kitchen? It was early in the morning and I'd been thinking about you all night with a raging hard-on. Then suddenly there you were, still damp from a shower, your eyes clouded with sleep,

your face scrubbed clean." He paused and smiled. "With that damn robe clinging to your breasts and thighs. God, Lara, you were a sight. Be thankful I didn't take you on the kitchen counter then and there." He rolled onto his back, his head resting on his laced fingers. "Lara, I knew last night if I told you..." He didn't finish his statement.

"What did you think I'd do?"

"I thought you'd leave me, just for general principles. I figured you'd be gone by sunup and I'd never see or hear from you again. And it seems that's exactly what you're thinking of doing."

"Yes, it is. You yourself said you were a confirmed bachelor."

"*Were* being the key word in that sentence."

Lara forced herself to look at him, to stare into his silver eyes that glinted in the sunlight. "Were the glasses to hide from me, or are you really sensitive to the light?"

"Just a disguise. I knew the moment you saw me you'd know. I also understand that you're not a woman who lets incidents like last night happen. I figured you'd hightail it out of Dodge and never be heard from again. I didn't want that. I hoped if you spent some time with me and saw what I was trying to accomplish here, you might give me a chance. And you have, Lara. At least we're talking. Under the circumstances I really appreciate that. What I need to know is do we have any chance of working through this, or are we both wasting our time?"

\* \* \* \* \*

There, it was out there; he'd let her make her decision about them and he'd abide by it. He wouldn't push if she chose to walk away, although he wouldn't like it either.

"Somehow I feel better knowing I haven't been throwing myself at two men in the last day, only one." She let out a resigned laugh; he liked the sound of it. "What time is it?"

"Just after three."

"We should get back. After leaving Maureen's party last night, I can't afford to be late for her supper party." She gracefully rose, brushed

off the back of her jeans and looked down. "Can we continue this conversation in the car on the way back to town?"

"Of course." He too rose to stand beside her, Lara's hand going to block the sun from her vision as she looked up. "Wait here, I'll bring the truck around."

"No, I'll walk with you. I'd like to say goodbye to Sadie."

While they walked side by side, he didn't reach for her hand as he had done all day. In the cool darkness of the stable, he left her alone with the horse while he checked their feed. He purposefully didn't want to hear her whispering to the horse. She was probably saying goodbye forever.

When she joined him he did reach to her. One very long moment stretched between them as she looked at his hand and then to his face. Slowly, she reached out, letting him capture her hand with his.

\* \* \* \* \*

As his truck headed towards the main road, Lara asked him to stop. He killed the engine, letting the truck sit in the center of the private road. Lara got out and walked a few yards back up the road. Grant only leaned on the roof of the vehicle, waiting. He knew what she was looking for; he'd spent many an hour doing just what she was. Trying to see the farm from all angles.

When she returned, she slid in quietly. A low, "Thanks," was all she muttered. In the distance to the interstate they didn't talk. Only after he was heading towards Atlanta did she turn.

"What do you want to tell Maureen? I could say I was too busy, that's it's too big a job for me. What would you prefer?"

"I'd prefer you not tell her anything until we've both had some time to think about the last twenty-four hours. I'd prefer you to tell her you're crazy in love with me and willing to give up everything you've worked for to come and live with me on the farm and share my dream." His voice was strong and clear. He didn't take his eyes off the road.

"Grant, we don't even know each other."

"I know it's crazy to think I'm in love with a woman I've known

less than twenty-four hours. It's even crazier when I realize I knew last night when I saw you on the staircase."

"Grant, you weren't seeing me, you were seeing a costumed version."

"No, Lara, I saw you, as my bride. While the color of your dress wasn't white, everything else combined, and you were a vision to me. Something too good for me, something I shouldn't touch."

"Is that why you did...what you did in the garden? Because you wanted to mark me as yours?"

"I couldn't help myself. I figured if I took you by surprise, at least I'd get one taste of you before you threw me in the fountain." He glanced briefly to her, then turned his attention back to the road. "Lara, what would you like to happen?"

She took her time answering. "I think I'd like to take some time and think this all through. You've thrown quite a lot at me in a short period of time."

"Okay. Why not close your eyes for a while. We've about an hour before we get to the city. I'll wake you before we get to the house."

"Thank you." She turned in her seat, her head resting against the window. Grant knew she closed her eyes, but he wasn't sure if she was sleeping or just hiding from him. When he nudged her on the outskirts of Atlanta, she stretched like a cat in the confines of her seat.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"No problem. Do you feel better?"

"I'm not sure, Grant." She laughed openly at him, and he decided to take it as a good sign.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lara made it to the cocktail hour poised and controlled and on time. The apricot-colored linen sheath she'd pulled on was light and comfortable. She'd forgone the heavy makeup and left her hair down. Grant was there already, talking with a man she knew she should know. Somehow his name escaped her. Probably because she couldn't take her

mind off of Grant. He wore gray slacks and a light blue shirt, the navy blazer snugged over his shoulders.

"Lara, you look beautiful." Grant spotted her in the doorway and abandoned the conversation he was having. The man turned to see who he'd been snubbed for and smiled. She instantly remembered him to be Judge Aimes and returned his smile of acknowledgement.

"Nice to see you again, Lara." He reached his hand and she took it lightly, accepting the kiss on her cheek from the aging magistrate. Lara had decided long ago that he and Miss Maureen would make a wonderful couple. They were both strong personalities with a social standing in the community. They were close in age, and both had been widowed for a long time.

"Good evening, Judge. Grant."

"What will you have to drink?"

"Just mineral water, please. I'll wait for wine with supper." She glanced at Grant and was sorry she had. Lara felt her skin heat and hoped her cheeks hadn't reddened. The judge was polite enough not to point it out if he noticed. She accepted the glass Grant offered her with a nod of thanks and was grateful to talk about the garden with them both.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she was seated across from Grant during supper, it seemed as difficult for him to concentrate on the meal before them as it was for her. Lara pushed most of her food around on her plate while Grant ate mechanically.

"So Lara, what did you think of the farm? Will you do it for Grant?"

Suddenly the room seemed to go silent around her. She glanced up at him from under her lashes and carefully placed her fork down. Grant drew a deep breath and seemed to wait for her answer.

"We're not sure yet, Miss Maureen. Grant's going to take me back tomorrow so we can go over a few things. He'll have to make a decision after that."

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant released the breath he had been holding, understanding she wasn't going to cut and run. Instead, she'd give him more time. Suddenly he was hungry, and the world looked good to him once again.

It didn't escape him that she deliberately put the rest of the guests and usually a room between them for the rest of the night. She excused herself early, and he stayed for brandies and cigars in the new library with the men. He found he was reasonably distracted in the space. Each time he let his eyes wander towards the sofa he saw her stretched across it, and he hardened each time.

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Lara was grateful he knew not to come to her that night. She took a hot bath and tried to figure out what to do with the rest of her life. He'd told her he was in love with her this afternoon. And if she was going to be honest with herself, she'd have to admit she felt more than just an attraction. Attraction she could handle, but the chemistry between them was just so overpowering. Her bed seemed empty and she tried not to think of him lying beside her, or under her—and especially over her. Her inner muscles flexed automatically at the idea of him buried inside her, and she went slick. This time when she drew her fingers across her lower lips, she felt the angst start to leave her. Several passes later, she felt the small rush of release and relaxed back under the covers. At that moment in time, she would have done just about anything to find Grant and invite him to join her. She didn't, but she wanted to.

Lara still didn't know anything about his past, and that was scary. But then again, he really knew nothing of hers. Laughing to herself, she realized up until she'd met him, there'd been nothing in her past to be concerned with. Most of all, she tried to think about how she'd feel if she left for New York and didn't see him again. A hollow feeling enveloped her, and Lara knew she was sunk. No other man had come close to

making her feel the way Grant did. And most importantly, he wanted her to share his dream for the farm, to see his vision and help him turn it into a reality. She could do just that.

Beyond just designing the houses on site, she could turn the place into a home for both of them. He'd mentioned children several times during the day; she hadn't brought up the subject. The only frustrating part was somehow it still seemed wrong. She thought she'd gotten over being embarrassed earlier in the day, but had she really?

Knowing she had to see the farm one more time before she left, Lara punched the pillow under her head again and determined to wait and see what happened tomorrow. Shades of Maureen Pierson floated through her mind. "I'll worry about it another time," she'd say. Lara was going to do just that. She also decided she had to practice the wave-of-the-hand motion Maureen had perfected.

## Chapter Eight

Grant was up early and waiting in the kitchen with the Sunday newspaper spread out in front of him, a mug of coffee in one hand. Entering the kitchen, she moved to the pot, helping herself. His hand reached out and she moved towards him.

"How did you sleep?"

"I've had better nights," he told her with a smile. "I was torn between leaving you alone and coming to you. What should I have done, Lara?"

Harold entered the kitchen before she could answer.

"When would you like to leave for the farm?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"Harold, we'll have breakfast on the road. Want to bring your riding clothes?"

"Yes, I'll meet you in the foyer in ten minutes." She moved from the room quietly. Lara wasn't surprised to hear the light knock on her door as Ann entered shortly thereafter.

"Miss Maureen would like to see you before you go."

"Thank you, Ann. I'll be right along."

"Harold said to tell you he changed your flight for this afternoon, left you an open-ended reservation. You go ahead; I'll take your bag down. Have a nice day with Grant."

Ann left the room in a hurry, and Lara smiled. All right, so at times she spoke before thinking, but the woman was smart, and obviously she



and/or Grant had been giving off signals. Down the hall with a knock on the door, she heard the familiar, "Come in."

"Good morning, Miss Maureen. A lovely supper last night."

"Yes it was. Tell me, dear, what do you really think about the farm? Come on, be honest with me. We've been through too much together to start lying now." With kind, experienced eyes she looked to Lara.

"The farm is...wonderful, spectacular, awe inspiring from a certain perspective. There's so much possibility there; it just needs to be developed with an eye to maintaining the natural surroundings. I don't think Grant would want to add a lot of cement and brick."

"And Grant—is he behaving himself?"

"Why yes, of course. He's been nothing but professional." Lara blushed when she realized she protested too much. With a smile settling on her lips, she sat on the edge of the bed. "He's wonderful, you know. Aggravating, handsome, frustrating and kind, rude and sexy."

Maureen laughed brightly. "Well, I can see you've been thinking about him."

"Would you mind if..."

"Lara, I told you I wanted you to meet Grant. And not just about the farm. He is a good man. He's a man who doesn't give his word lightly, and he keeps his promises. If you happen to find him attractive it couldn't hurt." She added an expressive wink, and Lara laughed. "The only thing I was sorry about was that you never got to meet Frederick at the party." Maureen Pierson studied her openly, her smile widening when Lara looked away. "I see, so you did meet."

"Mabel and Frederick managed to dance some."

"Is that what they call it these days?" Maureen was having too good a time, and Lara knew she had to change the situation.

"Speaking of what to call it, when are you going to give the judge a break? He's a kind and generous man, and he's obviously smitten with you." Lara was delighted as she watched Maureen Pierson turn beet red from her cheeks to her chest at her question. They hugged before she left, and Maureen told her to enjoy her day with Grant.

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Grant was waiting at the bottom of the steps. She took his outstretched hand and studied him. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, I was talking with Maureen." Grant stilled, his hand grasping hers tighter.

"What did she want?" Lara appraised him, thankful today the dark glasses were gone. She absently ran her fingers through the side of his hair and pulled at his mouth. She kissed him lightly before releasing him.

"She wanted to know if Mabel had met Frederick at the party."

"And you said?"

"I told her they managed to dance some." His outright laugh wasn't what she'd expected.

"Is that what you call what they did?"

"That's exactly what she said!"

"Let's get out of here; suddenly Maureen's logic makes sense to me."

As promised, they stopped just before getting on the main road for breakfast. The ride back to the farm seemed to go quicker today. Lara realized it was because she was now familiar with the roads.

"How did you wind up designing all over the States, Lara?"

"It wasn't on purpose. After school, I took an apprenticeship for a year in a shop in Manhattan. When I'd decided to go out on my own it just happened. My old boss was overbooked, and he offered me a job that was too far away for him to commute to. I went to Newport, and when that went well he offered me another. After that, it just seemed my contacts were scattered. I enjoyed the traveling in the beginning. It was fun to explore new places, meet new people."

"But?"

"I know it will sound crazy with all the advantages I've had and all the places I've been, but I'm tired of it. My apartment in New York is more like a large closet."

"So you're ready to settle down, you just don't know where yet?"

"I suppose. I haven't really made any decisions, just the traveling is

starting to grate on me.”

“Where are your parents?”

“They’re still in Forest Hills. Mom’s a legal secretary and Dad works for the Long Island Rail Road. He’ll retire in three years, and they’ve got their eye on a spot in Denver. Mom won’t go anywhere there isn’t snow.”

“Would they like me if they met me, or would they be disappointed?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I’d say they’d be thrilled.” She laughed, and he relaxed.

“Lara, why are we going back to the farm today? What do you have in mind?”

“I decided I wanted to ride Sadie again, and it was an excuse to get you alone.” She said the words without thinking and was horrified. Grant didn’t make her embarrassment any easier with the wide grin that spread across his lips. “Don’t get cocky with me, mister—I can still take you down in a heartbeat.” What was said in haste was right on target.

“I know you can, Lara. I suppose that’s why I’ve fallen in love with you. You understand just how much you mean to me already, and you know you can crush me in an instant. Kind of forces me to keep my place.”

“Grant, somehow I don’t see myself as intimidating, especially with someone like you. Do you realize I don’t know anything about you? What did you do before you bought the farm?”

“I lived in Texas, worked on a few spreads. I owned some land that turned out to be profitable. I wasn’t very directed for a long time. It wasn’t until I saw this farm that I could finally visualize my future.”

“What do you see?”

“First, you were right; I don’t see myself ever being comfortable in the pink house. I’ve always thought the log cabin suited me better. I have to tell you I was shocked when you understood that so quickly. And what I see shifts with time and perspective. I know I want a comfortable home. And just recently I’ve realized with the right person, filling it with kids isn’t a frightening option any longer.”

Both of them fell into a compatible silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant turned though the stone pillars and asked Lara where she wanted to go first. Her answer surprised him. She wanted to see the land, the outer building and barns. She also wanted to see the acreage he had bid on. She changed into riding clothes while he saddled the horses. Sadie seemed to remember her as she petted the horse before mounting.

This time they rode side by side, Grant pointing out a barn and telling her what its current use was and his thoughts on changes.

"Do you have a current survey of the property?"

"Yeah, back at the apartment. Do you need it now?"

"No, but I'd like to see it when we get back."

When they'd made a complete loop of the property, she led them back towards the log house. She wrapped Sadie's reins on a low tree branch and circled the exterior several times. Grant was waiting on the back patio. All day she'd kept a polite distance from him. Her kiss this morning had been their only physical contact. Even walking from the restaurant, when he went to guide her with his hand on her back, he hesitated.

More than anything he hated that he had to think about touching her. The impulse to do so was so automatic; he wanted the closeness with her. He shook his head, thinking to himself if he wasn't careful, he'd find himself wanting to cuddle with her at night. Of course, that was when she joined him, a skeptical look crossing her brow.

"What did I miss?" she asked, dropping beside him on the lawn.

"Don't ask unless you really want to know the answer."

"Oh, a moral dilemma? Talk to me, Grant—your secret won't leave this place." Grant knew her words were sincere and wasn't sure if she'd used his line from yesterday or if it was coincidence. Either way, he was getting antsy. She was so close, yet so far from his grasp.

"Lara, why did you want to come back here today?"

"I wanted to see the place again."

"See it again or one last time? I don't mean to pressure you, Lara, but not knowing if you're taking one last look or trying to figure out if you could live here is starting to drive me crazy. I want to touch you but keep holding back. So, tell me, Lara, what's it to be?"

"You're pissed at me, aren't you?" Her smile angered him even more.

"Hell, I'm pissed at both of us. I'm forty years old, Lara, too old to play games. I found you and I fell in love with you. What are you going to do about it?" He stood quickly, forcing her to shade her eyes to see him.

"I know what I'd like to have happen, but the idea frightens me so I can't really comprehend it."

He dropped to his knees beside her, taking her face between his hands. Grant kissed Lara like never before. It felt of permanence and trust. He let his hand drop to her breast, cupping her through the thin cotton shirt. When she sucked his tongue deeper between her lips, he pressed harder, helping her to lie back, following over her, keeping the kiss intact. Their hands roamed, and his shirt was pushed off his shoulders. Hers was pulled up and over her head, tossed aside. He found the front clasp on her bra and flipped it open with skilled ease.

Lara groaned and let her head drop back when his mouth covered her nipple, sighed with contentment when he started to suckle her. She ran her fingers along his strong shoulders, guiding his head occasionally, pressing her hand harder over his, giving him a suggestion of the power he could use against her skin.

His other hand wandered down her side, over her hip and back up. He didn't fumble with the zipper on her jeans; it easily came free under his touch. His lips left her breast only to cover her mouth, closing off what words she might have said.

She lifted her hips when prompted as he slid her jeans down her thighs. His finger came to her lips, his words a mere whisper. "Don't move, don't think, just feel." Grant slid down her body, stopping to kiss and lick her ribcage, nipping at her hipbone before finding her center.

He thought to tease her, but when he finally came to rest with his head between her legs, teasing was the last thing he wanted. He wanted

her to come. Gripping her hips, he held her tight while licking at her clit. He changed patterns from sucking to long licks of her pussy lips. They were full, puffy and a beautiful shade of pink. He said the words before he thought about it. "If you can find a pink the same shade as your pussy, you can paint the house that color." His mouth dropped back to lick her, his hand rising to fondle her breast.

"Forget the house, Grant; make me come. My God, just make me come."

"How?" he whispered, using his index finger to slide along her lips, taking her juices and licking them clean.

"Fuck me. Let me feel your cock inside me."

"Later. I want you to come for me this way." His finger skimmed along her pussy, entering her slowly at first, then faster. He latched his lips around her nipple and sucked. Her pussy pulsed and pulled his finger deeper inside her velvet walls.

"Grant, please come fuck me." Her hips lifted to meet his finger, and he placed his middle finger beside his index finger and penetrated her with both on the next inward push. "Oh, that's wonderful, but I need you to fuck me." She tried to squirm from his grasp, but he held her still.

Grant continued to finger fuck her and suck her breasts. When he added a third finger, she came, her pussy grabbing him tight, pulsing before moist heat covered them. He eased his movements to both her breasts and pussy, but didn't stop either. Finally, she went limp under him, and he moved up to lie beside her. Lara reached for his hand, sucking his fingers clean of her cum. They lay quiet for a time until he rolled on his side, propping his head on his hand.

"We were talking about you not comprehending a future with me." He gave her a sly smile, his lips just missing contact with her nipple. "Tell me, Lara."

"I can't think straight," she said, taking his hand and placing it over her pussy, her fingers pushing his index finger deeper between her folds.

"How can I love someone I don't know? I'm thinking that it's probably more just infatuation and chemistry mixed together to muddle my common sense. Why else would I do these things with you? Why

would I want more?"

"Then we're both muddled, because I can't stop touching you. It's like I want to devour you. And Lara, later I will fuck you with my cock, after we have a few things settled."

"Grant..."

"I'll fuck you from behind, from the side and from the front. And I'll enjoy each time."

"So will I," she conceded.

"Where does that leave us?" What she said next surprised him, although he didn't wait to take up her invitation.

"Kiss me, Grant." He helped her up and pulled her against him, holding her to his chest as if she were fragile. Lara's fingers tilted his chin down to her waiting lips.

Grant wanted to kiss her. *Hell, maybe she's right*, he thought. *Maybe it is just hormones and infatuation*. But as his lips met hers he knew that was wrong. This was where he belonged, on this land with Lara in his arms. She pulled back first, her hands fisting on his shoulders, pulling him closer. "Still think it's a passing infatuation?"

"No," Lara whispered. "I don't, but that doesn't make falling in love with a reclusive bachelor any easier."

Grant let her words settle before pulling her up off the ground and turning her in circles. "So, you admit it—you do love me. That's all I needed to know, Lara. You've made me very happy." This time his kiss wasn't tentative, but strong and possessive instead.

"That doesn't mean..."

"Yes, it does. It just means we need some time to figure it all out. At least we both have the same goal in mind."

"Grant, you're pushing."

"I know, Lara. It's just that now that I've found you, I want our life together to start, now, yesterday. I don't want to waste any more time."

"I should think it really started Friday night," she told him with a smile. He looked down at her, his lips curling into a smile.

"Yes, I agree. Would Mabel have supper with Frederick tonight?"

"She might be persuaded."

"Good. Let's finish our ride before..."

"Before?"

"Before I forget I'm supposed to be taking it slow, giving you time." He placed her gently on the ground and dropped before her. His tongue swept over her pussy lips several times before he tugged her pants back up her legs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lara wasn't surprised to find a second suitcase on the bed in the guestroom of Grant's apartment when she finished in the shower. Somehow Ann appearing this morning came into focus. She laughed as she rummaged through the case, noting she had several options for tonight's supper and a change of clothes for tomorrow. What was specifically lacking was her nightgown and robe. At the bottom of the case was a tissue-wrapped parcel. She fingered it several times but put it aside, deciding to dry her hair first.

Distracted by the gift, she finally pulled the paper back, a stunned gasp escaping from her throat. Lara pulled the gray silk nightgown from its wrapping, letting the material slip through her fingers. It was so simple it was stunning. Thin straps ran down to a rounded neckline. Holding it up against her, she knew it would just sweep the floor as she moved. The note slipped to the floor; she retrieved it and started to laugh when she read it.

*Lara, Enjoy your night away,  
Maureen*

Carefully folding the garment, she wondered just what she had gotten herself into.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant had told her he wanted to show her the town of Athens and



let her get a feel for the place. While they were out, he'd take her to one of his favorite restaurants. He also informed her that both Maureen and Ann knew there was a possibility they might stay overnight, if Lara needed more time to explore the ranch. Having been nicely outmaneuvered, she accepted with grace, remembering Maureen's present.

Actually, it made her relax, understanding Grant was trying to make her as comfortable as possible.

Lara's breath caught in her throat when he left his bedroom. She'd pulled on her brown pantsuit with low heels. The silky fabric flowed over her breasts and slid past her hips to a longer tunic top, the long slim sleeves pushed back to her elbows. The pants were long and straight. She'd pulled her hair back low at the nape of her neck and had used minimal makeup after being in the sun the past two days.

Grant stood a few feet away from her in black jeans and cowboy boots with a white tailored shirt open at the throat. The sleeves had been folded back several times. He was a magnificent sight and Lara found it hard to stop looking at him, especially with the thoughts running through her mind. She'd skip supper if she could run her hands along his chest, taste him, and feel him fill her once more. He read her look, grasping her hand and pulling her towards the door.

"Let's go, Lara, or we won't leave here tonight."

"All right," was all she managed to get out before he all but propelled her out the door. After they were safely tucked into the truck and he was about to turn onto the main road, he pulled to the side and released his seatbelt. Grant leaned over and kissed her squarely on the lips.

"You understand, if we stayed there..."

"Yes, I do. Show me the town, Grant, and take me to supper please."

"Putting off the inevitable, Lara?"

"Something like that," she admitted.

Grant laughed as he repositioned himself behind the wheel. His driving tour of the area and neighboring town was highlighted by his verbal assault of information. Shopping, banks, libraries, all anyone could

need within a reasonable distance. He was quick to remind her several times they were less than two hours from Atlanta, a metropolis where she could find just about anything she could want.

## Chapter Nine

Seated in a lovely restaurant where the owner knew Grant by name, she'd been introduced and was enjoying their time together. Their meal was good, and she realized Grant was testing her to a certain degree.

"I like your friend, Grant. You eat here often, don't you?"

"A few times a week. There's a great coffee shop two blocks down. I've been known to hang out there over breakfast or lunch too."

"Why not hire a cook or housekeeper?"

"I figured I'd let my wife handle that." Lara blushed and was instantly grateful for the candlelight. It didn't matter; Grant watched her and reached to cover her hand with his.

"Lara, there's one more thing I want to show you tonight, and then you can decide if you want me to take you back to the city."

Their drive back to the farm was quiet, but not uncomfortable. The night sky was clear, the stars winking at her with every glance. She didn't know what he had in mind, but she wasn't surprised when he pulled up in front of the log home.

Lara knew he'd disappeared while she went to shower earlier, but she had no idea where he'd gone or what he'd done. Apparently, he'd come here. As he ushered her into the house, he held her hand tightly as he led her through the darkened space directly to the master bedroom. He moved from beside her to light the waiting kindling stacked in the fireplace. She noticed several blankets had been spread on the floor in front of it and the mantle above scattered with chunky white candles.

When he lit them and the fire began crackling, the room came alive. He left her for only a short time, returning with a bottle of champagne and two crystal flutes.

Standing beside the glass wall, Lara was searching the night sky for an answer. She was rewarded when he came back into the room, a hesitant look on his face. Grant appeared nervous too. He opened the wine and poured without comment, going to her with a full glass extended.

"Lara?" She accepted the glass but couldn't break eye contact with him. "I'm going to tell you something I'm not sure I want to admit, but under the circumstances, I think it's best to be honest."

She watched him intently, her stomach suddenly queasy. What if he decided he'd been wrong, that he was supposed to be a bachelor? She closed her eyes at the thought and said a silent prayer she was wrong.

"Go ahead."

"I'm in love with you, Lara Rhodes, and it scares the hell out of me." He tipped his glass against hers before sipping. It wasn't what she was prepared to hear, and she was suddenly relieved.

"Thank God. All day I've been on edge, too. You said you wanted to keep things honest, so here goes. I'm more afraid than you could know, Grant. I've fallen in love with a total stranger, and it doesn't feel wrong. I can't quite reason it out in my head."

"Good—it keeps us even." His smile warmed her, and he reached for her hand. When she thought he would lead her to the makeshift bed he surprised her by drawing her outside. Standing behind her, his arm around her shoulder holding her, Lara felt she'd come home, in so many different ways. Grant seemed to feel it too, he was so relaxed against her.

"It feels right, Lara. Marry me, please? I'll make you a good husband, and you won't want for anything. You just have to tell me what will keep you happy and I'll do my best to get it for you."

"Grant, how can you say that after what I let you do in the library? What I let Frederick do?" His arm tightened around her.

"Because you did it with me, Lara. It was meant to be, for us to be together. We could spend a year or two getting to know each other better,

but I'd rather you marry me and figure it out as we go along. I know this is a different time in our world, Lara. What my parents had will be different from how we live, but I can't picture my future without you, or this place. Marry me and make us a home here, Lara. Trust me enough to give me thirty or forty years to prove it to you. If you're disappointed then, we'll work something out."

"Only thirty or forty years?"

"Hey, I'm forty now. Will you still want me when I'm eighty and old and cranky?"

"God help me, yes, I think I will. Oh, Grant." Lara turned in his arms, pulling tight. "What if we're really not compatible?"

"Ask me when I'm eighty; I'll give you my informed opinion."

"Grant, I'm serious."

"I know, Lara, so am I. As serious, probably more than you could ever know."

"What will Maureen think about all this?"

"Actually, I spoke with her earlier this morning. It seems she had a leg up on us."

"I don't understand? You mean Frederick and Mabel?"

"That too, but..." Grant moved away from her and placed his glass on the patio. His hand reached for hers, and she turned it over willingly. "She made a trip to the bank earlier this week, just in case."

Standing before her, he pulled something from his pants pocket. He held it up for her to see. Lara's jaw dropped, she knew it was literally hanging open.

"I told you there was one more thing I wanted you to see." She looked at the emerald-cut diamond on a platinum band he held before her. Even in the darkness, ambient light reflected around it in tiny rainbows. Lara knew the stone had to be at least two carats and the smaller ones flanking it on either side at least a carat each. It was a stunning piece of jewelry. She wouldn't change a thing about it. And he was about to slip it onto her finger!

Taking Lara's left hand, he held it to her third finger. Lara felt the warmth of his hands slipping against hers, her eyes slipping closed.

"This was my mother's ring. She wore it every day of her life from the time my father slipped it on her hand. Marry me, Lara; we'll make a good life for ourselves here."

"Grant, I do want to marry you. I know it's crazy, but I do. I can't imagine going back to my old life. Not without you, and I understand this is where you belong."

"Is that a yes?"

Lara moved her hands up his chest and around his neck. "Yes. God help us both, but yes. I love you, Grant, right or wrong, and I want to be your wife."

"Thank God!"

Grant kissed her with an unrestrained passion she had known was in him, but he'd held back. Now that he revealed it full out, she was overwhelmed by him. He lifted her off the ground and brought her back in the house. Clothing fell away without embarrassment, only to find them lying naked beside each other in front of the fire. Lara let her hands wander the length of him, feeling and caressing, her fingers heated by his obvious response. He was beautiful and she told him so easily, not embarrassed by her open perusal.

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Grant shut his eyes as her fingers slipped lower down his belly, teasing the curling hairs encircling his cock. Her slow movements were driving him crazy, but he didn't want to hurry her. He wanted the exquisite torture to last forever. He'd tried to reach for her several times only to have his hands pushed away while she explored him, first with her hands and then her lips. A kiss to his neck, a nip at his earlobe. A small line of fluttering tongue licks along his collarbone. All the while her hand holding him, stroking him, manipulating him to the point of straining.

All at once he pulled away, rolling over her, effectively stopping the onslaught to his senses.

"Lara, if you keep that up..."

"I'm doing my best, Grant. Give me some time to learn what you like." Her teeth caught her bottom lip between them just before she started to laugh.

"So that's how it's going to be?"

"I suppose so. It seems I'm just crazy about you and your body." Her hand moved between them, taking him back into her warm palm.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That works both ways, Lara." His silver eyes stared down, and Lara knew she'd never be the same again. Loving Grant had completed her in a way she hadn't known she was incomplete.

"Darlin', I can't wait. I want to love you," he whispered, moving down along her body. His lips to her breast, her nipples hardened. His hand stroked down her belly, around her hips and thighs. With a sigh, she let her legs fall aside, an invitation he didn't ignore.

Lara pulled his head back to her waiting mouth as his fingers explored her. She was ready, slick and hot, wanting. Her kisses were driving him senseless, and he moved his lips back to her breast as he slipped first one, then two fingers inside her. Her body reacted to him like no other man in her past. All the snap decisions had been correct. They were meant to be together. Never before had a man excited her so much by just being himself and letting him love her. Her body clutched his fingers, and the damp heat inside her intensified.

He drew his hand to her lips, his fingers tracing the outline of her mouth. His lips followed rapidly as he licked off her essence. Lara groaned under him, and he moved down her body.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant moved slowly as he explored her, memorizing each curve and arch, stopping to kiss a birthmark on her right hipbone. His lips were soft against her when he finally let himself take a taste of her. Tentatively at first, then growing bolder, he loved her until she ground against his

lips, his tongue lapping up the sweetness easing from her. Lara moved to pull him to her, but he pulled away.

"Later, Lara. I need to be inside you." Grant rolled away shortly, and she knew he'd protect her in all ways now. When she opened her eyes he was above her, his arms positioned on either side of her head, his hands stroking her cheeks. "Look at me, darlin'," he whispered, never losing eye contact as he slowly slipped inside her.

Lara's eyes slipped shut when he filled her. For a long time he didn't move, he just stayed where he was, buried inside her until he felt her relax around him. That was when he moved to slowly slide in and out of her. With each pull back she felt lost, then relieved when he pushed inward, rocking to keep him buried deep inside her. When she was peaking, her involuntary inner movements clenched against his engorged cock. "Someday soon, Lara, I'm going to feel you, skin to skin, understand?"

"When, Grant?" Her words were a mere breathless whisper.

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"Soon, darlin', soon." His words made her tremble, and she felt him lose control, pulsing inside her warm pussy. Lara felt him surge inside her, and finally she knew all was right with the world, just as she had when Frederick had filled Mabel. The thought was enough to push her over the edge and into the abyss once more, with pinpoints of light fluttering on her closed eyelids. This time, with Grant's arms wrapped around her, she welcomed her release with a new understanding.

As they lay sated in each other's arms before the fire, Lara asked Grant if he knew why Maureen had chosen the *Pirates of Penzance* to equate them with. He laughed and pulled her closer against him.

"Probably because I was born on February 29, leap year, just as Frederick was."

"Oh, now I understand. If I'd known when your birthday was before this I might have figured it out."

"As long as we have it straight between us now." Her hand reached



to cup him, his interest growing against her palm.

"Give me a few minutes, and I'll see if I can straighten it out!" She moved from the circle of his arms, slipping lower against his body, capturing him with her warm mouth.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Lara straightened me out all right,* was his last conscious thought before she engulfed him in her hot mouth.

## **Epilogue**

Four short weeks later, Lara stood poised at the top of the staircase in Maureen Pierson's Atlanta townhouse. With her hand on her father's arm, they slowly descended the staircase, all eyes staring up at them. Lara found her mother's smiling face where she stood next to Miss Maureen. Ann and Harold stood beside them, Ann dabbing at her cheek with a lacy handkerchief. She met the silver eyes of her lover and soon-to-be husband and smiled. Several steps from the bottom, Grant moved up beside her, taking her into his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Surprisingly, Grant wasn't nervous at all. He'd refused all the alcohol some of his buddies kept trying to ply him with. Instead, he stayed clearheaded and focused. Now, in this moment, he was going to marry Lara. His eyes met hers as she made her way down the steps. He didn't bother to pull back his gasp. He watched her all but float down towards him, a vision in a sleek column of silvery white. Her hair was twisted back and off her neck; diamond studs graced her ears, but her neck was bare. He knew he was supposed to wait to meet her at the bottom of the stairs, but he couldn't. Moving without thought, he met her halfway down, reaching to take her hand.

Grant waited while she kissed her father's cheek and transferred her flowers to her other hand. He took her hand and folded it over his

arm, smiling at her with a light in his eyes she'd never seen before. Just before they took the last step before Judge Aimes, who would administer their vows, he paused, drawing her to him.

"Lara, Mabel was beautiful, but you're magnificent. Thank you for marrying me." His lips grazed hers lightly, and she looked into his silver eyes, noticing the watery texture.

"Don't cry." She smiled.

"Wait until our first child is born, then see what happens."

"I love you, Grant, with all my heart, as much as Mabel loves Frederick."

"Then let's get married, Lara." His eyes flashed as he struggled to get his emotions under control. "Do you think Mabel could slip away later and meet Frederick in the library?"

"Any time he wants."

### **Author Bio**

Having been born and raised on Long Island, New York, Lillith and her husband were both eager to leave the urban lifestyle and explore their futures. With his encouragement, Lillith is living her dream of writing romance novels full time. Their new rural setting allows them to enjoy time together, and Lillith can spend many guiltless hours in her imagination, indulging her other passion. When she realized her works consistently tended toward the erotic, she gave herself permission to explore places she might not venture in real life.

You can learn more about Lillith and her work at her website [www.lillithpayne714.com](http://www.lillithpayne714.com).

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