



# KISS

CATHERINE CHERNOW

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

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By

Catherine Chernow

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Dedicated to the memory of Ingrid and Maura, and for all the women in my life battling Breast Cancer.

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## Chapter One

"I'm scared, Kat."

Kat Sullivan gazed at the older woman who had been her mother's friend and a second mother to Kat. "*You* are a desirable woman, Aunt Doris."

Soft light streamed down from the ceiling, surrounding Doris, outlining her still-trim figure. Power track lighting had almost emptied Kat's bank account when she had first opened KISS, but it was worth every penny. Doris' face glowed, her body shimmered in the muted light of the dressing room.

"I hope Harvey likes the new 'me.'" Doris tied a silk robe over an exquisitely detailed nightgown of champagne silk and French lace. Her fingers shook as she knotted the sash. "We haven't, you know, since my surgery..." her hands fluttered to her chest. Perspiration dotted her forehead.

"Wait 'til he sees you in that." Kat patted her shoulder. She knew that Doris' illness and surgery had robbed the couple of the intimacy they once shared. "Just look at yourself." Kat untied the knot on the sash and let the robe fall open. She grabbed Doris' shoulders gently and turned her so she faced the full-length mirror. "That champagne color highlights your hair and accentuates your skin tone."

Doris grabbed the lapels of the robe and pulled it over her chest.

"No, don't cover yourself. Just look." Kat raised Doris' chin with the tip of her index finger. Doris' eyes met Kat's in the mirror. "You're beautiful in that," Kat told her.

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Kat turned her so that Doris could see in the mirror behind them, giving her a view of the French Calais lace that ran diagonally across the back of the gown. "I *am* beautiful," Doris murmured. She smiled, the corners of her lips trembling. Her eyes misted, and she wiped the tears pooling in the corners.

"You're one of the most beautiful women I know, inside and out," Kat replied.

"You're a good person, Kat."

Kat's eyes misted, too. She owed Doris so much. When Kat returned to Summerville after her marriage broke up, Doris Leland became a bulwark of support. This was the least she could do for her "Aunt" Doris—help her gain her sense of self and reclaim her femininity.

Just then, the bell over the door to KISS jangled. "Let me go see who that is. I'll be out front when you're ready." Kat kissed Doris' wrinkled cheek and walked out of the dressing room. As Kat made her way to the front of the store, she spotted a tall man gazing at her merchandise. Not recognizing him, she assumed he was another tourist or East Ender passing through Summerville on his way to the Hamptons. Most people stopped into visit the quaint town, lured by the historic buildings and the unique boutiques lining Summerville's Main Street. KISS' reputation in the lingerie industry had grown over the years. The rich patrons Kat garnered had homes in Long Island's wealthiest East End towns. They loved her designs ... and her. Often, wealthy husbands came into KISS to buy their wives a birthday or anniversary gift, leaving the selection entirely up to Kat.

"Welcome to Kat's Incredibly Special Store."

The man turned his head. Kat smiled at her reflection in the mirrored finish of his aviator-style sunglasses. She wished she could see his eyes behind those shades. Her blood heated as he fingered the lace on a black satin and sheer gown hanging near the entrance. He caressed the bodice with the back of his hand then he rolled the lace between his thumb and forefinger. Her breasts grew heavy watching him.

"I'm looking for the owner." His deep voice shot through her down to her toes.

"That's me," she managed. Kat stuck out her hand. "I'm Kat Sullivan."

"Then perhaps you can explain this." He shoved a newspaper article at her.

Kat reached for it and read aloud. "'I'm tired of people like Jared Martin assuming they know what's best for Summerville. He and his 'MegaMart' store cannot ruin the face of America's small towns. I wish he would come to Summerville so I can personally tell him what I think of his plan to take over our retail district.'" She shrugged her shoulders. "It seems pretty clear to me, what didn't you understand?"

"Did you write that?" he asked his voice tight.

"Yes," she replied, handing the article back to him.

He snatched it out of her hands.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Look, I'm running a business here, I don't have time to..."

"You have no idea who I am?"

She sighed. "Okay, enlighten me. Who are you?"

"I'm 'Mr. Ruiner-of-Small-Towns.' I'm Jared Martin."

Kat dropped her arms and paled. She took a step back as he moved forward, crowding the small space between them. When she gazed up into his face, she got her earlier wish as he pulled off his sunglasses. Dark eyes met hers. Small swirls of golden light shined in his like the threads of golden cinnamon creamer she poured into her cup of early morning java.

"Nothing to say now? You seemed to have a lot to say to that newspaper."

She never thought the enigmatic, *greedy* owner of America's largest chain of discount stores would appear in hers! If Mr. Moneybags hoped to rattle her, he was mistaken.

"If you wanted more money, why didn't you ask?"

Kat glared at him. "You mean the fifty-thousand dollars you offered me for my store? It wouldn't even cover the loan I had to get to start up."

"The other store owners want to take what I'm offering."

He reached up and placed his sunglasses in his shirt pocket. The snow-white color of his shirt highlighted his tanned skin. A smattering of fine, dark hairs covered muscular forearms. The white and gold face of his wristwatch gleamed against the bronzed skin of his wrist. Just under the black leather watchband, Kat got a glimpse of paler skin.

No, she could not allow her traitorous hormones to influence her opinion of this money-hungry man. He may be nicely packaged, but he had only one thing on his mind—money. Kat had met his kind before.

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"Not everyone's for sale." Her voice shook. She took a deep, calming breath and noticed that his eyes zeroed in on the rise and fall of her chest. Kat wore one of the push-up bras she designed, making her breasts look rounder ... fuller. Her hand strayed to her chest, and stayed there.

He glanced at the array of lingerie and intimate apparel on display. Men had been in her store before, but they never viewed her merchandise with the same type of reverence that Jared Martin did. His eyes traveled over each piece. Kat's face colored when his eyes settled on a coral-colored corset with a matching robe. He tore his eyes from the outfit then slid his gaze in her direction. It lingered on her face, traveled down the length of her body. Kat thought for just one crazy second that he was imagining *her* in such an intimate outfit.

"I'll make you a deal on your stock," he told her, his voice gruff.

"You would sell all *this* in a MegaMart?" Her eyes widened in shock as she swept her hand out in front of her.

"Absolutely."

"Next to the power tools and lawn mowers?"

"You know, I think you're beginning to see reason."

"Get out!" she said through gritted teeth.

Doris came out of the dressing room. "Well, hello." She smiled at Jared.

He brushed past Kat and took Doris' hand in his own. "Jared Martin, ma'am. I'm visiting Summerville."

Kat noticed how gently he grasped Doris' older, wrinkled hand. Her heart gave a peculiar twist at the sight.

"You're going to love it." Doris beamed at him.

"Summerville's citizens are gracious. And there's so much to do here." Doris eyed him up and down. "You look like an outdoorsy type of man. Are you?"

He grinned, revealing a mouth full of even, white teeth. "I am. I love all kinds of sports." He slanted a glance at Kat.

"Humph," Kat replied.

Doris clapped her hands. "Well then, young man, there's plenty of boating and water-skiing that goes on here in the summer. You'll love it. Where are you staying?"

"Somewhere called the..." he beetled his brows. "The Pink Lady Inn."

Doris angled her head. "The Pink Lady Inn? Where'd you see that?"

"It's just outside town, in that development by the harbor."

Doris grinned. "Oh my, you mean the Pink *Lily* Inn, don't you?"

"I, uh ... well, there seems to be so many bed and breakfasts in this area, that I..."

"A real man-of-the-world, aren't you?" Kat snorted.

The skin across his cheekbones grew taut. His dark eyes flashed, the small gold flecks burned brightly. "At least I have manners, Ms. Sullivan."

Kat clenched her hands at her sides. "Of all the nerve ... why you..."

"Now, now. Kat, he's a visitor after all," Doris patted Jared Martin's shoulder.

"A visitor who's going to destroy this town," Kat muttered under her breath.

"I heard that," he leaned down and whispered near her ear.

Kat turned slightly to see that he grinned but it didn't quite reach the corners of his mouth. "Whatever you've heard about me ... it isn't true. Give me a chance." His warm breath tickled her ear, making her shiver.

Kat narrowed her eyes. "I know all I need to know about you."

He ignored Kat and turned his charm on Doris again. "So I guess I'm staying at the Pink Lily Inn. Is it a nice place?"

"Oh, yes. It's very pretty and homey. Betty Horan is the owner—she's my friend." Doris winked at him. "I'll tell her to treat you extra special."

Kat rolled her eyes.

Doris exited the store. Immediately after she left, Kat turned the full force of her temper on Jared. "What are you trying to pull? You think you can charm me as you did her?" Her body trembled, and *her* eyes flashed.

"I'm not pulling anything. You just got your wish, that's all."

"My wish?"

He quoted from the newspaper article again. "'I wish he would come to Summerville so I can tell him what I think of his plan to take over our retail district.'" Jared bent his tall frame. His nose bumped Kat's.

"I'm here, Ms. Sullivan, and soon this entire town will be eating out of my hand."

\* \* \* \*

Jared's cell phone rang just as he entered his room at the bed and breakfast.

"Hello!" he barked into the phone, flopping down on the bed and loosening his tie. He shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, resisting the urge to fall back onto the pillows. He couldn't fall asleep now, he had too much to do.

"Is that any way to greet your assistant?"

"Hello, George."

"That's better. How are things in Smallville?"

"*Summerville*."

"What's the upstart like?"

"Different ... than what I expected."

"So, what do you plan to do?"

A fleeting, niggling doubt entered Jared's mind. He felt the first threads of his plan to buy up Summerville's retail district begin to unravel. He figured KISS to be a "mall store" with mannequins in skimpy underwear, but KISS was classy, with elegantly styled nightwear that left something to the imagination. *Jared's* imagination wasn't where it belonged as he envisioned the lovely "upstart" in that coral-colored, satin corset he had seen. It would highlight her glorious, fiery-red hair and outline her lush bosom. The lady had a world-class chest. He also noticed that her large sea-green eyes tilted up at the corners. Her nose seemed a trifle too wide, but her mouth ... oh, her wide, generous mouth...

A mouth she should learn to keep shut, particularly when she didn't know what she was talking about. If she'd only let him talk, heard him out, she'd have seen that his plan was a

working, viable one that would boost the sales of every store in Summerville.

"I'm going with Plan A, George." He shook his head to clear it of thoughts of Kat Sullivan. This was war, and he had to win the first battle. He had seen Kat's stubborn kind before—people who didn't like change of any kind, even if it were a good thing.

"Great! Do you need me there?"

"I'll let you know."

"The 'Big M' wins again!"

Jared ended the call. He gazed out the window at the lush green lawn surrounding the bed and breakfast. Such a small town, he thought with a pang in his chest. Jared spent his youth in a town like Summerville, but the sunny, idyllic days of his formative years ended when Jared turned twenty-three. Fresh out of college, he had so many plans. Eager to step into his chosen profession, teaching, he accepted a job as a leave replacement in an elementary school. Soon after, Jared's father, the founder, and backbone of the MegaMart Empire, unexpectedly surrendered his reign and stepped down as CEO. No one else could fill the elder Martin's shoes, and Jared's path became clear. Pressure from MegaMart's Board of Directors made Jared set aside his dream of teaching so he could take care of the family business and run MegaMart.

He had no time for reminiscing. Work came first.

Jared picked up his cell phone and dialed.

"Local News Channel Sixteen? Give me your *Live at Five* producer."

\* \* \* \*

Kat's friend Lilith raced into KISS the following day.

"Hurry up, put on Channel Sixteen!"

Lilith grabbed Kat by the hand and hurried to the back of the store. Kat hit the power button on the small television in her office. Jared's image appeared.

"MegaMart Corporation has been people oriented since my father opened the first store back in nineteen-seventy-four," Jared told the interviewer.

"'People first,' that's your motto?" he asked Jared.

"Exactly. That's why I'm upset with that newspaper article Kat Sullivan wrote. She has no idea of the jobs my stores create, the economic boost they give a small town."

"You've been accused of questionable hiring practices, Mr. Martin."

"Let him squirm," Kat said under her breath.

"...As well as your stand on letting unions into your stores," the interviewer continued.

"My hiring practices are sound," Jared replied. "I offer all my employees profit sharing. If anyone has a problem, that person can come directly to me. They don't need a representative."

"Humph!" Kat said to Lilith. "What a phony."

"Still, allowing MegaMart into Summerville is like allowing fast-food chains. It ruins the look of a town," the interviewer continued.

"Our stores fit the town's profile. We do nothing without the civic association. We're community-minded. I intend to prove that MegaMart will be good for Summerville."

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"Well then, good luck, Mr. Martin."

Kat punched the power button on the television and watched as Jared Martin's image faded from the screen. She couldn't let him win. KISS provided more than just exquisite lingerie to its customers. KISS offered many of Summerville's women hope, women like her Aunt Doris. Explaining *that* to a man whose sole purpose entailed making money was impossible. She had to find another way to fight him.

"Do you know that while visiting one of his stores, Jared Martin actually jumped in the path of a moving car in the parking lot to save a little girl's life? He takes this 'people first' business seriously," Lilith stated.

"I heard it was a publicity stunt," Kat huffed.

"He is rather ... attractive. Ever since you split with Arthur, you haven't dated."

"So?" Kat walked out of the backroom and into the main part of KISS. She pulled a box out from under the counter and slit it open with scissors. "Why is my personal dating life such a concern to you?"

Lilith grinned. "I need more customers."

"Huh?" Kat drew her brows together as she pulled some delicate, lace-trimmed panties out of the box and laid them out on the counter. "What do you mean, you need more customers?"

"You know how it goes in a small town. People find out you're dating, and they figure the next step is marriage and well, kids. So, they come trotting into my store to buy yarn for booties, sweaters, and blankets."

Kat shook her head. "You're impossible." She stacked the panties on the counter in front of them.

"Oh my ... those are beautiful," Lilith smoothed her hand over a retro-Hollywood style panty lavished with black lace. "That's different," she murmured.

Kat smiled. "I saw an old movie a few months ago from the nineteen thirties with that blonde actress, Carol Lombard."

Lilith rolled her eyes. "See? You stay home watching all that old stuff on television."

"I get my best ideas from some of that 'old stuff' as you call it."

Lilith lifted the panty from the counter. "It is pretty. Is this what that actress wore?"

"Well, not on the screen, but I researched some of the intimate apparel of the nineteen thirties and came up with this." Kat pointed to the lacy edge. "See? It has something called 'eyelash lace' all around it."

Lilith's cheeks turned pink, she placed the panty down on the counter. "It makes it look feminine and sexy but yet..."

"The lace edging all around the top takes away that 'thong' look. Here," Kat handed the delicate panty to Lilith.

"Oh, no, Kat, I couldn't. They cost a fortune."

"No, take it." Kat eyed Lilith. "It'll look fabulous with your black hair and those amazing-color eyes you have. You wear a black lace bra with that, and you'll look dynamite."

Lilith shook her head. "You're doing it again."

"What?" Kat tossed the empty box into the trash.

Lilith crossed her arms. "You're avoiding the topic of men."

"All right. To prove to you that I'm not avoiding it, just who should I date?" Kat asked, hands on hips.

"How about Fred Meyers?"

Kat noticed Lilith's breathing quickened at the mention of Fred. Dear Fred. Sweet Fred. He had a crush on Lilith since high school.

"Lilith, all Fred talks about are the sixty-two flavors of ice cream in his store."

"How about Michael Benton?"

"Our dentist?" Kat moved to the rack behind the counter and lifted a clear plastic bag covering a sheer nightgown she had recently designed. She grabbed the hanger containing the gown and walked to the front of the store. Lily was right behind her. "Lilith, you'd think I was a horse the way he looked at my teeth and carried on about how *wonderful* I would look if I only tried his new line of veneers," Kat said over her shoulder as she walked.

"Oh, Kat!" Lilith laughed. "That's funny."

Kat sighed as she placed the gown on the molded silhouette of a woman in the front window. Smoothing a wrinkle from the delicate fabric, she replied, "They're nice men, Lilith, but ... not for me," and not half as good-looking as Jared Martin, went unsaid. She couldn't stop thinking about him. It rankled that a man that gorgeous could be so ... shady.

"And just between you and me," Kat lowered her voice. "Our town dentist is just a tad bit, well ... tedious."

"Jared Martin isn't tedious." Lilith's violet eyes twinkled.

Kat blushed. She read somewhere that Jared Martin was a hands-on, risk-taking entrepreneur who never lacked for female companionship. Kat also remembered the picture she saw of him in a magazine, accompanied by a tall, lanky blonde-haired woman.

"Jared Martin is a rich, spoiled man who thinks his money and looks can buy everything," Kat stated heatedly.

"So you *do* think he's handsome."

Kat turned angry eyes on Lilith. "He's a phony, and I intend to change *his* mind about opening that damn MegaMart store."

"How?"

"Just wait and see."

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## **Chapter Two**

Saturday afternoon Jared snoozed under a shady tree in a hammock on the lush grounds of the bed and breakfast. He daydreamed of Kat ... dressed in a sheer, strapless nightgown he had seen at KISS. She approached slowly, gracefully ... sensually. He saw the outline of her body through the wispy fabric. His eyes traveled up her long, slender legs and settled on the shadowy juncture between her thighs. Jared shifted on the hammock, his blood heating in response to what he saw in his mind's eye.

Kat's hips swayed in unison with each step she took. Jared caught a glimpse of her glorious red hair as it spilled down her shoulders and back. He could see a smattering of freckles across her nose—and her magnificent chest outlined by the sheer bodice of the gown. The dark tips of her full, round breasts stood out against the see-through fabric. Jared reached out to touch her, to feel the satin softness of not only that gown she wore, but her skin, too.

"Yeow!" Something cold and wet splashed his face. The next thing he knew, he was looking up at Ms. Upstart. She stood over him, a clear plastic bottle in her hand. Reigning in his temper he said, "I can only hope that's water."

"I wouldn't dream of ruining that beautiful shirt you're wearing," Kat replied smugly, looking like a little girl with her hair tucked under a ball cap. "Did you buy *that* in one of your MegaMart stores?"

"No," he replied, his tone clipped.

She sighed, capping the water bottle and placing it in her bag. "Perhaps you should be thinking of a way to get Ralph Lauren polo shirts into MegaMart. They could be the 'blue-light' special of the week. Then again, I don't know how you would make the same offer to Mr. Lauren that you gave me."

He narrowed his eyes. "You're a regular comedian, aren't you?" Jared turned his head so he could get a better look at her. Schooling his features, he admired the way her tee shirt outlined her lush bosom. He wondered if she were wearing that cream-colored lacy bra again. "For your information, I happen to know Ralph Lauren."

"Right. Sure you do." Her expression turned mulish.

"We sell Ralph Lauren 'Home' products in MegaMart. You know, his paint and bedding and..."

She blew out a breath. "Well maybe you can figure a way to buy Mr. Lauren's exquisite clothing designs in bulk and sell them real cheap instead of just laying there in that hammock like a lazy lump," she replied, her tone laced with sarcasm.

He placed his hands behind his head. "You should join me."

Kat's face heated as she gazed at the hammock.

Zing! Score one for me, he thought. Jared hoped that Ms. Upstart was considering sharing the hammock with him. It was a glorious day ... perfect for snoozing in a hammock with a woman with her looks and body. Of course, he probably wouldn't do much snoozing, he'd...

"No, thank you." She angled her head. "This is the last place I expected to find you," she pointed at the hammock.

*So much for that idea!*

"It looked too inviting," he replied honestly. "Besides, I'm practicing my eighth rule for success."

"Which is?"

"Don't take yourself so seriously ... loosen up and so will everyone else. Relax. Remember: *You* set the tone."

"Well, I'm glad you're rested and relaxed because it's Saturday and that means Soccer."

"Huh?"

"Soccer ... you know, that game you play by running and kicking a ball."

He settled back further into the hammock and scowled. "I know what soccer is."

"And children. The kids here in Summerville just love to play soccer year-round. Let's see, what did you say to that interviewer on Channel 16?"

Jared didn't like where this was heading. Ms. Upstart had a glint in her lovely green eyes. Or were they blue, he thought? Maybe it was a combination of the two, like the waters of the Caribbean Ocean.

"MegaMart encourages our employees to get involved in the activities the community has to offer young people.' *You* represent MegaMart," she leaned down and poked him in the chest. "*You* set the tone and *you* have to help some kids win a soccer game."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Use all your great 'people skills,'" she replied. She poked him in the chest again. This time, Jared reached up and grabbed her hand, pulling her down on top of him. The hammock swung from side to side.

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"Oh!" Kat wailed. She tried to move off him but that only made the hammock swing more. "I'm getting dizzy." She shut her eyes tight and clutched his shoulders. Every swing of the hammock had the lower part of her body brushing against his groin. He gritted his teeth against the sensations he felt each time her pelvis touched him.

"Wait a minute," Jared told her, wishing she'd open her eyes. He just couldn't seem to decide what color they were. "Just let this thing slow down." When it did, he grasped her around the waist to move her off him, but she toppled over the side onto the ground. Jared flipped over, too, landing on top of her. He grinned down into her face as her breasts pressed up and into his chest. "You may have this 'relaxing' thing down to a science," he murmured.

"Oh you!" She pushed at him. "Get off me," she shoved again, but he didn't budge.

"Say please," he grinned like a lunatic. This had to be lunacy, he thought. Kat Sullivan felt round, firm in all the right places ... and soft in all the others. He really didn't want to move. This had to be the most fun he had in a long time.

"I-I can't breathe..."

Her face reddened and her breath whooshed out. Jared felt it puff against his cheek. "Kat," he said, sprinting up and off her. "I'm sorry." Once on his feet, he leaned down and grasped her hand, pulling her flush up against him, knocking the hat from her head. Her beautiful, auburn hair spilled over her shoulders.

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Kat bent down to retrieve her cap. That's when he got a good look at her nicely rounded backside, erasing his earlier thoughts of her resembling a child.

Much to Jared's disappointment, she tucked her hair back under the cap and glared at him. "Y-you had no right to do that."

He grinned. "Rule Number Nine: Enjoy life at all costs. Take on all challenges with gusto."

Jared never backed down from a challenge...  
...Especially one as lovely as Kat.

\* \* \* \*

A little while later, Kat pulled her car to the curb and parked it on the street outside the park. She grabbed her keys from the ignition and threw them in her bag as Jared slid out his side. The next thing she knew, her driver's side door opened. Jared stood near the curb, grinning.

He swept his hand out in front of him. "You're team awaits, Madame Coach."

"Very funny," she snapped. Kat left the shelter of her air-conditioned car, stepped out into the midday heat, and wiped her brow with the fingers of one hand. She gazed at Jared's happy countenance and shook her head. Why did he have to be so damn cheerful? He chatted nonstop on the way over to the park, asking her a million questions about Summerville ... and her. She answered him, her replies guarded, particularly when it came to her.

Best not to let the enemy know too much.

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Jared shut the door behind her. As she walked to the back of the car, the sun beat down, causing small beads of perspiration to form on her nose. A drop of sweat trickled down the side of her face, and the jersey shirt she wore stuck to her back. Kat stood by the trunk and glanced over at Jared. He seemed calm and cool. He didn't have a hair out of place, not one strand moved in the slight breeze that kicked up. Kat popped the trunk open, grateful for the wind that wafted by, cooling her hot skin. She leaned in to grab a bag of equipment, swinging it up and onto her shoulder.

"I'll take that."

In the next instant, Jared reached out and grabbed it, sliding it down her shoulder and arm. His knuckles grazed her bare skin, leaving a trail of gooseflesh in the wake of his touch. He swung the bag onto a broad shoulder then reached into the trunk for the cooler. With his free hand, he closed the hood.

Okay, so it did feel good to have some help, but she didn't want to admit it to him. He kept pace with her easily as they walked to the soccer field, his long legs eating up the ground beneath him. A few minutes later, Jared plunked the bag and cooler down near the stands.

"What's your team's stats?" he asked her.

She narrowed her eyes. "Why on earth would you be interested in my team stats?"

He shrugged. "How else am I going to help you coach?"

Kat placed her tote bag on the ground and folded her arms. "You're really going to do this?"

"Of course."

"Okay, here's the long and skinny on the Summerville Slammers."

Jared grinned. "Catchy name. I like it."

"We're four, four, and 'O,' Mr. Martin."

His smile faded. "Why can't you call me Jared? I called you Kat earlier."

Kat smiled thinly. "If I call *you* 'Jared,' it would imply we're friends. And we're far from being friends."

"I'll call you 'Coach' today if you agree to call me by my first name."

She angled her head and frowned. "Is everything a negotiation with you?"

"That's what life is, Coach, one big negotiation."

"Look, Mr. Martin..."

"'Jared,' I know you can say it. Try it. Jaaaaaaared," he mouthed.

"I know," she snapped her fingers. "I'll call you Jared if you agree to get out of Summerville. Now. Today."

"Uh, uh. No can do. Besides, you need me."

"And why is that?"

"Your team is four, four, and 'O'? That means this game is important. Sounds like you're going to the playoffs."

"We will if we win."

"Then it's important to me, too." He glanced at the kids milling around the stands. "Come on, introduce me."

Kat hurried after him as he made his way to the team.

"This is a small town, Mr. Mar..."

"Jared."

"*Mr. Martin*," she replied, exasperated. "It's a small town, by now, everyone knows who you are."

"Rule number 2: Never assume."

She groaned. "I think you're inventing all these silly 'rules.'"

"Not in the least. My father lives by them, so do I."

As they walked, Kat pulled the brim of her cap down a little further to shield her eyes from the sun's glare. Her nose filled with the fresh fragrance of newly cut grass as it crunched beneath her feet. She slanted a look in Jared's direction, admiring his wide, purposeful stride.

"He should tell his son that Summerville isn't for sale."

"My father does not run MegaMart. I do," he replied, his tone clipped.

Kat felt as though she scored a point in her favor. It thrilled her no end to know that she annoyed him. "You have quite a large ego."

"There's no room at MegaMart for ego, just ideas."

She rolled her eyes and snickered. "Is that another one of your father's corny rules?"

He kicked a small stone out of the way with the toe of his sneaker, not breaking his stride. "Not really. Ever since my father got—" Jared stopped walking and reached for her upper arm. "Look, let's leave my family out of this."

"Sensitive are we?" she asked, aiming her chin in his direction. "Then maybe you can understand how deep my feelings run for this town. It's *my* family." She shrugged out of his hold.

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He sighed. "I do understand. If you'd let me show you the plans I've got in mind, you'd like what I have to propose."

"Forget it. I'm not looking at any plans."

She strode off to her team, Jared hot on her heels.

"Stubborn," he muttered in her ear. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise as his lips skimmed the outer lobe. Kat shivered in response and turned away.

Fifteen eager, little, female faces looked over at Jared. One little girl broke away from the group. Her blonde ponytail flipped up and down her back as she strode toward him. "I'm the Captain," she stated proudly. "The name's Jamie," she wiped her nose with the back of one grubby hand then extended it to Jared. The only other sound she made came from the large bubble she blew using the wad of pink gum in her mouth.

Kat bit back a triumphant smile when she saw Jared's face pale.

\* \* \* \*

Jared swore he'd never seen a dirtier hand ... or face. Did this kid play in mud all day? He stole a glance in Kat's direction. Her green eyes held a challenge. He could either shake the girl's grubby hand or walk away. If he walked away, he admitted defeat and he'd be damned if he'd surrender this early.

He had caught a glimpse of that fancy lace Kat used on all her intimate apparel. A small piece of it edged up around the waistband of her jeans earlier, when she reached for the bag in her trunk. He wondered what it attached to ... a thong? He

imagined Kat Sullivan's beautiful, round, tight bottom encased in a thong. It aroused him more than imagining her naked. Had she done that on purpose, he wondered?

Time to turn the tables on Ms. Upstart.

"Nice to meet you, Jamie." Jared bent down, grabbed the little girl's hand, and gave it a hearty shake.

Kat's smug smiled faded.

"Know anything about soccer?" Jamie asked. She dribbled the ball between her feet, then flipped it up with the toe of one cleat and bounced it off her heel. The ball connected squarely with Jared's right shin, and he felt the sting as it bounced off his leg. He slanted a glance in Kat's direction and saw the corners of her mouth kick up. She winked at Jamie.

"That was impressive," Jared told the little girl. He squashed the urge he had to lean down and rub his stinging shin.

He dribbled the ball then slid his toe underneath, lifting it easily then kicking it high. It hit the ground and bounced twice.

Jamie and the other girls stared at him, wide-eyed. When he looked in Kat's direction, she stood there, her mouth agape. He felt a moment's triumph and male pride.

"Yeah, well, my dad says you're gonna ruin this town," one little girl said from behind Jamie. She squinted in the bright sun, wrinkling her pug nose at Jared.

*So much for male pride.*

"My mom said you're making jobs for everyone," a little girl with pigtails piped up. The little girl looked at Jared and smiled, then booted her ball high in the air.

*Well, at least someone's in my corner. Even if she is only nine-years-old.*

Jared let the ball bounce once, lifted his right foot and stepped on it to slow its movement. He kicked it to her and returned her smile.

"That's not entirely true," he replied. "It's not me who creates the jobs, it's my stores. And," he glanced toward Kat. Her green eyes met his coffee-brown ones. "People just have to give me a chance to explain my ideas—like you're going to give me a chance today to help you win this game."

"We gotta win this game," Jamie told him. "We wanna go to the play offs."

Excited murmurs came from the other girls on the team. Jared sized them up quickly. Most seemed athletic, tomboys to the core, but Jared gazed at one round, sullen face. The little girl wore sports glasses that she kept tugging and adjusting. She stood apart from the team, kept looking at Jared. His heart went out to her. During his brief stint as a physical education teacher, he had seen kids like her before—shy, awkward.

His pulse raced when he realized how much he suddenly wanted Kat's team to win this game.

\* \* \* \*

"Okay," Jared turned to face Kat. "What's the deal with the little girl with the glasses?"

"Go warm up, girls," Kat told her team. "We'll join you in a minute." She hated to admit that her well-thought-out plan hit a snag. Jared didn't seem bothered in the least by Jamie's

grubby appearance or the fact that she deliberately hit him with her ball. He didn't seem fazed by their blunt questions about MegaMart, either. Jared didn't seem to care that many of the town's residents thought MegaMart an intrusion on their idyllic Summerville, but maybe that was an act on his part.

There was still time to wear him down.

"Allie's a little challenged," she told him.

"How so?"

Kat slanted him a look. "She's got some self-esteem issues."

Jared's dark brows snapped together as he mulled over that piece of information.

*Ah ... he's uncomfortable. Good!*

"And she has a few learning disabilities. Nothing major, but, she's had some trouble in school."

He scowled some more. Kat bit back a triumphant grin. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Do you mean to tell me that Mr. People-First is actually bothered by a little girl with—"

"I didn't say I was bothered," he snapped. "I'd just like to know what I'm dealing with, that's all."

"Okay then, here are the facts." She lifted a hand to her eyes to shield them from the sun. "Allie's got some issues, but she wants to play soccer. She loves the game—she just needs lots of encouragement."

He nodded. "Got it. Let's go warm them up."

"Wait a minute," Kat laid a hand on his arm. "This better not be your way of showing off. I don't want those kids used as your pawns."

He whistled. "I'd say *you* have some trust issues."

Kat shook her head and picked up her pace. Again, Jared strode along with her, ignoring her pique.

"This isn't about me, it's about Summerville," she huffed.

"Could have fooled me," he replied.

They stopped a few feet from where the girls practiced. "What is that supposed to mean?" Kat asked him.

"Maybe you're using *them* for your own means. If you want me gone, Kat, you're going to have to muster up a lot more ammunition than a bunch of nine-year-olds."

"I don't use people. You use people. You're so money hungry, you'll stop at nothing to put companies out of business," her voice shook.

"Ah," he grabbed her arm. "So now we get to the real issue here. My dealings with Plasticmate."

"You almost put them out of business." She tried to shrug out of his grip, but he wouldn't let go. "Seventy percent of their profits came from selling their plastic products in *your* damn MegaMart stores!"

His dark eyes flashed. "They almost put themselves out of business by trying to pull a fast one on me and my MegaMart customers."

"You have no regard for anyone." She finally managed to shake out of his hold. "They came to you, those Plasticmate people, and begged you to raise the price of their plastic

storage containers just a little when the price of resin went up."

Jared's face darkened just as a cloud passed over the sun. She couldn't be sure in that moment if she shivered from the look he gave her or the cool breeze on her overheated skin. "Plasticmate told me they needed to raise the price of their storage containers because the price of resin skyrocketed. Resin, I found out, didn't go up all that much. For the price they would have had to charge to compensate for the extra expense of the resin, I would have probably understood, but no, they had to be greedy."

"Just like you," she jutted her chin at him. "Maybe it takes one to know one."

"You know something?" He leaned down until they were nose-to-nose. "You haven't got a clue. I discontinued Plasticmate products because I didn't want MegaMart customers over-charged for the sake of greed. You shoot your mouth off—"

"Hey!" the kids yelled. "Come on!"

Jared shook his head and sighed. "I don't want to argue over this." He strode over to the team.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kat ran to catch up with him.

"Warming up the team," he said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, so you can tire them out?"

He stopped and glared at her. Good, she thought. Soon, he'll lose his temper and storm off. Then everyone in Summerville would see the 'real' Jared Martin. A jerk.

"I won't tire them out," he replied, his voice tight.

"It's hot, you'll dehydrate them."

"They've got their water bottles."

"I don't want their parents worrying about them, especially Allie's. These are children we're talking about here. You have to know that the parents worry—"

Again he cut her tirade short, but this time, he grinned, reminding Kat of a sleek, smiling panther.

"I do know," he replied easily. "And you?"

"What about me?" Kat eyed him warily.

"Why are you coaching the team? You don't have kids, why bother?"

*Because my husband informed me late in our marriage, that he didn't want kids. I'm thirty-three, at the rate I'm going, I'll never have kids.*

Kat squared her shoulders. "To give something back to Summerville." A tiny muscle by her left eye quivered in response to her lie.

Jared cocked his head, watching her, his gaze intense. Seconds went by before he answered.

"Liar," he finally replied. He reached out and tugged gently on a wayward strand of fiery-red hair .

Then he turned and walked off toward the team, leaving Kat to wonder if the man read minds.

\* \* \* \*

"Allie, you can do this. I know you can."

A drop of perspiration trickled down between Kat's breasts making her wish for the earlier breeze that soothed her parched skin. Her face flamed from the sun's scorching rays

that shined down on the soccer field. She tugged the brim of her cap further down, hoping to shield her sensitive cheeks and nose. Laying her hand over Allie's, she tried to get the child to stop fidgeting with her glasses. "Just get out there and try, that's all I'm asking. We need you to boot the ball into the net, and you've got the biggest kick on the team."

Allie's round face paled. "I-I can't. I know I can't."

"Oh, Allie." Kat squatted down in front of her. She smoothed her hand over the child's chestnut-colored curls. "Please don't say that. You've got to have some faith in yourself."

Allie shook her head. "I'm not doing it."

Kat glanced to the stands where Jared sat chatting with the parents. Everyone came to watch Summerville's youth play soccer on Saturday. Some sat with umbrellas to ward off the sun's stifling rays. Parents and grandparents sat in rows, fanning themselves and chatting, catching up on all the latest news and gossip.

Jared sat there with them, chewing their ears off about his damned MegaMart store. Kat realized that her team of nine-year-olds adored him. During the warm-up, he managed to dribble and pass with them and even took a turn at warming up the team's goalie. And no, she wasn't the least bit impressed with his skill with a soccer ball or how his shirt stretched across his wide shoulders and chest when he moved, his muscles rippling. While her skin became red in the sun, his tanned and turned deep bronze.

Kat's heart skipped a beat. Her plan to show Jared up for a phony was falling apart. Allie was scared to get out on the

field and every parent in the stands had their eyes on Kat. She needed all this like she needed another hole in her head. Kat had to be out of her mind when she told Summerville's Youth Soccer coordinator that she'd coach a team of nine-year-old-girls, but she could never seem to say 'no' to anyone who needed her.

The ref walked over. His gruff voice cut into her musings. "Coach, ya gotta send someone out there to take the shot. The clock's tickin'."

Kat sighed. "Just give me a minute."

The ref shook his head as he took in Allie's sullen face. "I'll give you five minutes, but no more."

He walked off, leaving Kat alone with Allie. She wanted Allie to take the shot on goal more for Allie's sense of pride than anything else. The Summerville Slammers tied the game and now the clock counted down on overtime. Kat glanced at the tense faces of the girls on the field and the people in the stands. Her own stomach clenched in response.

In the next instant, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She rose to her feet to find Jared standing there.

"You know," he began. She opened her mouth to speak then stopped when she noticed the barely discernible shake of his head. "Allie, you're right," he continued. "If I were you, I wouldn't bother."

Kat's mouth hung open. How dare he ruin everything she tried to do! She opened her mouth again to argue with Jared until she looked toward the ref. He shook his head and pointed at his watch.

Allie stared down at the tips of her cleats and tugged on her jersey. She wouldn't look at Jared or Kat.

"Just forget it, Allie. Don't take the kick," Jared told her.

Allie lifted her head and scuffed the toe of her cleat across a bare spot in the grass. "I'm gonna miss the shot."

Jared shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. So, forget it. Just go back to the bench and sit with the other girls."

She started to walk away.

"Are you out of your mind?" Kat whispered to him. "We need her to—"

"But then again, if you walk away," he called out to Allie, ignoring Kat. "You'll never really know."

Allie stopped and turned around. "What won't I know?"

"If you don't try, you'll never know the result. You'll always be wondering."

Allie walked back. He got down on his haunches in front of Allie and grabbed her shoulders. "Not knowing is worse than failing, Allie. Have you ever shot on goal before?"

She shook her head, 'no.'

Jared smiled at her. "Want to know the secret for getting the ball in every time?"

Her eyes widened. "Yeah. I do." Her face glowed.

Watching Jared interact with Allie, Kat felt that peculiar little twist her heart made in her chest, similar to that first time she saw him take Doris' hand in his own.

"Okay, then. I'll tell you. That's a wide net and the goalie is really nervous. She doesn't have a clue where you're going to shoot the ball."

Allie shook her head and pouted. "At the net, that's where."

"Yes, but shoot for a corner. Fake the goalie out. Make her think you're shooting for the left corner then shoot right. Switch feet if you have to. I saw how you can kick with either foot, you're good."

Allie's face lit with a smile.

"Give it one of those big boots I saw you use during the game, and you'll do it."

Kat held her breath as she watched Allie concentrate on what Jared said.

Allie tugged on her shirt again. "You think so?"

Jared nodded. "I know so."

Allie chewed her bottom lip. "Okay, I-I'll try."

Kat released her pent-up breath. Allie ran onto the field and stood behind the eighteen-yard line in front of the goal. The ref placed the ball on the ground in front of Allie, raised his arm and lowered it. Allie looked down at the ball, took a few steps back, moved forward then raised her left foot.

Kat saw the goalie run to the left side of the net. Allie lifted her foot and started to toe the ball to the left corner, but at the last minute, she switched feet and kicked it with all her might with the side of her other foot, sending the ball into the opposite corner.

No one was more surprised than the goalie when the ball sailed past her and into the net.

Kat shouted in triumph until her voice grew hoarse.

The next thing she knew, she had her arms wrapped around Jared Martin's bronzed neck.

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When her lips collided with his, she stepped back and gasped.

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### **Chapter Three**

Monday morning following the soccer game, Kat stood on the front stoop of KISS. She unlocked the front door as a bird's song wafted by her ears. The parrots inside 'Noone's Nest,' the rare bird emporium next door, chirped and chattered. Kat could hear their excited 'caws' as she pulled her key from the lock and stepped inside the dark, cool interior of KISS.

Balancing her coffee in one hand, and a white bag containing a buttered bagel in the other, she kicked the door closed with the heel of her foot. She pressed her shoulder against the light switch on the wall. Golden rays shined down from the ceiling, highlighting her displays of gowns and lingerie shimmering in a halo of luminescence. Kat glanced at her newest creation, a midnight blue illusion nightgown. The silk and fine-mesh gown had been cut on the bias for a peek-a-book effect. Trimmed in Brazilian lace, Kat's design evoked a sensual, elegant feel.

She walked to her office in the back and thought about whom she'd give one of those peek-a-boo gowns to ... maybe Nancy Noone. Yes, Kat thought, it would look stunning on her. Maybe it would lift her spirits, take her mind off her problems. The owner of the exotic bird emporium didn't want to sell out to MegaMart. Mounting bills in the wake of her recent problem had Nancy thinking twice about taking Jared Martin's offer.

Mr. Moneybags would buy out another one of her friends, Kat thought disgustedly. He had more money than he knew what to do with, so what did a mere fifty or seventy-five thousand dollars mean to him, anyway? He could care less that Nancy spent years building her business.

*Damn, here I go again, thinking about Jared Martin.*

She had made a fool of herself at the soccer game on Saturday. Not only had she hugged Jared when Allie scored that winning goal, she had...

Kissed him. Full on the mouth. In front of every single person at that game. "Stupid, stupid ... *stupid*," she muttered as she walked toward the back of the store. She switched on the lights in her office and deposited her bags on the desk. He had been so kind to all the girls on the team, particularly Allie. Kat rubbed her forehead while she tried to reconcile Mr. Moneybags with this other side of his personality—compassion. She couldn't, no *wouldn't* trust him. Helping Allie had been an act, a phony gesture on his part to win her over.

She booted up the computer. While she waited, she tossed the bag containing the bagel into the small fridge stacked on top of a filing cabinet. Her appetite fled as she thought about her insane plan to drive Jared Martin out of town. She had moaned and whined to Lilith about her failed scheme. Her childhood friend listened patiently then dispensed her usual sage advice. "Make friends with him, Kat." Lilith had told her at the coffee shop that morning. "You get more with honey than you do with vinegar. Besides," Lilith continued, "the whole town thinks you've changed your mind about

MegaMart, especially with that kiss you two shared." Her violet eyes had danced with mirth.

"We didn't exactly 'share' a kiss, it was more of a heat-of-the-moment thing." Kat's own cheeks heated at the mention of that kiss. She hated the smug smile on Lilith's face.

She pressed her hands to her lips as she thought about Jared's. His had felt warm, silky. Kat recalled having to stop herself from nibbling on them. He had responded to that kiss like any other red-blooded man would. Kat felt the force of his desire, remembered how his lower body stiffened when he pulled her close. He had tasted of her lips as though he couldn't get enough of her.

She removed her hands from her mouth, bringing her thoughts to the present. Glancing at the computer, she saw the desktop design come into view—KISS' logo—the store name super imposed over a pair of lush, bow-shaped lips. Kat's brows snapped together in thought. If only she could find some nasty little secret Jared harbored. Maybe she could use it to win her fight for Summerville. She noted Jared's sensitivity about his family when she mentioned his father. Hadn't she read something about Sam Martin? He had turned MegaMart over to Jared a few years ago when he was still a robust, vital, active man. No one could figure out why he'd abandoned the reigns and dropped out completely from the MegaMart picture.

Maybe if she 'Googled' his name she'd find something out. She punched in 'Sam Martin,' but all she got was a slew of biographies, filled with things she already knew...

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Including those ridiculous rules of success Jared claimed he and his father lived by.

She shook her head and sighed. Maybe she could hire someone to dig into Jared Martin's past...

Kat pressed the heel of one hand against her forehead. What was happening to her? She hated the direction of her thoughts. She disliked the idea of digging into someone's family and past, but unless she found out something soon, Jared's MegaMart would destroy Summerville.

The bell above the door to KISS jangled, breaking her thoughts. Kat glanced at her watch. Nine-thirty a.m. Customers usually didn't venture into KISS until around ten. She rose from the desk and exited her office to see Michael Benton, Summerville's dentist, standing in the front of her store.

"That was a great game Saturday," he told her, his face pink and pinched with tension. Kat thought he always looked like that whenever he entered the threshold of KISS. Jared flashed through her mind. He hadn't been uncomfortable at all. In fact, he appeared as though he truly enjoyed every corner of KISS as he examined and touched each gown, each piece of intimate apparel.

Michael shifted from one foot to the other. He glanced at the molded form of a woman wearing a red, satin bustier and garter belt.

Kat bit her bottom lip as she watched Michael's face turn the exact shade of red as the bustier.

"Thanks for the compliment," she replied, attempting to put him at ease.

He stared at the bustier, pushing his glasses further up on his nose. "The, uh, compliment?" he asked.

"About the game on Saturday."

"Oh, right, yes ... the game." He tore his eyes from the display and walked toward her. "You did a fine coaching job."

"Well, I had help," she replied grudgingly. "Jared Martin seemed to work wonders with Allie."

Michael gave her a small smile. "Allie's mother is due to come in for a cleaning this afternoon. I'm sure I'll hear all about it again."

"I'm sure you will," she murmured, suddenly wishing he would leave. The last thing she wanted to do was stand there and make small talk with him, especially since he seemed so uncomfortable.

Michael placed his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "So, I came to ask you ... maybe you, well, maybe you'd like to go to that 'Oldies Under the Stars' concert next Friday."

"Next Friday? Why, I—"

What could she say without hurting Michael's feelings? The thought of spending a Friday evening with Summerville's dentist while he discussed the benefit of his new tooth-whitening system set Kat's own teeth on edge.

"Is it Martin?" Michael's voice had an edge. "I mean," he continued quickly. "We, uh, well, at least *I* saw you kiss him. Have you changed your mind about MegaMart?"

"No, o-of course not."

Michael sighed, his face relaxed. "I'm glad, then I guess you would consider accompanying me to the concert?"

The bell above the door to KISS jangled again. Kat looked over at the entrance but Michael's shoulder blocked her view.

A deep voice rang out. "Kat's going with me."

She peeked over Michael's bony shoulder to see Mr. Moneybags standing by one of the display cases. Arms folded over his broad chest, he braced one, lean hip against the counter. His gaze strayed for just a second as he looked at the garter belts and panties on display. Then he looked at her, the golden flecks in his eyes burning bright.

Kat met his look squarely. "I beg your pardon," her voice turned frosty. "I never said—"

"Sure you did," Jared replied easily. He dropped his arms and approached. "Don't you remember? At the game the other day, you said you liked Oldies."

"No, I don't remember," her voice dripped with acid.

Michael watched the bi-play between Kat and Jared. His face fell. "Oh, well. Then I guess I'll be seeing you around town, Kat."

"Michael wait," she laid a hand on his arm. He looked down at it then up at her. He opened his mouth to speak then shut it.

Sometimes, she wished Michael Benton would stand up and fight for something, in this case, *her*. If he'd only put up a fuss, get angry—show Jared Martin that he cared, that Kat was *his* girl...

"I'll be seeing you around, Kat."

His eyes grew sad, but Kat noted something else in them—censure. He made his way around Jared and walked out of KISS, the door slamming behind him.

"Nice to see you again, Benton," Jared called out on a cheery note. His golden-brown eyes settled on her face. "He surrendered too easily."

"You—" she almost said 'idiot' but remembered Lilith's words about getting more with honey than with vinegar. "Hurt his feelings," she chose instead.

Jared shrugged. "I'll make it up to him and get my teeth whitened. I'm sure he'll be thrilled. That's all I heard about at the game on Saturday."

"That's a rotten thing to say." She glanced at his face. His smile dazzled—no way did *he* need to get his teeth whitened. They were perfect. His smile—perfect, his body—a perfect complement to her body. She fit flawlessly against him when he had kissed her. Kat's five-foot eight-inch frame molded to every hard angle and plane of his...

He gave her a level look. "At least I'm sincere. How about you?"

"Huh?" She shook her head to clear it of her crazy, lustful thoughts. "What do you mean?"

Jared grinned. "Admit it. He bores you to tears."

Kat did not intend to admit anything to Jared. She turned and made her way toward the counter at the back of the store. Jared strode behind her and stopped when she rounded the counter by the cash register. She pulled a box of bras out from underneath then changed her mind. The last thing she needed to be doing was handling lacy bras under Jared Martin's dark scrutiny. She didn't think her hormones could take it.

The box slipped from her hands and fell to the floor.

He grinned, leaning over to glance at the array of intimate apparel on the floor. "You seem very skittish. I didn't seem to bother you at all the other day when you kissed me."

"That," she said in a clipped tone, "Was a huge mistake." She bent to retrieve the box and stashed it back under the counter.

"Could have fooled me." He replied, leaning his head over the counter.

"It was excitement, nothing more," she said from her position under the counter. She rose to her feet quickly, bumping her head on his chin.

"Oh!" she cried out, rubbing her forehead.

Before she could say anything else, Jared rounded the corner, his tall frame crowding the small space between them. "Are you okay?" Concern etched his face.

"I'm fine," Kat replied testily as she rubbed her forehead. "Just get out of here," she shooed him away, but he didn't budge.

"Let me see," he murmured as his fingers probed her forehead. He applied gentle pressure. "Does this hurt?" he asked. "Looks like you might have a bump there."

Kat stood stiffly, inhaling the citrusy scent of Jared's cologne. When the tips of his fingers grazed her hairline, she almost swooned from his gentle touch. From her vantage point, she could see the 'v' of the polo-style shirt he wore. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down on the smooth expanse of his tanned throat. Something about gazing at his wide neck and shoulders did strange things to her insides. Her stomach fluttered, as though a million, tiny moths beat their wings.

Kat stole a glance at his smooth, sculpted chin. "As long as you're okay, too," she managed. His lips were a hair's breadth from hers.

"I don't know about that, seems kind of sore," he replied, running the fingers of one hand over his chin. "Maybe you should kiss it and make it feel better."

"Oh you!" She shoved him away and squeezed by. "What do you want?" she asked. "I haven't got all day."

"I came in to buy something."

She swallowed. Hard. Kat didn't want to serve him. She didn't want to watch him handle her merchandise again ... or did she?

"I'd like to buy something for my—"

Kat smiled thinly. "The blonde?"

Jared scowled. "Who?"

"The blonde I saw you with in a magazine photo."

He laughed. "Ah, I remember. That picture in *People Magazine*. The blonde is the daughter of an old family friend. I gave her a job at MegaMart as a favor to her father."

Kat snorted. "I'm sure."

"I want to buy something for my sister." He looked at the loungewear display. "That," he pointed to a teal-colored, embroidered, spun silk nightshirt. "I think she'd like that."

She sighed. "Do you really have a sister?"

"Absolutely. She's eight years younger than me. Dawn's twenty-eight."

Kat filed that little bit of information away in her mind. Maybe she'd 'Google' the name Dawn Martin, and see what she could find.

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"What size?" She walked over and removed the gown from the curved form. When she turned, she noticed him staring at her, his eyes traveling up and down her body. Her skin warmed as her pulse skittered out of control in response to his perusal.

"I'd say she's just your size," he replied, his voice soft as a caress.

Kat felt an odd sensation in the pit of her belly. Desire swirled through her then pooled deep inside, settling between her legs. She shifted to relieve the growing ache there.

"If there's nothing else you want, I'll wrap this for you. Is it a birthday present?"

He shrugged. "No, not exactly. More like a 'thank you.'"

"I'll bet," she muttered. If Jared Martin were thanking a woman for something, that woman wasn't his sister and ... Kat could only imagine what he would thank her for.

She rang up the sale. He removed a credit card and handed it to her.

"Will that be all?" she asked, making her voice sound professional. She swiped the card in the slot on the credit card machine.

"No, actually that isn't all. I'd like to take you to lunch."

She handed his card back. Her eyes locked with his. "Look," she told him as she grabbed some tissue imprinted with KISS' logo. She shook out the crisp, pink sheets and laid them in the bottom of a pink box. "I'm not going to lunch with you, and I'm certainly not going to that concert with you, either." An image of her nestled with Jared on a blanket

under the stars on a moonlit night swirled through her mind. She pushed the picture to the furthest recess of her brain.

He smiled, just stood there and grinned as if he knew what she was thinking.

Kat looked up. "What?" She folded the nightshirt and placed it in the box.

"If you don't go to that concert with me, what'll you tell your dentist friend?"

She stuck her nose in the air. "What I do with Michael is none of your concern."

"Which is probably nothing," again he grinned.

Kat favored him with a sour look.

He kept his eyes on her as she folded the tissue over the gown. "Great logo, by the way. It'll look even nicer flying under MegaMart's banner."

"Fat chance of that happening," she hmphed.

"We'll see," he smiled. "You could give me a chance to convince you."

"About throwing in the towel and joining the MegaMart family?" she asked snidely.

"It never hurts to keep an open mind."

She rolled her eyes. "Another one of your rules?"

"No, it's not. It just makes sense, that's all. Don't close your mind to new ideas. Besides, if I were to apply one of my 'rules' in this case, it would be, 'Turn your enemies into friends and never turn one of your friends into an enemy—they know too much about you.'"

Kat's cheeks turned pink as she thought about her new plan to find something she could use against him.

"Anyway," Jared continued, "Like I said, if you don't accompany me, he'll probably wonder why, because, as you say, this is a small town and everyone knows everyone's business."

"So?" She put the cover on the box and reached for some pink curling ribbon on a spool. "What of it?"

"You'll hurt the poor guy's feelings."

She cut a length of ribbon from the spool. "Oh, so *now* you're concerned about hurting his feelings? Which, I might add, you did—not me by butting in."

"You're a softy, admit it. You don't like to hurt anyone."

Kat tied the ribbon around the box and yanked on it. She reached for another piece. Her fingers trembled knowing Jared watched her every move. She had to stop acting so foolishly!

It was time to turn the tables on him and invoke Lilith's plan to befriend the enemy.

Kat took a deep breath and said, "Maybe you're right."

He blinked once, surprise registered on his face. "I am?"

She tied the other piece of ribbon around the box. Schooling her features, she peeked up at Jared. She'd give this her best shot and play the 'nice' game with him. If he let down his guard, she could get in and find out something useful—something she could use against him to win her fight for the town she loved.

It had nothing to do with her attraction to him. Nothing at all...

She slid the scissor blade across the ribbon. It curled and bounced against the top of the box. She did the same with

another piece and pulled her fingers through the springy, pink curls.

She handed the box to him. "I'm a bit busy today, but maybe we could do lunch tomorrow. I certainly wouldn't want to hurt *your* feelings, after all, you're still a visitor to Summerville, and now, well, you're a customer."

Jared just kept staring at her. Kat continued. "We could discuss MegaMart." She nearly choked on the words, but she managed to get them out. *Lilith, Lilith, I hope you're right about all this.*

He shook his dark head, a wary look in his coffee-brown eyes. "I thought you just said you didn't want to go to lunch with me."

"Well, as I think about it, I know how to return a favor. And it suddenly dawns on me that I owe *you* one." She drew out the last few words, hoping she sounded ... seductive.

He lifted one dark brow. He started to say something then stopped, a confused look on his face.

Kat bit back a grin and decided that she owed Lilith one of Fred Meyer's giant, homemade ice-cream sundaes.

"You helped Allie," she explained. "Going to lunch with you is the least I could do to say thank you."

He reached for the box. She smiled charmingly, letting her fingers brush against his as she passed it to him, ignoring the fluttery feeling in the pit of her belly the touch of her fingers against his produced.

"I hope your sister enjoys the nightshirt," Kat told him, imagining a tall, cool blonde wearing it. She squashed that image down.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

"Then I'll see you tomorrow," his eyes traveled over her face. A few seconds went by before he turned on his heel and strode out of the store.

Kat blew out a breath as she watched him exit KISS and tried to ignore the faint tremble that coursed through her.

\* \* \* \*

The little minx was up to something, Jared thought as he stood in front of Meyer's Sweet Shoppe a few hours later. As he visited Summerville's shops and emporiums on the main drag, all he could do was think about Kat. Her sudden mood shift baffled him. Maybe she really liked him, and didn't want to admit it. Well then, he'd play on that, build on it ... use it to his advantage. He also hoped she was considering kissing him again as she did on that soccer field. The feel of her pressed against him as she wrapped her arms around his neck made his head spin. When her lips collided with his...

"Coming in?"

He turned to see a man standing in the doorway of the Sweet Shoppe. "Fred Meyer," the man stuck out his hand. "And you must be Jared Martin."

Jared sized him up quickly as he shook Fred's hand. Meyer was tall, his brown hair slightly gray at the temples. He wore faded jeans and a t-shirt that read, 'Meyer's Sixty-Two Flavors.' Underneath that, Jared noticed three columns of printing. He read aloud from the top of the first column, "Macadamia Fudge. Sounds good."

"It is. Why don't you come in and have some?"

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

Jared shrugged. Why not? The day being hot and sultry, the ice cream would cool him down. Or was it KISS that made his blood heat? Each time he'd been in Kat's store, surrounded by all that sexy, classy lingerie she designed, his body temperature shot up by about ten degrees. And her. Kat made him hot ... everywhere, especially when she kissed him. Their bodies had been on fire from the summer sun—or was it for each other? Confusion set in and he didn't like it. Maybe she only kissed him to throw him off, to make him lose his focus.

Now, standing in front of Meyer's Sweet Shoppe, Jared realized he had an excellent opportunity. Fred Meyer was the leader of the town's civic association. Jared couldn't pass up this chance to pick this guy's brain and see how he felt about MegaMart. Located three stores down from KISS, Meyer had to know Kat. Maybe Jared could find out more about Miss Upstart. There had to be something about Kat that he could use...

To what? Pressure her into selling out to him? While that had appeal before, it didn't now. Jared realized he didn't want to change one thing about KISS and not one thing about Summerville, for that matter. The town had too much charm. It was too damn small, too. The public school system in Summerville housed fifty students. Time stood still in Summerville, and Jared liked that. He felt a pang in his chest ... if only time would stand still for his father, too.

It was time for Jared to shift gears. He wanted Kat to listen to this plan. He knew she'd like it once she did, but he

couldn't beat her over the head with it. He'd have to ease her into his way of thinking.

He followed Fred Meyer to the counter in the front of the Sweet Shoppe and took a seat on an old-fashioned, swivel-style stool. For just a second, Jared had the craziest desire to spin around on it.

Fred instructed a young man behind the counter. Jared watched the kid pile two scoops of creamy ice cream on a crunchy waffle cone. The boy handed it to Jared.

He licked the icy-cold mass of chocolate fudge ice cream. He swirled it on his tongue, and savored the taste of the dark chocolate chunks laced throughout the frozen custard.

Jared's eyes nearly crossed from the sweet, creamy taste.

"It's all homemade," Fred told him, grinning.

"It's delicious. What's your secret?"

Fred laughed. "Exactly. It's a secret family recipe."

Jared beetled his brows. "You didn't serve this to those Soccer players last Saturday."

"Well, they like my soft-serve. And it's easier to give soft-serve to kids than it is to dish out the hand-cranked stuff."

Jared stopped eating for a second. "What do you mean, 'give?' Don't you charge them?"

"Never do." Fred ambled from behind the counter and took a seat next to Jared. "I never charge those soccer kids or their coaches. I can't. I used to play soccer myself. Someday, if I have kids, my kid will too." Fred smiled.

Jared shook his head and sighed. "You're giving away your store."

Fred shrugged. "It's mine to give away."

Jared took another lick of his cone then placed it in the dish in front of him. "Have you thought about MegaMart?" he asked, wiping his lips with a paper napkin.

"I have, but I'm not sure that MegaMart is the way to boost this town's image. This is a family-owned business—has been since my great-grandfather started it in 1904."

"I'd keep it exactly the same—all sixty-two flavors."

"I don't know," Fred stated thoughtfully. "I'd like to run this by Kat."

Jared's interest piqued. Ah, so here indeed was another one of Kat's 'friends.'

"You know Kat a long time?" he slanted Fred a glance.

Fred smiled shyly. "We go back a long way."

Jared felt a small spark of envy ignite inside him. The MegaMart fortune usually came between Jared and any 'friend' he could possibly make. Moreover, most women were enthralled by it, that's usually what they saw first when they looked at Jared Martin, except for Kat. She didn't seem impressed by his wealth.

Kat ... Kat ... Kat!

He imagined her dressed in that peek-a-boo gown he saw at KISS before. He wondered if she modeled those designs she made. Maybe she'd model that peek-a-book gown for him. He would see just a hint of her soft skin underneath, yet she'd be covered up enough to make him wonder what lay beneath the opaque fabric...

Jared's cell phone rang, breaking his lust-filled reverie. "Will you excuse me?"

"Sure," Fred said easily. "Take a seat in one of the back booths. You'll have more privacy."

"Thanks, I'll be right back."

Jared strode to the back of the store and eased his tall frame onto the cool vinyl seat in one of the booths. He answered the phone on the fifth ring.

"Jared, where in hell are you?"

"Hello, George."

"There's a picture of you kissing Kat Sullivan in today's paper."

Jared sat up a little straighter in the seat. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Jared, I don't know what you're doing, but..."

"I'm winning Summerville over."

There was a moment's pause on George's end. "Including her?"

"*That* was a ... victory kiss. We were at a sporting event." Jared winced, fully expecting lightning to strike for the lie he just told. It might have been a mistake on Kat's part, but not on his. Her wide, generous mouth was soft, warm ... and he had felt her lithe frame mold to his ... she fit perfectly against him.

George sighed. "Jared, you're supposed to be cinching this deal. You've got three openings to attend in a few days and another store under construction. You need me there."

Jared pinched the bridge of his nose. Sometimes George could be one, big pain in the butt.

"You haven't called in days."

"I've been busy. Kat's team had to win a soccer game. I've got to set up a meeting with the historical society—"

"You're really losing it—a kid's soccer game?"

"It's called community relations." And it's the most fun I've had in ages, went unsaid. Lately, his life revolved around sitting at his desk analyzing figures or attending one opening after another. It felt good to interact with people as he did at that game.

It felt even better doing that with Kat ... and sharing that kiss. Oh, why couldn't he stop thinking about that kiss?

"And why in heaven's name are you meeting with the historical society?"

"I'll get a better idea on construction and design of the new complex," Jared replied.

George didn't.

"George?" Jared heard a long, drawn-out sigh.

"Yes, I'm here, Jared. I'm ... thinking."

Jared's lips thinned. "I don't pay you to think."

"Well, someone has to because you're obviously not. Or maybe you're thinking with your—"

"Enough," Jared muttered through clenched teeth.

"Look, there's a better way to change Ms. Upstart's mind. Remember what we did with Plasticmate?"

Jared shifted in the seat. "They were trying to cheat MegaMart. That's different."

"Yes, but we proved that people always have something to hide, Jared. Remember what we found out about the CEO of Plasticmate?"

Jared massaged the back of his neck to relieve the knot of tension there. "Yes, I do. I threatened to use that little fact if

he dared to go to the media about my father, but he backed off in the end."

"You see? You could do the same thing with Ms. Upstart. She's the problem here, Jared. Why not make it *her* problem if she doesn't give in and sell out to you? Let's dig up some dirt on her."

"No."

"Jared—"

"Forget it," Jared snapped. "I'm not doing that. I'll handle Ms. Up ... I mean, Kat."

"Oh, so now it's 'Kat,' is it?"

Jared clenched his jaw. "Just let me handle this. Stay out of it. I'll call you before I leave Summerville."

"When will that be?"

"When I'm good and ready."

Jared ended the call. He stared at the phone for quite some time. Maybe George had a point. Some things didn't add up when he thought about Kat. How come she stayed in a small town like Summerville? Her talents and abilities could take her far.

The nightshirt he bought for Dawn suddenly popped into his head. He had left the box at KISS. Jared glanced at his watch. One-thirty p.m. Kat said she'd be busy for lunch, but maybe KISS opened again by now and he could get the box.

He rose from the seat and walked back to the counter.

"It was nice talking to you Fred," Jared shook his hand.

"Same here, Jared."

"I'd like to attend the next civic association meeting. I think you'll like what I'm going to propose."

"All right. Let's give it a shot. We'll hear you out."

Jared slanted him a glance as he took out his wallet to pay for the ice cream. "Will Kat be there?"

Fred grinned. "Of course. She doesn't miss a civic association meeting."

"Okay, then, what do I owe you?"

Fred held up a hand. "It's on the house."

Jared shook his head and handed Fred a ten-dollar bill.

"Here, I insist."

"You helped Allie—you helped Kat and her team win that game. You gave your time, it's the least I can do."

Jared smiled thinly. "Like I said, you're giving away the profits."

"Are you always so cynical?" Fred cocked his head at him.

Jared's smile faded. He squared his shoulders, looking Fred right in the eye. "I'm a businessman. It's the bottom line with me."

Fred shook his head. "Making money isn't the only thing in life, Jared. Sometimes, it's the least important thing."

Jared smiled thinly again. "I guess we can agree to disagree."

"Well, maybe we can." Fred replied. "I'll see you at the civic association meeting. It'll be in a couple of weeks."

"See you then."

Jared walked out into the bright sunshine. These past few days, he felt as though his life back home was Kansas and Summerville was Oz. Here, he could forget his responsibilities to MegaMart and his father. He glanced in the direction of KISS and strode towards it, intent on retrieving Dawn's gift.

With Dawn's help, he could travel and do business without the constant worry about his father.

*Making money isn't the only thing in life, Jared.  
Sometimes, it's the least important thing.*

Jared slowed his pace. Of course making money was important. Keeping the family business alive was important. His dream of teaching physical education had been important, too...

Jared felt that twinge of resentment he always felt when he thought about that lost dream.

He looked up to see a clear blue sky—another glorious summer day. It hadn't rained once since he'd been in Summerville and wondered if that's how the town got its name. He picked up his pace as he neared Kat's store.

*Kat ... Kat ... Kat ... he couldn't stop thinking about her.*

A breeze tickled his skin. People passed him, they smiled and said, 'hello.' He saw a bright yellow parrot in a cage. It hung in the window of a store called 'Noone's Nest.' Jared could hear its 'caw.' Then it started to sing:

*In the summertime when the weather is high, you can  
stretch right up and touch the sky.*

Jared smiled when he heard the bird's song. Yes, that's what it felt like to be in Summerville, he thought. You wanted to reach up and touch that clear, blue sky...

That's not all he wanted to touch. He wanted to hold Kat again. He wanted to feel her body pressed up against his.

*When the weather's fine, you got women, you got women  
on your mind.*

Summerville was definitely reeling him in.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

Or was it Kat?

\* \* \* \*

Jared stopped in front of KISS' Victorian façade, painted in a soft shade of pink. He thought about the pink box containing Dawn's nightshirt. Leave it to Kat to match everything just so, including her storefront.

He also noticed the sign hanging on the door. 'Closed. Back In An Hour.' Jared frowned and peered through the window into the dark interior. He pressed his ear up against the pane when he thought he heard voices coming from somewhere in the back of the store.

He walked around to the back of KISS and stood near the rear entrance marked 'Deliveries Only.' He placed his ear against the door. One voice definitely sounded like Kat's, the other sounded like a man's voice. Then he heard another woman. Laughter erupted from all three then died down. He saw the door open a crack, so he sprinted behind the dumpster and watched in fascination as Kat opened the door wide. Her eyes swept the small parking lot in front of her.

"It's all clear," she smiled as a man and woman exited the back of KISS.

The young woman turned and gave Kat a hesitant look.

"Go on," Kat shooed her away. "You're going to do fine."

The woman had tears in her eyes, "I—" she started.

Kat just shook her head. "Go on, Bill's waiting for you."

Jared couldn't believe his eyes. The young woman's sleek brown pageboy just cleared her chin. She wore heavy makeup, and stiletto heels and her outfit! He whistled through

his teeth. A denim miniskirt just cleared her bottom cheeks and outlined her trim hips and round fanny. Topping it off was a low-cut, bright pink tank top edged with lace.

The man and woman got in a car and drove off, but not before Jared saw the woman blow Kat a kiss through her passenger side window. He swore the man winked lewdly in Kat's direction, too.

Kat stood there for a moment. When she turned, Jared saw tears pool in her eyes. The sight of them made his chest grow tight. She wiped them away with the back of one hand and made her way toward the delivery entrance.

That's when Jared made his presence known.

\* \* \* \*

Kat had her hand on the delivery door when she heard a deep male voice from behind, "So, this is how you spend your lunch hours." She whirled around the find Jared standing there.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" The breath whooshed from her lungs. Her heart raced.

"That's a question I should be asking you."

She narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

He walked to her. "The sign in the front of your store said, 'Closed. Back in an hour.'"

"So?"

Jared raised his brows. "But you were in the store, Kat."

"I—" she started then stopped when she realized Jared was staring at her. "What?"

"It's just that," he cocked his head. "I don't know ... there's something different about you."

She sucked in a breath as his eyes traveled over her.

"There's nothing different about me. You're imagining things." Kat shifted her stance. "Did you want something?" she asked.

He smiled, a sheepish grin lighting his face. "I, uh, forgot the box."

"What box?"

"That nightshirt I bought for my sister."

"Oh that!" she gave a nervous laugh. "Yes, I noticed you did. You must have put it down while we were talking and ... what now? What's wrong? Why do you keep staring at me?"

Jared shook his head. "Nothing."

"Okay, fine, if there's nothing else you want, then I'll just be on my way. I'm busy."

Kat started to walk away, but Jared grabbed her arm. "No, don't go yet."

She turned to face him.

"There is something else. Who were those people that just left?"

"Customers," she blurted.

"I didn't know that customers use your delivery entrance."

Kat sighed. "Look, if you've got nothing better to do than question me about my business practices—"

He held up a hand. "You're right. It's none of my business. Yet."

She paled. "What do you mean ... yet?"

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

"Just that. You can have your secrets for now, Kat, but when I buy your store, and *I* will buy KISS, you'll have no more secrets from me."

Her mouth hung open. "Of all the—"

Jared closed the small space between them and grabbed her shoulders. Then he kissed her. He let his lips linger then slid them across hers, the tip of his tongue tickling the soft inside of her lower lip. Kat moaned with each pass of his lips and tongue. In the next instant, she kissed him back. He cradled the back of her head in his large, tanned hand and circled her waist with the other, pulling her flush up against him. Kat's head spun. This man's mouth possessed some kind of magic. Each time his lips met hers, the world tilted on its axis.

"Kat," he whispered. "Kat..."

She felt his racing heart, heard his sharp intake of breath. Kat pulled away. "You'll never get your hands on KISS, never."

\* \* \* \*

He watched her walk away, her hips and fanny swaying seductively, her determined voice ringing in his ears.

"We'll just see about that, Ms. Upstart," he whispered.  
"We'll just see."

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## **Chapter Four**

Kat entered the back of KISS and slammed the delivery door. Bracing her back against it, she took a deep breath and prayed that her racing heart and pulse would slow. Eyes closed, she pressed shaking fingers to her tingling, kiss-swollen lips. What a fool she had been to respond to Jared's kiss! She groaned in frustration. Lilith had said be nice to him and Kat felt as though she crossed a dangerous line. Her powerful attraction to Jared would be her downfall.

Her eyes popped open. Kat glanced at her watch. Two p.m. In another few minutes, Miss Emma Ritter's personal shopper was due at KISS. Emma Ritter bought Kat's exquisite designs for her many nieces. Usually that 'something' turned into several purchases. Emma didn't bat an eyelash at the bill, usually four figures.

The bell above the door to KISS jangled in warning. Kat smoothed a hand over her hair as she hurried down the corridor, past her office, her reaction to Jared's kiss weighing heavily on her mind. A primitive urge to kiss him back had overtaken her body ... and her good sense.

As she approached the front of the store, Kat spotted Patrice Larkin, Emma's personal shopper, gazing at a black silk and mousse line baby doll chemise and matching thong. Embroidered with Chantilly lace, the baby-doll style chemise hung to mid-thigh. The matching thong had the same delicate lace edging all around.

Patrice looked over and smiled. "This is beautiful."

Kat walked over to her. "Hello, Patrice. Thank you."

"I'm thinking Miss Ritter's niece will like this. It's exquisite." Patrice ran her hand over the chemise again then turned her attention to the retro-style panty Kat had shown Lilith just a few days ago. "And these are wonderful!" She held one up to the light. "Just look at that detailing. Very unique. I think I'll take a dozen of these, as well. Do they come in any other colors?"

"Yes, of course." Kat did a mental calculation. The chemise and thong cost eight hundred and twenty-five dollars. Twelve of those panties would be seventeen hundred dollars. Miss Emma Ritter had to be buying for her favorite niece, Arnya. She always spent a little more on Arnya.

"What's the occasion?" Kat inquired as she rounded the counter and pulled several panties in colors of cream, pink and black from the display case.

Patrice lifted one dark, thin brow. "Arnya's getting married. It's for her bridal shower."

"How wonderful," Kat replied. "Miss Ritter must be thrilled."

Patrice shook her head full of short, cropped hair. The jet-black strands stood out at odd angles. On anyone else it would have looked horrific, but on Patrice, with her perfect oval face and high cheekbones, it looked stylish and fashionable. "Just between you and me," she leaned in and lowered her voice. "Emma's not too thrilled."

"Really," Kat folded the panties and placed them in a box lined with KISS-imprinted tissue. "Why not?"

"Arnya's marrying the heir to the Plasticmate fortune."

Kat's ears perked up at the mention of Plasticmate. She schooled her features. "Why isn't Emma pleased with that?"

Patrice shrugged a thin shoulder, her long, silver earrings bobbed in unison. "She feels that Graham Waters, Plasticmate's sole heir, isn't good enough for Arnya."

Kat tied some ribbon around the box. Excitement coursed through her. Maybe she could use this information. "They are uh, wealthy aren't they?"

Patrice smiled thinly. "Not as wealthy as they once were. Jerome Waters, Graham's father, is Plasticmate's CEO. He lost a bundle when some discount store chain who carried his products decided to discontinue them."

Kat made quick, mental notes of everything Patrice said.

"There were rumors of ... blackmail ... and other unsavory things happening between Plasticmate and," Patrice chewed her lower lip. "You know, I can't seem to remember the name of that discount store."

Kat looked up. "MegaMart," she replied, her tone curt.

"Yes. That's it. Jerome really has this thing against that discount store chain. He says they tried to blackmail him because they wanted a bigger piece of his profits. In the end, MegaMart refused to carry his products anymore. He's supposedly very bitter."

I would be, too, Kat thought.

Blackmail.

The ugly word swirled through her mind. Had Jared tried to pressure Waters with blackmail? When Waters approached Jared with the price increase, had Jared tried to make Waters

give him a bigger cut? She shuddered at the thought, and vowed to be more careful around Jared Martin.

Kat grabbed the baby-doll chemise and thong off a pink-padded hangar. "This is a small, I'm sure it will fit Arnya."

"Oh my, yes. That'll do fine," Patrice told her. "And we may as well look at some bridal lingerie. Emma wants Arnya to have the traditional white bridal set."

"Of course," Kat replied. "Come this way."

They walked to the bridal section of KISS. Patrice's dark-blue eyes lit upon an ankle-length, white satin gown, the bodice trimmed in delicate, shirred tulle. "Oh my, Kat ... Arnya would look stunning in that."

"It ties in the back," Kat told her. "And the shirring of tulle goes all the way around, too."

Patrice rubbed the satin material between her fingers. "My, it shimmers," she said, with just a touch of awe in her voice.

"I'll wrap this, too, then." She brought the gown to the counter and reached for a long box. As she folded it and placed it gently on the tissue, she asked Patrice, "So, why is Miss Ritter going along with Arnya's choice of husband?"

Patrice sighed. "You know Emma Ritter. She's a crafty one. If she tries to throw up roadblocks in Arnya's way, she says Arnya will find a way around them." Patrice chuckled. "Emma says she'd rather have Graham Waters where she can keep her eye on him. She doesn't want Arnya embarrassing the family and doing something rash like eloping."

Emma Ritter was always a bit of a snob, Kat thought. An heir to a plastic fortune just wasn't good enough for the Old Money, Gold-Coast Ritters.

"Here you go," she handed Patrice a large, pink shopping bag bearing KISS' trademark logo. Three boxes peeked over the top.

"Thanks for everything, Kat. I always know I'll find something for Miss Ritter's nieces at KISS."

"Anytime," Kat replied. She walked Patrice to the door.

They passed a display. Patrice's eyes lit upon a deep, chocolate-colored 'Marilyn-style' chemise.

It would look stunning on her, Kat thought, as she gazed at the stretch-satin and mesh, ankle-length gown. Small diamante crystals studded the bodice, below the mesh.

Patrice turned and shook Kat's hand. "Send Miss Ritter the bill promptly. You know how she is about paying you—she never wants you to wait."

"I'll send it out in the next few days."

"So long, Kat."

Kat laid a hand on her arm. "Will you wait just a minute, Patrice?"

"Sure."

Kat walked over and grabbed the 'Marilyn-style' chemise from the hangar. She quickly boxed and wrapped the gown, then grabbed a matching push-up bra, thong and panty. She wrapped those as well and placed all the boxes in a KISS shopping bag. Kat handed them to Patrice.

"What's all this?" Patrice asked her.

Kat smiled thinly. "It's for you."

Patrice's dark blue eyes widened. "For me? But..."

Kat held up a hand. "You bring me a great deal of business."

Patrice narrowed her eyes. "Really."

"Yes, and well, I have a favor to ask."

"I figured." She sighed. "All right. What's the favor?"

"I need you to keep me posted about Arnya and Graham Waters."

Patrice angled her head. "Why?"

Kat folded her arms and leaned against a counter. "Let's just say, I have a keen interest in the Plasticmate-MegaMart war, and Arnya and Graham."

Patrice shrugged. "Is that all? Well, I wouldn't exactly call it a war but, okay. I'll let you know how things go."

Kat walked over to her. "I'd like to know, well, more of Jerome Waters' side of the story with MegaMart."

"Sure, I'll try to find out."

"I'd appreciate it, and, let's just keep this between you and me, all right?"

Patrice slanted Kat a look. "That's fine by me." She checked her watch and grabbed her bags. "Mercy, I've still got some more shopping to do." She grinned. "It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it. So long Kat. I'll talk to you soon ... and thanks."

"Bye!" Kat waved from the doorway as she watched Patrice's tall, lithe frame disappear down the street. She closed the front door to KISS.

Kat spotted the box Jared had forgotten sitting on the far counter. He was so sure of himself. He thought he had KISS in the palm of his hand...

And Summerville.

KISS  
by Catherine Chernow

Kat spent another few hours at KISS. Some tourists came in and browsed. Kat grew antsy, couldn't wait for them to leave. She felt unsettled inside ... jittery. She blamed Jared, and that kiss they shared earlier. He awakened dormant feelings of desire Kat thought had disappeared long ago, along with her ex-husband.

She closed up KISS at exactly six p.m. As she walked down Summerville's main drag, she passed Noone's Nest. Inside, one of the large, yellow parrots sang a rendition of *Hello Dolly*.

If Nancy sold out to Jared, where would he put her prized, rare birds—next to the garden tools in his stupid MegaMart? She beetled her brows. No, he'd probably stick them next to her exquisite lingerie. She wondered how Nancy's colorful parrots would look displayed on a rack. Knowing Jared Martin, they'd be the 'blue-light' special of the week.

"Hey there, Kat," Fred called out to her.

Kat stopped in front of Meyer's Sweet Shoppe. "Hi Fred."

He bent his tall frame and locked the front door then turned to face her. "Saw Jared Martin today."

Kat stiffened. "Really?"

Fred ambled toward her. "He's a nice guy."

"He's a shark. Don't let him fool you."

Fred smiled. "Well, be that as it may, he's coming to the next civic association meeting."

Kat's eyes widened. "Why?"

"It's better that everyone hears him out in a public forum, don't you think?" Fred's usual, happy, face hardened into grim lines. "You and I have done all right over the years. I

mean, we had our rough spots, but some of these stores, Kat, well, you know how it is. Some people got hit pretty badly with lots of stuff. Look at Nancy, what with her husband dying in 9/11 and well, Doris and Fred have had it rough at Country Crafts with her medical bills and—"

She held up a hand. "Fred, you don't have to remind me," she snapped. His face fell. "I'm sorry," she softened her tone. She laid a hand on his forearm. "It's just that, there's got to be a better way than bringing Jared Martin and his MegaMart into Summerville."

"I say we hear him out, that's all. Give the community the chance to decide."

She looked down at the box in her hand. Tonight, she'd stop by the Pink Lily Inn and give Jared what he bought for his 'sister' and then...

Kat swallowed, her throat convulsed.

She'd take him to dinner and find out something about him that she could use to ruin him. The time for procrastinating was over.

"Will you come to the meeting?"

Fred's voice cut through her thoughts. Kat looked up at him. She squared her chin, determination stamping her features. "You bet I will. Everyone's going to hear what I have to say in a public forum, too."

Kat stalked off toward her car, the pink box clutched tightly to her chest. As she got in and started the engine, she gazed in her rear view mirror at her swollen lips.

Damn Jared Martin, anyway.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

She had no idea how she would get through dinner with him that night—if he agreed to go. Well, she'd do her best to see to it that he did ... no matter what it took.

Kat pulled her car away from the curb and drove down Main Street. Stopping at a red light, she thought of how she'd maneuver him into dinner...

The kiss they shared popped into her mind. Twice she kissed him, and twice she felt the force of his desire. Jared Martin definitely desired *her*. If she could play on that, use it—make him want her as much as she wanted him...

She lifted one hand to her burning right cheek. Glancing in the rear view mirror, she noticed her face had turned scarlet. Her breathing quickened, her mind raced with all sorts of images of her and Jared, entwined, making love.

The blare of a car's horn shook her from her reverie.

The light turned green. Kat shook her head and gunned the engine. Her car shot forward.

Seduction.

Could she do it, she wondered? Could she manipulate Jared Martin, get close enough to him that he would come to trust her?

She had to. Before that next civic association meeting.

Kat had to find out more about Plasticmate and Jared's role in their downfall. If she didn't, he'd steal her beloved Summerville. Her haven. She'd do anything she could if Nancy and the other store owners didn't have to sell out to him.

Even if it meant kissing him again. She'd kiss him a hundred times, if it meant saving her beloved hometown.

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by Catherine Chernow

Those were her last thoughts as she pulled her car in front of The Pink Lily that evening. As she walked up the flower-lined walkway of the charming, Victorian home, her legs trembled. She hated deception. Seducing Jared was nothing more than a deception on her part, but wasn't he doing that to Summerville? Seducing everyone—making them think that his MegaMart would stimulate economic growth and create more jobs? She imagined Doris and Harvey working in MegaMart, wearing those silly blue aprons and smocks Jared had his employees wear.

Ridiculous.

He'd probably insist that *she* design them!

Kat opened the front door and walked into the lobby of the Pink Lily. Betty Horan spotted her immediately. Her plump, round face lit with a smile.

"Why Kat, how nice to see you."

Kat had to fight the urge to turn around and flee.

\* \* \* \*

Jared paced the confines of his room on the second floor of the Pink Lily. His feet sunk into the plush pile carpet as he walked and pondered why he acted so rash around Kat earlier. Raking the fingers of one hand through his dark hair, he realized he lost all his good sense when he kissed Kat Sullivan. Twice. Okay, so the first time, she kissed *him*. He wouldn't accept the blame for that heat-of-the-moment kiss, but the second time...

He wanted to brand her with his lips, to seal the memory of that kiss on her brain ... and his. He wanted to kiss her

until they both fainted from the exquisite torture. His blood beat in his veins, in perfect rhythm with his heightened breathing. Just the thought of kissing Kat again made him hot, aching and hard.

He paced some more and stopped by the window. Looking out over the lush grounds, he marveled at the vast amount of pink trumpet lilies lining the walkways. Jared opened the window and inhaled. He shut his eyes and breathed deep of the lilies' heavy, sweet odor.

He thought of his father. Sam Martin would be appalled if he ever found out Jared's latest plan—to seduce Kat Sullivan. When they kissed, her wide, generous mouth parted sweetly, softly—she had let him in. Now, he intended to stay. His father wouldn't approve. Sam would lecture him about morals and good business sense and the bottom line and...

Jared sighed. Sam would do no such thing. Not now, not ever. He had lost all interest in MegaMart months ago. Jared inhaled again, hoping the sweet odor would wash away the resentment he felt each time he thought of his father's circumstances. He had forced Jared to surrender his dream of teaching. Now, Jared had the pressure of staying on top. Companies like Big D for Discount and Bargain Bonanza gave MegaMart some healthy competition, forcing MegaMart to build twenty stores a year. Now, Jared had to concentrate on *this* store here in Summerville. But, this one would be different. Unique. *His* vision of what MegaMart should be. If he had to give up his dream of teaching, if he had to give up his vision of what his life should be, he'd at least make MegaMart into what he wanted *it* to be.

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*by Catherine Chernow*

He opened his eyes again and gazed out.

A car pulled up near the main walkway. Jared blinked to clear his vision when he saw Kat get out. She strode up the lily-lined path to the main entrance. In her hand was a pink box bearing KISS' trademark logo.

He had been so caught up in that kiss he shared with Kat earlier, that he had forgotten the box ... again. He grinned, slow and cat-like, as he watched Kat shift the box and press it against her magnificent chest...

...And nearly tripped in his rush to get to the phone when he heard it ring.

\* \* \* \*

Betty Horan rounded the counter behind the front desk and approached Kat. "Oh my, Kat, this is a wonderful surprise."

"Actually, I'm here to see one of your guests." Kat prayed her voice sounded professional—and steady!

Betty angled her head. "Really? Who?"

Kat cleared her throat. "Mr. Martin. He left a package in my store earlier. I'm just here to deliver it."

Betty grinned. "Why, that's no problem. Let me buzz his room."

Kat's hands grew icy. She blamed it on the cool, air-conditioned air blowing across her bare arms. It snaked across her shoulders, down her upper arms and elbows then traveled to her fingers. She watched as Betty reached for the phone. Maybe Jared wasn't there. Her heart raced when she

heard Betty speak, grinning the entire time during her one-sided conversation.

"He'll be right down, Kat."

Great. Wonderful. Okay, so she'd hand him the box then leave. *No!* She couldn't run away like a coward. She *had* to stay. They'd have dinner together and then...

She swallowed—hard. The thought of what they would do *after* dinner sent hot and cold shivers down her spine.

"Well, hello."

Kat looked toward the wide staircase when she heard Jared's deep voice. He descended—his step lithe and quick.

"Hello," she squeaked in response. Damn, but that couldn't be her voice that sounded like a mouse! The closer Jared came to the bottom step, and her, the more she realized he resembled a sleek, black, panther intent on its prey.

At the bottom of the steps, he stopped. Kat's heart skipped several beats during the few seconds his dark eyes scanned her slender form. As he walked, she noticed his dark silk trousers outlined lean trim hips. The casual white shirt he wore outside the waistband of the trousers looked crisp, yet ... relaxed.

Far different from what she felt at the moment.

He stopped in front of her. She inhaled the spicy, citrusy scent of his cologne. Her head swam as Jared filled the small space between them.

He shook his dark head. "I'm getting very forgetful lately," he murmured. Jared plucked the box from her hands. "Thank you, Kat. I appreciate your bringing this over." His dark, gold-flecked eyes roamed her face and settled on her mouth.

Kat's lips grew dry. "Of course," she swallowed, her throat closing. She felt like shattering into a million pieces from his hot look.

Jared didn't take his eyes from her face. "Mrs. Horan, would you get us a bottle of that chilled Cabernet Sauvignon you told me about earlier?"

Betty Horan grinned from ear-to-ear. "Right away—Jared." Kat shot him a look.

He shrugged. "See? Everyone else has no problem calling me 'Jared.'"

Kat wanted to huff in response. She pasted a smile on her face.

"We'll be in the solarium, Betty," Jared called out.

He grasped Kat's elbow and steered her in the direction of the solarium. Kat felt as though she was being herded. He led, she simply followed, or rather, had no choice but to go in the direction he went. For the second time in a matter of minutes, Kat's mouth felt as dry as the desert. Would he take charge in the bedroom, too, she wondered? If her plan to seduce him met with success, would he be this ... commanding and compelling ... in bed, too?

Her face grew hot when she realized the direction of her thoughts. If she didn't gain a foothold soon, she'd lose this battle.

She removed her elbow from his fingers and sailed ahead of him into the solarium. Late afternoon sun streamed in through the windows. Wheat-colored whicker furniture mixed with cream-colored, antique wood furniture decorated the

Pink Lily's main solarium. Kat took a seat on a chintz-lined sofa, resisting the urge to scoot into the corner.

Betty Horan followed Jared in, with a bottle of wine and two hand-painted wine glasses on a silver tray. She set it on the small table in front of the sofa.

"Such a pretty room, isn't it?" she winked at Kat.

Kat wished the sofa would simply fold up and swallow her.

"Yes, it is," Jared replied easily. "I'm enjoying ... the view."

Although he faced the wide windows looking out onto the flower-lined grounds and ponds, his eyes strayed to Kat.

Kat's body flushed in response. She felt hot everywhere, and had a feeling it had nothing to do with the sun streaming in through the windows.

Betty grabbed the bottle of wine and placed the corkscrew over the top.

Jared removed it from her hands. "I'll do that. Meanwhile, could you bring us an assortment of cheese and fruit, please?"

"Of course. I'll be right back."

Jared waited until Betty left. "I think we should talk, don't you?" He uncorked the wine, set the bottle on the tray to let it breathe. He eased his tall frame into the seat next to Kat. "You and I need to come to an understanding," his voice grew soft.

Kat angled her chin, hoping to dispel the jitters in her belly. "Yes, we do."

Jared didn't speak for some time, gazing down at the bottle of wine. Finally, he lifted his dark eyes to hers. "I'm not going to apologize."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

He shook his head. "What I meant was I can't say I'm sorry I kissed you."

"I see," she murmured. Jared shifted his weight, the sofa dipped in response.

"I'd like to again. In fact, I'd like to right now."

Kat caught a glimpse of the bulge between his legs. Her body leapt to attention, a pounding ache pulsed between her legs. If he kissed her now, she'd crumble.

"But..." His expression grew rueful. "Unfortunately, we need to iron out some things about MegaMart and KISS."

Kat narrowed her eyes. "Like what?"

He slid his arm across the back of the sofa, behind her head. "Let's just say, I'd like to call a truce."

Kat leaned back and crossed her arms. "After your earlier statement, how can I trust you?"

He picked at a thread in the cushion. His eyes met hers squarely. "I had no business saying what I did about KISS—about owning your store."

Betty came in with another tray full of cheese, fresh fruit and cookies.

"Thank you," Jared tore his eyes from Kat's face for just a second. "That's a very nice tray, Betty."

Kat turned her head and rolled her eyes when Betty practically simpered.

"I'll just leave you two lovebirds alone."

Kat's mouth hung open as she watched Betty exit the solarium.

"That's a good way to catch flies," Jared tapped her chin lightly.

She snapped it shut. "You're enjoying this, aren't you? To you, this is all a game, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not a game. It's business, serious business for MegaMart as well as Summerville."

"What do you know or care about Summerville?" she asked, her voice laced with contempt. Damn, she had to remember her goal ... seduction. Snapping at Jared certainly wouldn't get her anywhere.

"I know I like this town. I like the people. I like ... you."

Her face turned pink. Kat leaned over and grabbed the wine bottle just as Jared did.

"I'll pour," he told her. His fingers brushed hers. Kat's lingered for a few seconds, then she let go of the bottle, her fingers tingling from his touch.

He poured two glasses and offered her one. She took a healthy swallow. Her head spun for just a second.

Jared blew out a breath. "When I first heard about Summerville and KISS, I thought this was a little hick town."

Kat stiffened. "Really."

"Yeah. Well, I've seen more in the few days I've been here. This town is a way of life; it's a comfort zone."

Kat took another healthy sip of wine. She certainly couldn't argue with his perception of Summerville. How was it that he always knew her exact thoughts, her exact feelings?

Jared took a piece of cheese off the tray and popped it into his mouth. Kat watched him chew, then swallow, the corded muscles of his throat moving up and down as he devoured

the food with slow, sensual appreciation. She placed her glass on the table. The fruity mellow wine was giving her the strangest thoughts and feelings about him.

"I have an entirely different idea in mind for this particular MegaMart I want to build."

She shot him a look. "And what would that be? Instead of 'blue-light' specials you'll have 'green-light specials?'" Kat wanted to bite her tongue.

He chuckled. "No, nothing like that at all."

Jared looked down at his glass, swirling the wine inside with a flick of his wrist. When he looked up again, his eyes settled on her mouth. Kat sucked in a breath as he studied her lips, as though he was trying to memorize every detail of them.

Without another word, he leaned over and kissed her. He brushed his lips across Kat's then wrapped his forearm around her waist, pulling her flush against his chest. The instant Kat's body met his, hers softened and molded to the lean contours of Jared's chest and abdomen. As he deepened the kiss, she dug her fingers into his shoulders. When the tip of his tongue flicked hers, Kat moaned in response.

Her head swam—she couldn't be sure in that moment if it were the wine or Jared's kiss.

As she gave herself up to the magic of Jared's mouth, she was no longer sure if Jared was seducing her or she him...

She realized she didn't care.

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## Chapter Five

Heat seared every inch of Jared's body as Kat thrust and parried her tongue with his. He felt the warmth of the afternoon sun on his back as it streamed in through the solarium windows of the Pink Lily, but he knew his body was reacting to Kat, not the sun's sultry rays. He slid one hand down her back, trailing his fingers over the delicate bones in her spine, until he reached the soft swell of her bottom. Jared's entire body stiffened in response to Kat as he pulled her against his groin.

Kat's fingers crept up his shoulders. She cupped his face between her hands and nibbled at his lips. Her teeth raked his lower lip then the pink tip of her tongue darted into the corner, teasing the side of his mouth with each little flick. Jared's body leaped to attention. Warning bells went off in his head. If she didn't stop, he'd take her right there on the couch...

"Kat," he whispered, tearing his mouth from hers. "Kat..." He couldn't seem to form an entire, cohesive sentence.

Her breathing came in short, shallow pants. Finally, she looked up at him. "Let's go to dinner," she said, her voice pitched low. "I know this little out-of-the way place."

Jared rested his forehead against hers. "All right," he managed. He didn't want dinner—he wanted her. No, he couldn't, *wouldn't* rush this. Dinner would help slow them down. When he finally got her into bed, she'd be in a frenzy for him...

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*by Catherine Chernow*

If he wasn't first!

Kat rose to her feet and ran a hand through her fiery-red hair. Jared stood, too, his grin rueful. "I think we got a little carried away," he murmured, gazing at her wayward locks. His heart still raced like a runaway train.

Kat smiled back. "I was thinking the same thing."

He reached out and touched the lace on her camisole then dropped his hand. Jared liked seeing her creamy skin flushed with passion. Beneath the silk of her camisole, he could see the outline of her peaked, hard nipples. His own body hardened again in response.

"I'll pick you up in an hour," he said, his voice husky.

Kat ran her index finger over his jaw. "All right," she whispered. "I'll be waiting for you ... at KISS..."

He angled his head, waiting for her to finish. Then she said, "I promise you won't regret it."

A hot shudder ran down the length of his body. He stood there and watched her disappear down the hall, heard the click of her heels against the wood floors, heard her say goodbye to Betty. Kat's promise rang in his head.

*I promise you won't regret it...*

What was she up to? Only one word came to mind ... seduction. Jared's smile widened then he started to laugh. So that fiery-haired minx thought she could seduce *him*? She had met her match, he decided. Jared would enjoy tussling with her—mentally as well as ... physically.

He left the solarium and bounded up the stairs, taking two steps at a time. When he got to his room, he kicked off his

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*by Catherine Chernow*

shoes and socks then stripped off his shirt, pants and boxers and got into the shower.

As he soaped his body, he thought of Kat ... dressed in that peek-a-boo gown he had seen. His shaft rose in response. He shut his eyes, let the water sluice down his chest and legs, and imagined her dressed in that red satin bustier he had seen at KISS, too. Jared tilted his head back and let the shower spray cover his face. In his mind's eye, he saw Kat again as she slipped into that coral-colored corset and garter belt. He imagined tying the ribbons in the back, her waist cinching in response, her magnificent breasts rising together until they almost spilled out of the lace-trimmed top of the corset.

Jared braced his palms against the shower wall to steady his shaking body as the force of his desire hit him swift and hard.

Kat might have met her match ... but so had he.

\* \* \* \*

Kat pulled into the back of KISS. She shut off the engine and got out of the car.

"Hey Ms. Sullivan..."

She swiveled her head in the direction of the man's voice.

Kat smiled. "Hi Bill. Where's April?"

Just then, a woman got out of a sleek, white sports car, her shiny blonde hair gleamed in the sunlight. She wore a bright red bra-dress. Beads and gold embroidery embellished the daring halter-top. It tied at the neck, outlining April

Chapman's curvy frame. Her high stiletto heel sandals covered long, slender feet.

Bill glanced at Kat. "We just stopped by to say ... thanks."

"Oh, Bill ... April," Kat looked over at the young woman.

"Please, you don't have to say anything—"

He shook his head. "But we do. You ... well," he lowered his voice. "I came to give you this." Bill reached for Kat's hand and placed a wad of money in her palm.

She looked down at it, her eyes wide. "No! Bill, I can't accept this." She tried to give it back to him, but he wouldn't take it.

"Please. If you don't want it, maybe ... maybe you can use it to help someone else, like the way you helped my April."

Kat swallowed, felt her throat constrict. "All right. That's the only way I *will*."

"Okay, then." He glanced at April. Dark shadows appeared under her green eyes. She gave him a tentative smile. "She still gets tired," he said for Kat's ears only.

"She will, for a while yet."

"But she's stronger ... up here." He tapped the side of his head with his index finger. "And that's all that counts right now. She even told me that she wants to go back to work."

"Oh my, that's wonderful, Bill."

"Yeah. You did a lot for her and well, me."

Kat folded the money and placed it in her handbag. "I'll be seeing you then."

He nodded. Kat noticed a small tear in his eye.

"Go on then, she's waiting for you."

"Right."

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*by Catherine Chernow*

Bill Chapman got in the car and drove off, leaving Kat standing there, a mass of raw emotion churning inside her.

\* \* \* \*

Click ... Click ... Click...

A man sat in a black Ford Taurus in the parking lot behind KISS and snapped pictures with a digital camera. He whistled when he saw the blonde get out of the white BMW. Man, she was something else! Click ... click...

He sat up a little straighter when he saw a man get out of the car and hand Kat Sullivan a wad of money. He whistled through his teeth as he clicked away.

"George O'Reilly is gonna love this," he muttered.

He took a few more pictures—one of Kat placing the large wad of cash in her handbag. The last one he took was of her going into the back entrance of KISS.

"She's got some racket going on here," he said aloud.

He reviewed the pictures he had taken. First, there was that man and woman he had seen earlier. The girl had a fanny he'd love to get his hands on ... and now the blonde.

He couldn't wait for George O'Reilly to see these photographs. George told him there'd be a nice, fat bonus. Jared Martin and MegaMart could well afford to pay what they promised. After all, that's who George O'Reilly received orders from—the big guns himself—the president and CEO of MegaMart—Jared Martin.

The man tucked the camera into his pocket and drove out of the back of the parking lot, pleased with his day's work...

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Knowing George O'Reilly, Jared Martin's personal assistant, had ten thousand dollars waiting for him.

\* \* \* \*

Kat hurried down the hallway toward her office. She deposited her bag and keys on the desk, clutching the wad of cash from Bill Chapman. Opening the small safe near her desk, she placed the money inside and locked it. Bill shouldn't have given her the money, that's not why she had helped April. Wheels turned in her head. All that money *could* certainly help someone else, and Kat would make sure it did. After locking the safe, she strode into her workroom down the hall. She opened the door and walked over to the closet on the far side, taking a deep coral-colored dress with a matching jacket off its hangar. The sexy, body-hugging style of the dress with its ruched center would highlight her curves. The dress swirled down, stopping just above her knees. She thought for a few seconds, a slow smile lighting her face. The coral-colored corset, garter belt and matching thong. They would look stunning with that dress and show off her figure!

Kat glanced at the shoe collection in the corner of the workroom. There she spotted the perfect pair of pumps—'corset side' stiletto heels. The sexy pumps had a swatch of leather on the side of each shoe, with satin ties that reached around the ankle. Kat picked up the shoes and outfit. She strode to the dressing room where she deposited them, then walked out to the front of KISS and retrieved the corset, garter belt, a thong, and a pair of pure silk stockings. Shivers ran up her spine—a combination of excitement and ... fear.

Running her hands over the stays in the corset, she imagined Jared doing the same thing...

To her.

She shut her eyes for a moment and imagined his long fingers gliding over the stays. When they made love, he'd unlace the back of the corset slowly, driving her wild with anticipation of what he'd do next. She imagined him slipping the corset from her torso, his hands sliding around her back. He'd reach up and cup her breasts. Kat trembled in response to the thoughts swirling through her mind.

She hurried to the dressing room, stripped out of her clothes, and gazed at her body in the mirror. It had been two long years since she'd thought of actually being with another man. Now, she was actually thinking of seducing one.

"For Summerville," she said aloud, her voice echoing through the dressing room.

Kat slipped into the thong-style panty then grabbed the garter belt, shimmying it up her legs and hips. Next, she took the stockings from their package and placed the toe over her hand to examine them for any flaws. Nothing marred their silky perfection. She sat down on the bench against the far wall and pulled each stocking over her toes and feet, up her calves, then attached them to the garters dangling at the end of the satin and lace belt. She stepped into the 'corset shoes,' then bent down to draw the laces through the swatch of material around her ankles.

Rising to her feet, she assessed her appearance in the mirror once more.

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*by Catherine Chernow*

She sucked in a breath as she gazed at her body. Kat ran a finger along the edge of the garter belt outlining her trim waist and hips. The silvery shoes complemented the coral-colored garter belt and thong—making her feet appear delicate, feminine...

Sexy.

Damn! Could she do this? The first seeds of doubt began to take root but Kat pushed them down. She had started this ... she'd have to see it through.

Jared Martin didn't stand a chance in hell of resisting.

Kat walked over to the other side of the dressing room and grabbed the corset. She unlaced the back and drew it around her breasts and torso, then stopped. How would she lace it? Kat glanced at her watch. Six-thirty p.m. Jared would be here in a half an hour...

Holding the corset to her body with her right forearm, she used her left hand and fumbled with the ties in the back. She managed to draw the laces through two hooks to secure it and keep the corset from slipping from her body.

She heard the buzzer in the front of KISS sound an alarm.

Oh no! Jared was here already?

Someone pounded on the front door. Kat heard the rattle of the doorknob then they pounded on the door again. She looked around the small dressing room and saw a robe hanging on the back of the door.

Thank God for small favors. She let go of her pent up breath and shoved her arms into the sleeves of the robe. Kat drew the belt across her waist and tied it as she strode from the dressing room to the front of KISS. As she neared the

front door, she could make out a woman's shape through the slats in the blinds covering the glass pane.

"Kat! Are you in there? It's Lilith."

Kat opened the door and dragged Lilith inside.

"What on earth—" Lilith's eyes grew wide as they traveled up from the tips of the 'corset shoes' Kat wore, to the stockings on her legs, finally settling on the outline of the corset beneath the robe.

"I need your help." Desperation laced Kat's voice as she shifted the corset to keep it from falling. She grabbed Lilith's hand and pulled her along as she made her way toward the dressing room.

"I came by to see whether you wanted to join Nancy and me for dinner," Lilith replied around a smile, "but I can uh, see that you're otherwise occupied."

"Lilith, this is no time for humor," Kat wailed as she pulled her friend along. At the dressing room door, she pushed it open and shoved Lilith in ahead of her. "You've got to help me lace this thing," Kat begged while she shed her robe and tossed it on the bench.

Lilith's mouth hung open. "Oh Kat," she breathed. "You look ... magnificent." A grin lit her face when she saw Kat's lacy under things. "Very sexy, my friend." She narrowed her eyes. "You have a date?"

Kat gave her a sour look. "Why else would I be dressed this way?"

Lilith whistled low. "My, my, and just who is the lucky guy?"

Kat pushed the corset up and over her breasts. "Please, Lilith, I'll answer all your nosy questions if you'll just help me with this thing."

Lilith folded her arms across her chest. "Uh, uh. Apologize."

"Huh?" Kat gave her an exasperated look. "For what?"

Lilith stuck her nose in the air. "I do not ask nosy questions."

Kat sighed. "Oh, all right, already. Just help me, please, and ... I'm sorry okay? I'm desperate here." Again, she glanced at her watch. Six forty-five.

Lilith moved behind her and brushed Kat's hand away from the back of the corset. She grabbed the satin laces and tugged.

"Hey! Not so tight." Kat squirmed away but Lilith tugged on the laces, pulling her back.

"These have to be tight, silly. Stop fidgeting." Lilith worked quickly, pulling the satin ties through the hooks. "You of all people should know that," she grinned.

Kat gazed at her reflection in the mirror as Lilith laced the corset. Her waist cinched inward, and her breasts grew rounder, fuller, pushing up and over the lace edging at the top.

"Oh my, Lilith..."

Lilith smiled. "You look stunning, Kat."

Kat swallowed hard. "Are you sure?"

Lilith laughed. "Okay, now, out with it ... who's this hot date with? Michael?"

Kat shook her head, no. She couldn't take her eyes off her figure. Her waist looked small, delicate ... curvy. Her breasts rounded over the top of the corset, the cleavage between them appeared long and ... deep.

"Well? I'm waiting," Lilith grinned back at Kat's reflection in the mirror.

"Jared Martin," Kat blurted.

Lilith blinked once. "Mr. Moneybags? The one you swore to run out of Summerville?"

"Don't be a smartass," Kat admonished her friend. "It's not what you think it is—"

Lilith's dark brows shot up. "You're dressed in a corset and garter belt and..." She glanced at the dress hanging up on the far wall. "You're planning, I take it, to wear *that* stunning dress," she pointed her index finger to the coral-colored creation, "not to mention you're going out with a tall, dark, sexy guy."

"I'm saving Summerville," Kat snapped.

"Oh, honey, what you're *saving* is yourself to be Jared Martin's dessert for tonight!" Her violet eyes danced with mirth.

Kat walked over to the other side of the dressing room and snatched the dress off the hangar. "It's a ... sacrifice."

Lilith laughed until tears sprang from her eyes. She wiped them away with the fingers of one hand. "I'll just bet it is!" her voice shook.

Kat glared at her friend ... and wished she could wipe that satisfied smirk off Lilith's face.

The buzzer sounded again. Kat glanced at her watch.

Seven p.m.

"Oh, Lilith, this is a mistake," Kat sighed. "What on earth do I think I'm doing?"

Lilith grabbed her shoulders and turned Kat toward her. "It is *not* a mistake, my friend. It's a start—a brand-new start—for you."

Kat shook her head stubbornly. "I'm doing this for Summerville."

"No," Lilith replied, her voice stern. "You're doing this for *you*. Kat, just go and have a good time. Loosen up. Enjoy yourself. He seems like a really nice guy, I mean, look what he did for Allie."

Kat's mouth thinned. "It was an act, Lilith, and so is this. I'm going to make him want me."

"Oh, he's going to want you all right," Lilith's grin turned sly.

Kat shook her head. "Then, I'm going to turn the tables on him. He's got something to hide. I just know it. He's not what he seems, he's—"

"Very nice. And I think you're making a mistake by thinking otherwise."

Kat sighed. "You're impossible."

The buzzer sounded again. Kat smoothed a hand over her deep-red waves then marched out of the dressing room, Lilith hot on her heels. Jared's tall framed was visible through the slats on the blinds on the front door.

It was now or never. Kat squared her shoulders and opened the door to KISS.

Jared stood there, looking more handsome than ever in a dark, silk suit. His coffee-colored eyes traveled over her and settled on her face.

"You look ... spectacular," he said, his voice soft.

Lilith peeked her head over Kat's shoulder. "Hi there," she waggled her fingers at Jared. Kat dug her elbow into Lilith's side. Lilith moved away from her, undaunted. "It's nice to see you again," she grinned at Jared.

"Hello, Miss Gentry."

"Oh, now ... you know you can call me Lilith."

Jared smiled. "Lilith. How goes it at 'The Yarn Barn?'"

"Just fine. Just fine."

Silence stretched between the three of them.

Lilith glanced from Jared to Kat. He hadn't taken his eyes from Kat's face.

"Well, you two have a good time." Lilith brushed past Kat, who stood like a stone statue. "Loosen up," she whispered as she walked by. "He's not going to eat you ... yet." She grinned charmingly. "Bye!" Lilith called out as she sailed out the door, past Jared, and down the steps.

Kat watched Lilith walk down Summerville's main drag and dearly wished she could follow.

\* \* \* \*

"Have you changed your mind?"

Kat raised her eyes to Jared's. "About what?"

The soft lighting of KISS' interior highlighted Kat's magnificent sea-green eyes. She looked up at him and blinked once. Jared thought she looked pale. The freckles

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*by Catherine Chernow*

across her cheeks and nose stood out. A dewy sheen of moisture lined her forehead.

"About dinner tonight," he replied, his voice soft. "We don't have to go to dinner if you don't want to—"

Her eyes grew wide. "Oh, no! I mean, yes, I do want to go to dinner with you."

He hadn't realized he held his breath in anticipation of what she would say. Relief washed over him. Damn, but he had it bad. And his desire grew with each passing second he stood staring at her. That swirly dress she wore outlined her trim, lithe figure and...

Her breasts looked magnificent. Jared couldn't stop staring! This would never do. If he didn't control himself, tonight would be over before it even started. His eyes traveled down her legs to her feet sheathed in those sexy high-heels she wore. God help him, he had never, ever been attracted to a woman's feet before, but the sight of Kat's long, narrow feet swathed in those shoes with that sexy, corset-like strap around her ankles made him hard as stone.

"Please, come in," she told him. "I'll just go and get my wrap."

Kat ushered him further into KISS. The familiar, cool stillness assailed him as he followed her inside. As Kat turned to shut the door behind them, he caught a whiff of her perfume. The light, floral fragrance washed over him, making him want to reach out and hug her close so he could bury his nose in her hair and each part of her so he could continue smelling her ... tasting her.

God, how he wanted her.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

He glanced around the store, realizing that for once, his eyes had not strayed to the myriad of lingerie and nightwear on display. That's because he could feast his eyes on Kat alone. Standing there, dressed as she was, she epitomized everything KISS stood for—elegance, class, and a hint of mystery as to what lay beneath the surface. Jared ached to find out what lay beneath her sexy get-up and ... her. He'd enjoy stripping away her surface appeal to find out what lay beneath.

How long had it been since he actually enjoyed something, particularly a woman?

Too long.

Kat walked to the back of KISS and came out a few minutes later with a jacket over her shoulders. The lapels didn't quite cover her chest, the ends stopping right under her breasts. The three-quarter sleeves hugged her slender forearms to the elbows. In her right hand, she carried a small, satin handbag.

She walked toward him, her saucy hips swaying with each step.

"I could drive," she told him. "I know the way and—"

Jared reached out and did what he'd been dying to do since he arrived. He grabbed her hand and tugged her to him. Then his mouth claimed hers in a fierce kiss. "Good evening, Ms. Sullivan," he murmured against her mouth.

He felt her smile against his lips.

"Hi," she whispered. She pulled back a little to glance up into his face. "Ready?"

*Oh, was he!*

"Let's go, then."

Jared followed her out of KISS. Kat locked the door, depositing her keys into her bag. She turned to face him. "Hungry?"

He swallowed. Hard. He was hungry all right, but not for dinner.

"Yes," he said, smiling just a little. "Very."

Kat grinned back. "So am I."

When she smiled that sexy little smile, Jared had to do everything in his power not to take her right there on the steps. His hand strayed to her lower back as they walked down the steps, hovering protectively as he helped her into his sleek, black Jaguar. His eyes kept close watch on her long, slender legs and her tight, round backside as she climbed in. Kat shifted and drew the seat belt across her chest.

"I can't seem to lock this," she murmured. She raised her big, sea-green eyes to him.

Jared bent down and pulled the seat belt across her body, the back of his knuckles grazing her chest. He heard Kat's breathy gasp as he drew the seat belt down and into the holder. It locked with a resounding 'click.' Jared shut the door and walked around the front of the car, feeling Kat's eyes on him the entire time.

As he got in and started the engine, he could have sworn that when his knuckles skimmed Kat's chest, he felt something stiff and bony underneath the silky dress she wore. Was it her bra, he wondered? No, this felt different.

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As he eased the Jaguar onto Summerville's main drag, he sincerely hoped he would have the chance to find out what lay beneath Kat's dress.

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## **Chapter Six**

Jared pulled his sleek, black Jaguar onto the open road. Route twenty-five, the local highway, stretched before them as he shifted gears and headed toward Long Island's East End. The sun dipped low on the horizon, a big, orange ball of fire in the early evening sky. He heard the hum of the Jag's motor, felt its power beneath his hands as he gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles turned white. He eased off a bit and tried to relax, but hearing the rustle of Kat's dress each time she shifted in the seat next to him made him hard. His eyes kept straying to Kat's long legs covered in sheer, shimmery stockings. He had a long, long night ahead of him as anticipation built with every passing second. They'd dine ... talk and then...

He shifted in the seat to tamp down his arousal. Jared glanced at Kat from the corner of his eye. Had she seen? Part of him wanted just that, yet, another tiny part of him hoped she didn't. Jared couldn't afford to appear vulnerable in any way. He feared what she might do or say if she ever knew what the power of simply sitting next to her could do to him.

"So," he tried for levity. "Where are we off to tonight?"

Kat's face lit with a grin. "Harry's. It's a little bit out of the way, and it doesn't look like much from the outside, but it's got the best steak you've ever eaten."

"Sounds great."

"It is. Oh my..."

He gave her a sharp glance. "What's wrong?" Jared wanted to lean over and kiss the worry lines that creased her forehead.

"You do like steak, don't you?"

Jared grinned. "Love it."

He saw her body relax, and her face softened as her worry lines receded. His own worry over her obvious concern for his feelings disappeared. Why in hell was he so concerned about what she thought, he wondered. It didn't matter in the least...

Or did it? He wasn't just going to sell her on his new MegaMart idea tonight, but himself, too. He wanted her approval, her ideas, her advice, her...

God, how he wanted ... Kat. Her fragrance filled the car, and his senses. His head reeled from the delicious, sweet odor. As he inhaled, his mind raced to think of something clever to say. Never in all his days had he been at a loss for words around a woman.

"I, uh, take it you like steak, too?" He wondered if he sounded as lame to her as he did to his own ears.

Jerk. Idiot. Fool. He thought of a hundred other ways to describe his adolescent attempt at conversation. Sitting there like that, dressed in that sexy, coral-colored outfit, Kat was every man's fantasy and wet dream rolled into one...

Including his.

Moron.

He focused on the road ahead, thinking of something else to say. Kat viewed the scenery from the passenger-side window then her head swiveled in his direction. She shot him

a wary look, tucking some of her glorious, auburn hair behind one ear. "I usually just get a salad," she blurted.

Jared shot her a look of disbelief. "Then why on earth are we going to a steak place?" He'd be damned if he would sit there and watch her picking through a plate of lettuce while he dined on steak.

When he glanced at her again, she was looking out her window, her shoulders shaking. Had his sharp tone upset her, he wondered? Or was she shaking because of the frigid air blowing on her?

"Kat, what's wrong?" Jared reached for the button that controlled the air conditioning, fearing she caught a chill. He grew alarmed when she didn't answer. "Kat?" His eyes traveled over her, checking for goose bumps or any other telltale sign indicating that she was cold ... or upset. Damn, but he had it bad for her! The idea of her creamy skin chilling set his teeth on edge. "Hey ... what's wrong?" he asked softly. He was tempted to pull the car over and throw his jacket over her. What an ass he had been to speak to her in such a sharp tone of voice.

When she finally turned her head in his direction, he saw her sea-green eyes dance, saw her generous, wide mouth break into a grin. "Oh my, the look on your face," she managed around a laugh. "It's priceless."

"Huh?" he beetled his brows as he slowed the car when they came to a traffic light. Stores lined either side of the small town of St. James, but Jared barely noticed their quaint charm. "What look?" his mouth thinned when he realized that she hadn't been cold or upset at all, but full of laughter. Kat

continued to giggle, small hiccups escaping with each breath she let out.

"I meant the look on your face when I said I usually eat a salad."

The minx. She had been teasing him! Had she picked up on his vulnerability, his acute awareness of her every movement, her every need?

"You looked horrified and ... oh my, worried. How sweet," she drawled.

*Oh yeah, she knew all right!*

"Don't let my obvious concern fool you." He clipped his voice and didn't bother to soften it.

That only made her laugh harder. "Trust me, I wouldn't sit there and order a salad while you devoured a steak. 'Harry's' is known for their steak—they have this great marinade and..."

He kept his eyes on the road ahead. Jared hit the accelerator when the light turned green.

She laid a hand on his arm then quickly pulled back when he flinched. "You thought I was serious, didn't you?"

He felt her hand skim his upper arm. A buzz, like an electric jolt shot down to his hand. Jared shrugged not wanting to give away the fact that he had fallen into her little trap and let her play on his emotions. God help him, but he wasn't about to let on how concerned he became when he saw her shaking.

"I'm sorry," she said huskily.

Jared thought she didn't appear the least bit sorry, despite her tone. Her eyes still shined. Those big, sea-green eyes.

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*by Catherine Chernow*

Were those little flecks of blue in them, he wondered? Or was it a deeper shade of the same green, perhaps it was...

Oh, this was ridiculous! She had him all tied up in knots, and now all he could do was think about the exact shade of her eyes.

He glanced her way as he slowed the Jag behind some traffic, bringing the car to a complete stop. Jared turned to face her, easing one arm across the back of her seat. "Just remember what they say, Kat." He removed his arm and placed both hands on the steering wheel in front, as he accelerated again.

"Oh? About what?"

Jared glanced at her. From the corner of his eye, he could see her silky, elegantly arched brows raise skyward. He heard her sharp intake of breath, saw a slight tremble take hold of her body. Good, he thought smugly. She deserved that little bit of fear, that anticipation of what he might do. He had to keep her unbalanced and wary, make her anticipate his next move...

Later. When he'd get to see what lay beneath that silky, coral-colored creation she wore. He loved the color on her—loved how it picked up the mix of reds and auburn in her hair.

"What?" she asked him again, her voice had a breathy quality to it. Hearing it made Jared hard again.

Damn.

"About paybacks," he replied, his voice deep and languid. "They can be a real..."

"Bitch," she finished for him, never taking her eyes from his face, and then she shuddered, the light of anticipation and sensual promise in her eyes.

Yeah, it was going to be a long night, Jared thought, the instant he saw her eyes light and her body tremble.

He would savor every, single second of it.

\* \* \* \*

Kat's body vibrated with need as Jared helped her from the car. Her teasing, done to enflame *him*, had the same effect on Kat.

His warm palm strayed to the small of her back as they walked toward Harry's. She let go of the air from her lungs when his fingers touched the stays of the corset beneath her dress. Kat wanted to lean back into him and let him glide his hands all over her torso, across the bony inserts of her undergarment. She reveled in his light, yet stimulating touch.

She was certain she'd seen the barely discernible bulge between his legs as he drove to the restaurant. Kat would tease him all night—if that's what it took to make him trust her and tell her things she could use as weapons against him. A stab of guilt knifed through her. She liked the feel of Jared's hand on her back a lot more than she cared to admit. As they walked up the steps, his hand moved to her upper arm. His firm, yet gentle grip bespoke of a protective quality. She enjoyed the sensation of feeling protected and...

Cherished.

Did he actually enjoy being with her or was it just another act on his part to throw her off balance? What would it feel

like to be with him always—to feel that wonderful sensation of being cared for?

*Stupid.* She was foolish to venture down that route. This was her enemy—her opponent in the battle for Summerville. This was a man who almost put an entire company out of business in one fell swoop. He'd do that to Summerville, too. He'd eat it alive, swallow it whole then spit back the pieces he didn't want.

Like Arthur, her ex, had done. He swallowed her up too, all those years ago, when she was just a green girl from a small town attending college in the big city. She'd been sucked in by Arthur's power and charm. She'd be damned if she let Jared Martin do that to her, too.

Kat managed to break away from him and hurried up the steps of the restaurant. In the next instant, Jared's hand rose above her head, his palm against the door as he pushed it open. Kat stepped inside the dim, dark-wood paneled interior of Harry's. She inhaled the odor of grilled meat, heard the clink of glasses and voices of the patrons dining inside.

Kat walked up to an elegantly dressed, distinguished-looking gentleman. He looked up as she approached, a grin splitting his face, his blue eyes twinkling. "Kat! How lovely to see you." He reached for her hand and kissed the back of it, his lips lingering for a few seconds.

Kat could have sworn she heard Jared growl.

"Hello, Harry," she replied. "It's nice to be back."

"Your usual table?" he asked as he glanced over her shoulder at Jared.

"Yes, for me and my guest." Kat stepped aside. "Harry Moutien, this is Jared Martin. He's a ... visitor to Summerville."

"Ah! How wonderful." Harry clapped his hands. "It ees a pleasure to meet you, Monsieur Marteen." He stuck out his hand and shook Jared's enthusiastically.

"Harry," Kat looked down her nose at him and whispered, "You can cut the accent, okay?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Ah, she admonishes me all the time."

"You deserve it," she shot back. "It's enough you make the world's best steak, you don't have to show off how French you are."

Kat noticed Jared's scowl as she chatted with Harry. For a fleeting second, she thought Jared seemed...

Jealous.

*Ridiculous.*

But, if Jared did have an ounce of jealousy in him, she'd use it to her advantage. And, no, she wasn't enjoying the little thrill that shot through her at the very thought of him being jealous of another man in her presence. She didn't care one bit. This was all for Summerville!

Why couldn't it be all for *her*? Why couldn't she enjoy it just for tonight and pretend that Jared Martin had the hots for her and only her? Kat glanced at the other patrons in the dining room. There were some attractive women in there—women who were more in Jared Martin's league. Elegant. Classy. Long Island Blue Bloods. Gold Coast Babes.

They looked like that blonde she had seen him with in that magazine picture.

*Stop it—just get a grip, Kat!*

"I'll give you a private table in the back, yes?"

Kat lifted her chin. "Yes. That would be fine, Harry."

"Follow me."

Harry grabbed two menus and walked through the busy dining room. Kat followed, with Jared behind. Again, he placed his hand on her back. Each time he touched her, her bones melted and her pulse raced. Kat longed to turn around and push Jared back out the door and head for her house—and her bed.

It would be no good if she rushed this. They had a long night ahead—a night in which she could savor the feel of him. Let him strip away the layers she wore and get to the real her—make him want her as much as she wanted him.

The very thought turned her insides to mush. Her heart galloped as they made their way through the crowded dining room to a more secluded part of the restaurant.

Harry would take care of them.

And she would take care of Jared.

\* \* \* \*

Jared sliced a piece of his porterhouse steak. It almost melted in his mouth, the marinade tasted spicy, yet sweet.

Like Kat.

He glanced her way and broke a sweat as he watched her eat. He saw the small, pink tip of her tongue dart out for just a second, watched her eyes close as she savored the taste of

the meat in her mouth. Jared wondered if that's how she made love, too. When he got her into bed that night, would she savor their lovemaking like she did her meal? Would she make a meal of *him*, he wondered?

Kat Sullivan had him thinking the craziest things.

He'd convince her stubborn soul that MegaMart was good for Summerville. That *he* was good for Summerville ... and her. He'd manage her the way he did everyone else, with charm and his own unique ability to make people see reason. His reason. If that didn't work, he'd do what George said and handle Kat the way he handled Plasticmate. He'd fight her with the one thing he knew meant a great deal to her.

KISS.

He'd strip away the layers of that store to find out what really happened behind its closed doors, just like he planned to strip away Kat's layers to find what she hid. He'd have a good time, too. Jared enjoyed her sultry teasing. Remembering his promise to make her pay sent his body into overdrive—he could feel the blood beating in his veins. Heat seared every part of him. Sipping the icy cold water in his glass, Jared watched her spear another piece of meat. She put it to her lips, opened her mouth and popped it inside, then chewed and swallowed. Kat caught him gazing at her and smiled slowly, raising her wineglass to her lips, taking a sip of the deep red liquid.

His hands shook as he reached for his own glass and took a healthy sip. *Slow down, boy, he admonished. Take it easy. Relax.*

The sound of music coming from the corner of the room wafted toward him.

"Harry has dancing here every night," Kat murmured, her large, sea-green eyes met his across the table.

*Dancing? With Kat? Yes, there was a God, after all!*

Jared rose to his feet and came around the table. He extended his hand.

"Dance with me," his voice grew husky with suppressed desire. If she said no, he'd drag her up and into his arms and out onto that dance floor. The need to feel her, to press her body close to his consumed him.

Kat put down her knife and fork ... slowly. She looked up at him, raised her snowy-white linen napkin to her lips and dabbed them with a corner of the cloth.

She rose to her feet and grasped his hand. "I'd love to," she replied, her voice silky.

Jared led her out onto the dance floor. The strains of an old melody caressed his ears and flowed through him as he pulled Kat flush against him. Never had music sounded as sweet as it did in that minute when he held Kat in his arms. Her body molded to his, swaying in rhythm to the music ... and him.

His hands moved to her waist. He swore he could span it with both hands as he slid them under her magnificent breasts. Jared felt the stiff, bony lines of what lay beneath her outfit.

His eyes widened as recognition dawned.

*A corset.* That's why her waist appeared so tiny!

The minx.

KISS  
by Catherine Chernow

A smile spread across his face.

"You're lovely," he blurted. *Fool.* Damn, but he had to be careful, lest she find out just how powerful his attraction to her had become. He shoved that thought aside, succumbing to the feel of her in his arms. "Kat," he whispered close to her ear. His lips skimmed across her forehead and temple. Kat shuddered against him and moved closer into the shelter of his arms.

The music played on. Soon, Jared didn't even hear it.

He heard only the beat of Kat's heart, felt it thud against his chest.

And realized she had snared him once more.

No trap ever felt as sweet!

\* \* \* \*

Kat sucked in a breath as Jared's hands spanned her waist. She noticed the look of surprise on his face.

He knew. Jared knew what lay beneath her dress. In that instant, a feeling of power assailed her, knowing that her plan worked.

His thumbs slid under breasts, down the front of her waist, his fingers gliding along her back on either side of her spine. She could feel his erection through the thin silk of her dress. The sultry tune echoed in the small confines of the room. Kat heard nothing, saw nothing—except for Jared.

His dark eyes smoldered with every move. She succumbed to the feel of being this close to him. When he leaned down, his lips caressed her earlobe, sending a cascade of wanton

desire through her. She moved closer, pressed her body flush against Jared's until their knees bumped.

He smelled like heaven. His warm, musky fragrance caused her head to spin in a zillion different directions all at once. She realized she had let him lead and followed like a panting puppy in hopes of a treat. Resting her head against his chest, she felt the slow beat of his heart, which increased as she snuggled against him.

*Love thine enemy.*

*This* was the way to fell her opponent. Lilith's advice to keep Jared Martin close rang in her ears, only Kat longed to get even closer.

"Let's go," she whispered.

His coffee-colored eyes dilated, the pupils growing large in a matter of seconds.

Jared released her and stepped back. She felt a strange loss when he moved away from her.

"Stay here," he commanded, his voice soft.

Kat couldn't have moved if she tried. She nodded her head and stood rooted to her place on the dance floor.

Jared withdrew a wad of cash from his pocket and threw it on the table. Then he turned to face her.

Kat swallowed. Hard. Her breath came in short, rushed gasps.

Jared grabbed her jacket and bag from the table and walked toward her. He placed the jacket over her shoulders and put the bag in her hands, folding her fingers over the small, satin clutch.

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by Catherine Chernow

Leading her from the restaurant, Kat swore her feet floated over the floor. Heat and a dull ache flowed through her loins as she walked. She heard Jared murmur 'good night' to Harry thankful that at least one of them could still speak.

The warm, night air caressed her face as they walked out of the restaurant to the parking lot. She felt that strange sensation of being led, as if she had no choice but to go in his direction. No, her mind screamed! Be tough. Take the lead. Take charge, take...

Him.

She'd fell him by letting him lead.

Right where *she* wanted to go.

\* \* \* \*

Jared practically shoved Kat in the car then slammed the door closed. He sprinted to the driver's side and got in. As he started the engine, he turned to face her, "Kat—" he started.

She leaned over and grabbed his face in her hands and kissed the breath from his lungs. Jared's head reeled, his mind raced, and at the same time, his desire-ridden body leapt to attention, his erection pressing painfully against his trousers.

He grabbed her around the waist and hauled her into his lap. Kat lay sprawled across him, her head resting against the crook of his arm. Jared kissed her deeply, his tongue battling with hers. He slid his hand over her silk-lined legs, trailing his fingers up the back of her calf, enjoying its tight, muscled feel. His hand skimmed her knee then rode up her thigh. He

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stopped when he felt the garter and gazed down into Kat's passion-filled face.

"It's payback time," he grinned.

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## **Chapter Seven**

Jared's hand continued to taunt and tease Kat. She moaned once as her head lolled back on Jared's forearm. His fingers played with the garter, skimmed the delicate lace on the panty, then worked their way under and grazed the delicate nub hidden in the folds of flesh between her legs. Kat almost sobbed from the exquisite torture as his long fingers stroked and fondled her most secret place.

She shifted her body, pushing her feet against the passenger seat, stretching as though she was a tight wire being pulled in two different directions. Heat flowed through her body though the air conditioner blew cool air full blast against her skin. Each time she moved, her bottom skimmed Jared's thighs, his erection pressing against her backside. Moisture seeped out of the folds of flesh between her legs that Jared caressed with his fingertips. The more he stroked, the wetter she became.

"God almighty, Kat, don't move another muscle."

Jared's strained voice filled the small interior of the Jaguar, just as his fingers ceased their delightful, exquisite torment. She looked down to see him easing her dress back over her legs.

An urge to cry out, 'No!' filled her. Kat mentally cursed. Why had he stopped?

Grasping her around the waist, he lifted her from his lap and eased her into the passenger seat. He shifted his tall

frame beside her, but that didn't diminish the bulge between his legs straining against his trousers.

Yes, she thought smugly, paybacks were indeed a bitch. It pleased her no end to see the pained look on his face.

He gripped the steering wheel, causing the skin on his knuckles to grow taut and white against the bronze color highlighting the backs of both hands. He sat like that for a few seconds, not moving, not saying a word. Finally, he slid his gaze in her direction.

"I won't take you here like this. You deserve more than that." His voice was clipped ... hoarse. "I intend to give you what you want, Kat—what we both want."

Her eyes widened when he grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips, trailing them across the delicate skin lining the back of it.

"...but not here. Not this way," he finished.

She swallowed, her throat muscles convulsed around a tight, painful lump. "Take me home," she finally managed.

His face fell as he released her. Jared blew out a breath, running a hand through his dark hair. He glanced out the driver's side window then turned to face her, his face a mask of hard angles and planes. "All right," he replied, as he blew out a breath. "I'll take you home."

He slid his eyes away from her, put the car in drive and hit the accelerator.

Kat laid a hand on his forearm. His foot slammed on the brake, causing the car to lurch forward. Jared gazed at her sharply and narrowed his eyes. "What?"

She tried to smile, but couldn't get the corners of her mouth to lift. "With me, Jared. I meant ... come home with me."

His entire body relaxed. When he looked at her next, his magnificent eyes glowed with a soft, golden light.

"With pleasure," came his husky response.

Kat cursed the long drive back to her house.

\* \* \* \*

Jared heard the low hum of the Jag's powerful motor, as well as the racing beat of his own heart. He had to battle the urge he felt to push the accelerator to the floor. His brain held a dim memory of leaving Kat on the dance floor and of him emptying his pockets of several hundred dollar bills. Jared swore he could still hear the waiter's shout of 'Sir ... your change!' as he literally shoved Kat out of Harry's.

As he drove toward Summerville, Jared glanced at Kat. She stared out her window at the passing scenery and didn't utter a word.

He didn't blame her in the least. He had responded to her like a hormone-crazed teenager enjoying his first lay in his daddy's car. Jared thought he'd shatter into a million tiny pieces when she said, 'Take me home.' The need to be inside her had overtaken his body ... and his good sense.

He had caught a glimpse of what lay beneath her dress—the fiery coral-colored thong and garter belt she wore fueled his deepest fantasy come to life. He had to be out of his mind to screw this up now. He'd bet his last dollar that she had on that coral-colored corset he had seen on display at KISS.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

No way was he going to rush this!

She was allowing him in, letting him see her sensual side. If she allowed him access to that, he'd find out more—like what was really happening behind KISS' doors. It shocked him that he wanted to know that secret far more than he wanted her approval for his plans for MegaMart and Summerville. What went on behind KISS' closed doors intrigued him, made his desire for Kat increase tenfold. Part of him couldn't resist thinking that something shady was going down, yet another part of him refused to believe it.

He wouldn't believe it.

Not about Kat...

That realization hit him squarely in the chest. By thinking the best of her, he let down his guard. If he let down his guard then he would be allowing *her* in. What would she see? The pain that knifed through him every time he thought about his father? Would she see his shattered dreams and hopes?

Jared reached over and grabbed her hand, bringing it up to his lips. Her startled look as he brushed his mouth across the soft, fragrant skin lining the back of her hand pleased him.

He liked her wary.

Jared slowed the Jag as he came to a red light. He squeezed her hand then started to release his grip.

Kat's fingers curled and tightened around his. Then she brought his hand up to her right breast. He kneaded the firm flesh, and ran his thumb across the peak of her nipple. The protruding bud hardened beneath his touch. Kat placed her hand over his, pushing her breast further into his palm as though she couldn't get enough. His eyes strayed to her deep

cleavage. As if on cue, he leaned across the console and planted a soft kiss in the deep 'V' between her breasts. She inhaled swiftly, causing her magnificent chest to rise and fall.

From the corner of his eye, Jared saw the traffic light turn green. He grudgingly released her as he gunned the engine and drove toward Summerville.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up in front of Kat's house.

\* \* \* \*

"Here are your pictures."

George O'Reilly glanced up just as a tall gray-haired man threw a Manila envelope down on the desk.

"My, my," George intoned. "That was quick, Mr. Galati."

Vincent Galati shrugged powerful shoulders. "You hired me to do a job, and I did it. I know it's late, but I figured you wanted to see these."

George nodded and opened the envelope, extracting several five by seven photographs. George's eyes widened upon seeing a photo of Kat accepting a huge wad of cash from a man. A scantily clad woman stood nearby. "Well, well, what have we here? Ms. Upstart has quite a little side-business going on, doesn't she?"

"Looks that way."

George studied each picture. "I'm sure Jared Martin will be very interested in these."

"Do you have my money?"

George looked up. "Patience is a virtue Mr. Galati."

"Just give me what you promised."

"Here," George opened a desk drawer and handed him a fat, white envelope. "Now, get lost."

Galati opened the envelope and did a quick count.

Ten thousand dollars, just like O'Reilly had promised. He watched as George examined each photograph, thoroughly engrossed.

Every lousy thing Galati ever heard about MegaMart was true. They were sharks out to eat every last little fish in the ocean, and they'd do it by every means available, and George O'Reilly was the biggest, nastiest shark in the sea.

"You must be a bitch to work for," Galati muttered under his breath.

George looked up. "I heard that, Mr. Galati." George leaned back in a large, black leather chair, and eyed him. "A bitch is a female dog, are you aware of that?"

"Yeah. Whatever." Galati turned and reached for the doorknob again, only to hear a whizzing sound then a thud. When he looked up, he noticed the pointed tip of a silver letter opener imbedded in the wood on the door frame. It missed his head ... barely.

"Oh my," George grinned. "I wondered where I put that letter opener. Must have ... slipped from my hands."

Galati ripped open the door and ran, hearing George's laughter ringing in his ears.

\* \* \* \*

Jared eased the Jag into the driveway of Kat's two-story, remodeled sixty's-style home. She dug through her bag until

she found her small ring of keys and hit a button on the remote dangling from the key chain. Her garage door opened.

Jared glanced at her.

"Go on. Pull in," she urged. He did as instructed, parking his car along side of hers in the spacious garage.

She placed her keys back in her bag and had her hand on the car door, intent on getting out, only to have it wrenched open by Jared. He leaned in and pulled her out. The foreplay she and Jared engaged in on the way back from the restaurant had taken its toll. She managed to stand upright on wobbly legs. He must have sensed her weakness. Pushing her up against the car, he wrapped one arm around her waist, holding tight. Then his lips slammed into hers in a fierce, hot kiss. Jared's lean body pinned her to the car, but Kat didn't fear him. Instead, she gloried in the muscled feel of his tall frame, enjoying the sensation of being supported as his lips nibbled and sucked hers.

A few minutes later, Jared broke away from her, panting. "This is crazy," he whispered next to her ear. His warm breath puffed across her sensitive outer lobe, caressing the thin skin there. "We're supposed to hate each other."

She smiled. "I know." Kat tugged on his tie, bringing his mouth back down to hers. After another heated kiss, she released him and led him inside her house.

The home's entranceway held a set of stairs off to the left. "Where's your bedroom?" he asked.

Kat nodded toward the stairs. "Up there."

In the next instant, he scooped her up, ignoring her startled squeak. Wrapping her arms around his corded neck,

she held on for dear life as Jared took the stairs two at a time.

"Where now?" he asked at the top of the stairway. She figured he would release her, but he tightened his hold, as though she might flee any second.

"Go right," she answered, breathless. The ache returned full force and pounded between her thighs. Kat's grip tightened. She twined her hands around the back of his neck and kissed the hard, tight muscle below his ear. She felt a shudder run through him.

He marched down the hall with her cradled in his arms.

"Here..." she told him when he almost passed her bedroom. "My bedroom's right here."

Jared managed to open her bedroom door and sailed through the entrance with her still nestled in his arms, barely clearing the jamb on either side. He kicked the door shut with the heel of his shoe and set Kat down on her feet, letting her slide down the length of his body. Her high-heels sank into the deep pile of the carpet as she turned to face him. Heat and desire swirled together inside her body as her hands lashed out. She started to tear the shirt from his body, but Jared stopped her. Disappointed, she raised her eyes to his face.

Passion filled his eyes. They glowed with warmth in the dim interior of her bedroom. Jared maneuvered her toward the bed and switched on a lamp on a nearby table. Soft light washed over them.

They stood for several minutes, not speaking, just gazing at each other.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

For just a second, Kat thought she had made a fatal error by letting her desire get the best of her. Jared's hair had been mussed by her hands in their flight together up the stairs. His neck bore the marks of her lips and teeth where she had kissed him before. Had she gone too far?

She swallowed nervously as Jared continued to stare at her. Slowly, tentatively, she reached for him. He grabbed her hand and brought it to his erection visible through the dark silk trousers he wore.

"What you do to me, Kat." He leaned his head back and sucked in a breath. "You're aptly named." Jared brought his head forward, his dark, gold-flecked eyes locked with hers.

Her heart skipped several beats when she felt the hard evidence of his desire. She kneaded the bulge between his legs and grinned.

"Kat," he whispered her name and shut his eyes as she continued her sweet assault on his groin. She moved closer, never taking her hand from his erect shaft, but continued to massage it as she stood on tip-toes and reached up to plant a soft, wet kiss on his mouth.

He groaned once, and yanked her into his arms, claiming her mouth in an urgent kiss. She swayed once, her thighs brushing against his arousal.

"God almighty, you're exquisite," he said, his voice strained with desire.

He stopped kissing her. She felt the loss of his lips and struggled in her need to fuse her mouth with his. Her breasts grew heavy as the ache between her thighs intensified. Why wouldn't he let her get close again?

"I want to see you," his voice broke through her thoughts.  
"All of you."

"I know, I want to see you, too." She reached up to unbutton his shirt, but he clamped a hand over hers. Jared held her shoulders, and eased her away from him, his gaze settling on the large oval mirror on the other side of the room. He grabbed her hand and led her over to the other side of the room.

"Don't move," he intoned, placing her directly in front of the mirror.

He walked away to get a chair and dragged it over. She watched, fascinated, as he removed his suit jacket, draping it over the back of the chair. Then he unbuttoned the small buttons on his shirt cuffs and rolled them up, revealing his tanned, muscular forearms. Kat angled her head as she studied his movements.

Jared looked at her sharply. "I told you not to move."

While his tone of voice commanded, his face and body remained relaxed. He was toying with her, playing with her like a large cat played with a mouse.

Two could play at this ... and she was no mouse!

She aimed her chin in his direction, crossing her arms over her breasts. "I'll do as I please." Her stance turned defiant.

He smiled his slow, cat-like grin. "Really?"

She nodded, "Really."

Jared stalked toward her. Instinct made her back up a step.

"Afraid?" he asked her.

"Certainly not." But, a little part of her was just that—afraid. That fear paralleled her fascination and need for him to touch her. All over. Kat began to lose patience. She started to move toward him, but he was quicker. Snagging her upper arm in a powerful, yet gentle grip he drew her to him.

"You're independent—I like that," he said around a grin. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her flush against his body.

"I'm thrilled, to say the least," she shot back. She squirmed against him and felt his erection once more.

"Do you always get your way, Kat?" He ground his hips against her pelvis. Each pass of his groin against hers sent a shock wave of longing through her.

"Always," she retorted, but her body betrayed her real feelings. She trembled, standing on the brink of a sensual abyss that lay open before her.

"Well, I have to tell you, my lovely opponent, I get my way, too."

She smiled. "Then I'd say we're evenly matched."

"The question is, though. Who's going to win *this* round?"

She smiled slowly. "We'll see."

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## **Chapter Eight**

Jared studied Kat's face in the dim glow of the bedroom light. His eyes never left hers as he ran a finger down the deep 'V' between her breasts. "Do you like that?" he whispered.

Her body shuddered against his, causing his shaft to fill and swell. Every nerve ending in his body went on red alert as her tremor zinged through him. He lifted the hem of her dress and slid his fingers across her thigh, fingering the top band around her silk stocking. He then ran that same finger underneath the swatch of silk that hid her secret place and reveled in the feel of the tight, springy curls that shielded her clit. Kat sagged against him.

"Please," she whispered. "Come to bed..."

She urged him forward, but Jared stood firm. "No," he shook his head. "Not yet. Patience, Kat. Patience."

"Screw patience."

He threw back his head and laughed. When he looked at her next, she had a mulish look on her face. She passed the pink tip of her tongue over her lush lower lip and lowered her eyes to the bulge in his trousers.

The minx.

Hooking a finger in her cleavage he drew her forward. The tops of her breasts rose quickly when he skimmed the lace peeking out of the top of her undergarment. Damn, but he had to see if she wore that coral-colored corset! He continued to work his finger over the top of her right breast.

Simultaneously, he lifted the hem of her dress again and slid his hand over the juncture between her thighs. Kat purred in response.

He stepped back quickly. "Let's see whether you're a worthy opponent."

Her eyes snapped open. "What?"

"I said I want to see if you're ... up to snuff."

She gazed at him warily.

"Come on, Kat, put your money where that lovely mouth is. Show me what's inside," he patted her chest, above her heart. He reached out and brushed her shoulder, cupping it in his palm. His fingers trailed a path down her arm, across her wrist then he entwined his fingers with hers. He leaned in and sipped at her lips. They were warm, she tasted sweet ... sultry. Kat swayed on her feet as he kissed her. He caught her to him and slowly eased the jacket from her shoulders, down her arms, removing it completely. Her bare shoulders gleamed in the soft light of her bedroom.

He turned her so she stood in front of the mirror. Jared wanted her to see his every move. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he lifted one hand, and brushed the magnificent auburn hair from her shoulders, trailing his lips over her neck, down her collarbone, ending at her breasts. She shut her eyes and relaxed in his arms.

"No," he told her. "Open your eyes, Kat. Look. See what I'm doing to you."

She gazed back at him in the mirror.

When she swished her bottom across his groin, he thought he'd shatter.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

\* \* \* \*

Kat's anticipation increased as Jared unzipped the back of her dress. She gazed at his reflection in the mirror, watching him as he slid the silky garment down her body. It whispered across her overheated skin. When he pulled it to her hips, she sucked in a breath.

He stood, staring at her.

Several seconds went by. Jared still hadn't said a word, but stood motionless behind her, his dark, golden-flecked eyes riveted to the swell of her breasts as they pushed up from the lacy confines of the corset.

With one swift tug Jared pushed the dress down her legs. She stepped out of it then he reached down and picked it up, handling her dress with infinite care. It reminded her of the first time she ever laid eyes on him. He had touched the fine undergarments and lingerie with reverence that very first time she saw him at KISS.

He moved away from her, arranging the dress across the back of the chair. When he returned, she still hadn't moved. She couldn't. Dressed in nothing but the corset, thong, garter belt and silk stockings, she felt a thrill of decadent desire pass through her and ... power. It had been disconcerting at first to let him remove her outer covering to reveal what lay beneath, and he still hadn't shed a single item of *his* clothing, but Kat quickly realized that the balance of power remained in her court. His eyes were riveted to her near naked form.

Jared moved behind her once more, reaching up and around her to finger the lace lining at the top of the corset.

He smoothed his large hands over the stays lining her rib cage, spanning his open palms across her waist. Kat felt wickedly wanton as his hands worked their magic. Trailing his fingers across the exposed skin of her lower back, he brought them around to feel the smooth expanse of skin on her lower abdomen. She pushed back against his body, grinding her bottom into his groin. He toyed with the lacy band around the top of her thong then lowered his hand when she moved back. Kneading the globe of her right bottom cheek as she continued her assault on his groin, she watched his eyes grow heavy with unbridled passion.

"Kat," he whispered. "Kat..."

Power. Sex was power. The idea that she could manipulate him this way had warning bells go off in her head. Hadn't that happened to her with Arthur? He had been a powerful, wealthy man. He had manipulated *her*. She pushed her ugly thoughts aside. She was doing this for Summerville! A tiny tremor shot through the muscle near her left eye. She could feel the twitch as an old childhood refrain ran through her head.

*Liar ... liar ... pants on fire....*

She moved restlessly in Jared's arms, running the back of her silk-clad calf up his leg. He leaned down to plant small, hot, nipping kisses to her throat and chest, his tongue darting out at the bottom swell of her right breast, just above her nipple. The small, brown bud of her breast was nearly visible through the top of her corset. Her body leapt into overdrive when the tip of his tongue touched her sensitive aureole. The room spun.

"Take it off me," she whispered. The corset suddenly felt too tight, too constricting ... too hot.

"Say, please." Jared grinned over her head.

She met his eyes in the mirror. "Please," she intoned.

"Hurry..." rushed out from her on a sigh.

He chuckled. The sound of his warm laugh zinged straight down to her toes. He was enjoying this, she thought. He loved seeing her in this frenzied state of arousal.

Good. Let him think she was hot for this, let him think...

That if he didn't hurry and get her out of the damn corset, she'd kill him!

\* \* \* \*

Jared's wildest imaginings of Kat had finally come to life. She stood before him dressed in that sexy, sultry coral-colored corset, garter belt and thong he had seen at KISS. Kat leaned back and ground her bottom into his erect shaft. Each pass of her rounded backside across his swollen member made him grit his teeth in frustration. He tried to divert his thoughts so he wouldn't spill himself right there in front of her. There was no sweeter way to fell his lovely opponent than to surrender to her wanton plea to remove the stiff creation that held her magnificent breasts so beautifully, but Jared wanted to savor the view he had of her, both in the mirror and up close.

"Please," she whispered again. "I want ... out of this." She moved in his arms, her body restless and filled with urgency.

He chuckled softly, kissing her temple. "First things first, Kat. I've waited a long time to see you like this."

She rested her head against his chest and inhaled deeply. He felt her breasts push against him as she let out a puff of air. Her moist, warm breath whispered across his shirt.

He released her, albeit reluctantly, and walked over to the chair. Jared eased his tall frame onto the cushion and assumed a relaxed position.

Kat blinked once and shook her head. "Wh-what are you doing?"

He smiled and leaned back, placing his hands behind his head. "Enjoying you, sweetheart."

"Oh." She blinked again, her sea-green eyes settling on his face.

Jared brought his hands down from his head. He made a twirling motion in the air with his index finger. "Turn around."

"Jared, please, I'm..."

"Turn around, Kat, I want to see you. All of you."

"This is silly."

"No it's not, it's ... just do it," he could barely get the words out. She looked like every man's fantasy rolled into one. He had to stop himself from reaching out so he could play with the lacy garters on her legs. Kat's breasts continued to rise and fall, her deep cleavage beckoned for his touch.

"All right," she said around a sigh.

She turned slowly, allowing him to take in every nuance of her appearance. He wanted it burned into his mind so he could view her image over and over again. At night, when he lay in bed at the bed and breakfast, he'd see her in his mind's eye, dressed that way.

It would have to last him a long time.

"Stop," he told her.

She did, and began walking toward him.

"No," he held up a hand. "Not yet, Kat. You'll get what you want soon enough."

Her stormy expression made him laugh. Jared sobered, intent on playing with her some more. Leaning back in the chair he commanded softly, "Touch yourself, right there," he pointed at the juncture between her legs. "And I want you to watch your reflection in the mirror."

"If I do that, will you ... will you promise to get me out of this?" She passed a hand over her tummy.

"I promise."

She seemed hesitant at first, then she turned, facing the mirror, and ran her hand across the silk covering her most secret place. Then she did it again.

Jared shifted in the chair, his shaft growing painfully erect. "Do it again. This time, run your finger underneath the band. I want you to touch yourself where I've touched you."

She did just that, rubbing her clit with her fingers, up and down, sighing as she did. He almost sprang from the chair and grabbed her, but held himself in check. Jared watched, fascinated, as Kat withdrew two fingers from the folds of flesh between her legs. Then she walked over to him and placed one foot on the edge of the chair. With her leg up like that, he could smell her arousal. She licked her lips then blew him a kiss with the same hand she used to caress the nubbin between her legs.

The room suddenly became stifling.

"Are you hot for me?" She crooned, running her index finger over his chin. She winked and walked back over to the mirror. Angling her head in his direction, she said. "I'm waiting for you to make good on your promise."

He rose from the chair. Jared could barely walk, that's how hard his shaft had become. He walked over to the mirror and stood directly behind her, his hands shaking. If he didn't calm down, he'd screw this all up.

"Hurry," she begged.

"No," his tone was sharp.

Her eyes flew to his in the mirror.

He smiled back at her reflection. "We've got all night, Kat. Don't rush this." He made his voice sound silky as he reached for the ties again, willing his hands to remain steady.

His movements were slow and calculated. Working his fingers, he untied the silky laces at the very bottom of the corset, passing them up and over the hooks and eyes that contained them. He let the ends of the smooth ribbons dangle, purposely swishing them over her bare bottom cheeks.

Kat moaned once and swayed.

"Easy," he crooned, wrapping his arms around her. "I've got you."

When he was sure she was steady again, he continued to unlace the ties at her back. As each one loosened, her face glowed with relief and ... unbridled lust.

He continued to release her from the confines of the satiny corset, watching her chest rise and fall as her breath whooshed out in urgent pants. When he reached the top hook

and eye, he unlaced the ribbons and removed the corset, letting it fall away from her breasts. They sprang free from their confines, and spilled into his outstretched hands.

"Magnificent," he breathed into her ear as he touched and fondled her nipples. She grabbed his forearms, her nails digging into his skin. "My, my," he chuckled. "You are anxious, aren't you?"

He continued his ministrations, cupping her breasts in his hands then releasing them, playing with the hard, peaked, buds that swelled at the tips. Jared knew her breasts would be beautiful, but in his wildest dreams, he didn't think he'd ever stand a chance in hell of touching them. Kat hadn't wanted him in the same town, let alone her bedroom.

But all that had changed...

...or had it?

Did she think she could snare him into a trap with sex? It would take a lot more than that! He'd have his fill of her tonight. Over the next few days, he'd charm the ladies in Summerville's historical society then wrap up the entire MegaMart deal so he could return to his life in the city.

...and his father.

That thought made him profoundly depressed. He longed to stay here in Summerville ... with Kat. He wanted to feel the warm summer breeze caress his skin. He wanted to walk down Main Street, licking one of Fred's icy-cold ice cream cones.

He wanted to snooze in his hammock at the Pink Lily. Maybe he could convince Kat to join him...

Those thoughts swirled through his mind, fueling his need to be with her, to be *inside* her. He turned her in his arms, savoring the feel of her naked breasts against his chest. Working his thumbs under the band at the top of her thong, he worked it down her bottom and over her hips. When it was halfway down her legs, Kat took over, pushing it down her calves. She stepped out of it and picked it up, then tossed it aside.

Naked.

Jared spent several minutes taking in her gloriously bare form, turning her this way and that, admiring the gentle swell of her bottom. Finally, he bent down to unlace her corset-style stilettos. She grabbed his shoulders as she stepped out of them. With the same reverence he had shown her garments, he picked up her shoes and placed them near the chair, alongside her dress.

He walked back over to her. Her body shined—she was a glorious, fiery goddess—and she was his for the taking.

If only for tonight.

Jared reached for her and kissed her until she went limp. He managed to restrain himself ... barely. Picking her up in his arms, he carried her to the bed, following her down onto the mattress, covering her body with his.

When she wrapped her arms around him, he felt as though he had finally found a sheltering haven from all the burdens in his life.

\* \* \* \*

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

Jared's hands and mouth worked their magic on Kat. He kissed her long, hard and deep, and then trailed a fiery path of kisses down her neck, across her collarbone, continuing down the length of her body where his lips caressed the skin right above her pubic bone. When his mouth settled between her legs, Kat's body ricocheted off the bed. Grasping her hips to hold her steady, Jared's tongue snaked out, the tip of it lodging between the shielding folds of skin hiding her clit, and slowly stroked her pulsing bud up and down.

Her breathing grew frantic. She shifted, her legs moving restlessly, as she grabbed fistfuls of the bedspread. Glancing down at Jared's head full of hair, she placed her hands there, running her fingers through the silky strands as he continued his ministrations.

Her body ignited. Clutching handfuls of his thick, black hair, she spread her legs wider to allow him more access to her hot, wet clit, as a wall of white-hot pleasure slammed into her. Jared's mouth never left her sensitive bud for a second, but continued to lick and nibble as the swirling tide of need reached its crescendo. When the frantic sensations stopped rocking her body, she relaxed.

Jared's head rested on the pillow next to her. She could feel his dark, golden-flecked eyes on her, watching her every move. Finally, he said around a chuckle, "We should have removed the bedspread."

Kat cracked one eye open and looked over at him. "Very funny," she said, feeling the damp spot beneath her bottom. Her face flamed in response to feeling the wetness beneath her. She shifted closer to him.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

He lifted his head, angling his elbow up onto the mattress, resting the side of his head in his palm. The mattress sank a little from his weight as he moved. He continued to look at her, his eyes warm and teasing. "Did you get what you wanted, Kat?" His voice took on a wicked tone.

She turned toward him and stroked his beard-shadowed chin. "Uh huh," she said drowsily, feeling robbed of all speech.

He leaned toward her to plant a soft kiss on her lips. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he drew her to him, sliding that same hand to her bottom to squeeze and fondle it. When he drew his finger lightly over the space separating the twin globes of her backside, she almost came again.

Oh, this was such a dangerous game she played with him! Just one touch of this man's hand sent her spiraling back to that deep, sensual abyss. She had to shift the balance of power ... quickly.

Kat reached out and began unbuttoning his shirt. He sat up to give her more access, letting her ease the shirt from his shoulders, down his arms. She tossed the shirt to the end of the bed, and turned her attention back to him. Grabbing the ends of his t-shirt, she pulled it up to his waist and over his chest. He took over the rest of the way, yanking it up and over his head then tossed it to the end of the bed to join his other shirt there.

She drank in the sight of his broad, bare chest and ran her fingers across the firm, muscled flesh. A light smattering of fine dark hair lined Jared's chest, trailing down to his abdomen. Leaning down, Kat tickled his bellybutton with the

tip of her tongue. He groaned once and flopped onto his back. Kat climbed on top of him, straddling his hips, leaning over to tongue his nipples. She gently stroked and plucked them, watching his golden-flecked eyes dilate as they filled with desire.

"God, Kat..." His voice was strained. Now *he* grabbed the bed covers in his hands.

"Paybacks are a bitch, aren't they?" she asked in a sultry voice. She trailed the ends of her hair across his chest and abdomen.

Kat unbuttoned his pants and slid the zipper down. Jared sucked in a breath, his abdomen sinking into the mattress.

"Hurry," he said through gritted teeth.

Kat smiled wickedly. "Patience is a virtue, Mr. Martin."

He lifted his head, breathing hard, and gave her a black look. The next thing she knew, he grabbed her wrists and pulled her toward him. She slid across his body, which only made him groan louder when she maneuvered the hot, wet, juncture between her thighs over his protruding member. He released her and flopped back on the bed in defeat.

She released a laugh. "What's wrong? Not up to snuff, are we?"

He lifted his head. "I swear to God, Kat, I'm going to—" he started to say something that sounded threatening, but abandoned all speech when she wiggled her bottom across his groin. She then sat up straight and flipped back the fiery red hair trailing across her breasts. Wetting her fingertips, she massaged her nipples in a sensual display. Where this wanton desire to show off in front of him came from, she didn't know.

She wiggled her bottom, the twin globes caressing his erect shaft.

He wore a pained expression. "You do much more of that, and I'm going to haul your fanny over my knee," he ground out.

"You would really spank me?" She blinked once, her eyes filling.

"I ... oh Christ, Kat, no, I..." Jared reached for her, pulling her down on top of him. "I wouldn't hurt you," he murmured, stroking her bottom gently then trailing his hand up her back. He rubbed her between her shoulder blades.

"Kat?" he asked.

She hid her face against his chest.

"Kat," he implored. "Look at me, please."

She continued to ignore him, her head buried against his chest, her hair spilling across him. When her shoulders started to shake, he reached for her, and forced her chin up with the palm of his hand. "Please don't cry," he murmured.

Kat looked him right in the eyes, biting her lower lip in an attempt not to laugh. "I really had you going there, didn't I?" She screeched when he flipped her over and followed her down onto the bed, pinning her there. Then he lifted her slightly, so that her bottom was exposed. She felt the sting of his large palm against her backside and giggled. The smack she received only served to inflame her more. She wiggled against him kissing him full on the mouth.

"You ... minx," he grinned, kissing her back.

Kat felt his erection nudge her belly. "Do you want out?" She glanced down at the outline his stiff member made

against his trousers. Reaching down, she cupped his balls in her hand.

Jared's eyes dilated, his breathing quickened. "Don't stop." It sounded more of a plea than the hoarse demand she thought Jared intended.

She continued stroking him, cupping and massaging his testicles until sweat broke out on his forehead.

"You poor baby," she crooned softly. "Let's give you some relief, shall we?" She released him and maneuvered his trousers over his hips—slowly.

Jared glared at her. "Hurry," he intoned.

"Now, now ... we have all night. Let's not rush this."

"I'm warning you, Kat," he ground out, "You won't sit for a week if you don't hurry up."

"Patience, Jared, patience."

"Fuck patience!" he roared, as he shoved his pants down over his feet, kicking his legs out. His trousers flew off, followed by his boxers, all landing on the floor in a heap. She tumbled off him when he leaned down to kick off his shoes and removes his socks.

When she looked at him next, he was on his hands and knees, crawling up the bed, heading straight for her! Kat's mouth hung open as she drank in the sight of his tall, dark, naked form as he made his way up the bed. In that instant, he reminded her again of a sleek, wild cat. Her eyes flew to his engorged member and the sack that hung below it. His dark golden eyes pinned her, as though she was a small wild animal caught in the throes of fear.

But she wasn't afraid, no—she was excited. Aroused. Ready to surrender and give *him* what he wanted...

Her.

His hot look sent a shiver of longing down her spine.

Jared maneuvered her so that she lay on her back. For one crazy second, Kat thought about resisting. How had she let things get so out of hand, she wondered, as he slid his hands over her, touching and stroking her body in places she didn't even know existed. His touch became more urgent as he continued to stroke and fondle every single inch of her. She felt his rigid shaft nudge the folds of flesh between her legs, begging entrance.

Kat's body responded in kind, despite her misgivings. She wiggled against him, rubbing her sensitive nubbin up and down his swollen member. The swirling, churning mass of white-hot pleasure began to build inside her as moisture seeped from between her legs. The more she rubbed, the wetter she became, and the harder he got.

He closed his eyes and inserted his thick, pulsing shaft inside her, burying himself to the hilt. Kat cried out when he began to move, slowly at first and then gradually he increased the speed at which he pumped into her. She matched his movements, thrusting her pelvis forward and back, twining her legs around his back in an effort to hold on.

She could feel the long outer ridge of his shaft as it slid against her clit. That sensual abyss yawned before her. She stood on the edge, ready to leap in and let her release take her over. When a tide of pleasure toppled her, Kat shouted,

"Jared!" and dug her nails into his upper arms while he continued to pump into her, spilling his hot seed inside her.

Jared collapsed against her, resting his forehead against hers.

They were both hot—their skin slick with perspiration, but Kat didn't care. She curled against him, hugging his powerful shoulders. Jared didn't withdraw from her, but moved closer. She heard the low hum of the air conditioner as cool air swirled over her skin, causing bumps to form across her arms. Kat shuddered against him, nestling her head between his neck and shoulder.

Reaching across her, he grabbed for the coverlet and pulled it over their bodies, cocooning them in warmth.

Kat heard Jared's breathing, heard the tick of her bedroom clock. She shifted slightly, but he didn't allow her to pull away. Resting her head against his chest, she closed her eyes and soon, fell into a deep slumber.

She woke up once that night to use the bathroom. When she did, Jared's golden eyes opened, they glowed in the darkened bedroom as he watched her every move, from the time she rose from the bed and made her way to the small bathroom adjoining her bedroom, until she came back. As she crawled into bed, Jared lifted the covers, beckoning her in, pulling her to him. She turned in his arms, only to feel his hard arousal nudge the cleft of her bottom. He stroked her backside gently then inserted his knee between her legs. Kat opened like a flower, reveling in the sensations that rocked her as he entered her from behind. With one hand holding and massaging her breasts, he placed the tip of his shaft

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between the folds covering her clit and took her to heaven and back.

Again, she fell into a deep sleep.

When she woke next, it was to hear birds singing outside her window.

She cracked one eye open and turned to gaze at the pillow Jared slept on.

It was empty ... and cold.

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## Chapter Nine

Kat rolled over and grabbed Jared's pillow. Hugging it to her chest, she buried her nose in the linen pillowcase and inhaled deeply. Jared's spicy, citrusy scent still clung to the material. She placed it back in his spot and rose from the bed, wincing as she padded to her closet to fetch a robe. Kat was sore in spots she didn't even know she *had*. Jared had been a vigorous, playful lover.

She glanced toward the chair near the mirror and saw her dress and corset on the seat cushion. Jared had managed to make the corset stand upright in one corner of the chair and arranged the matching thong, garter belt and stockings so it looked like an ensemble, proving once again, his reverence for her creations. She walked over to the chair and picked up the corset, running her hand over the lace edging at the top. Kat hugged it to her body, much like she did Jared's pillow. The corset smelled of him and ... her.

She placed it back on the chair and walked away, remembering just how it had felt when Jared undressed her last night. His slow, calculated movements were burned into her brain. She recalled the feel of his fingers brushing against the stays in the back of the corset. Her face flamed, remembering how he trailed the corset ties down her back, swishing them against her sensitive bottom.

She groaned in frustration, placing her head in her hand. One night with Jared Martin had only fueled her need for another and another and another...

Kat stalked to her closet and grabbed a silk lace robe off a pink-padded hangar. She quickly tossed the garment across her shoulders, pushing her arms through the sleeves. As she tied the sash, she walked over to her bureau and opened a drawer, reaching for a fresh pair of silk, hip-hugger panties.

Kat wanted to verify that Jared hadn't left anything behind so she gave the room one last glance. Who was she kidding? She had hoped to find something—*any* piece of his clothing that might indicate he was still there. His early morning defection, without even a curt 'goodbye,' stung more than her pride, cementing in her mind what a fool she had been. Jared Martin brought out something in her that no one, not even her ex-husband could—a wild, primitive urge to mate. Even in her desperate attempts to change Arthur's mind about having children, she hadn't acted that wanton in bed with him.

She had been stupid, so stupid not to notice the signal that Arthur's sudden shift in attitude had wrought. Fifteen years her senior, he had told her that he would welcome having children with Kat ... until he found someone younger! Jared had told her that he liked her independent nature, but Arthur didn't. Her creative spirit and ambition to become one of the Metropolitan area's most popular designers of women's lingerie and undergarments soon became a cause of disagreement between them...

...As well as Arthur's young mistress.

*"Fill this house with children, Kat. Don't let Arthur, or what happened to your sister and me stop you from living ... or loving."*

Her mother had said that to her after Kat had come back to Summerville, her heart wounded from Arthur's betrayal and now those same words swirled through her mind. She tried to block them out as she strode from her bedroom and walked down the hall.

Kat stopped at the second door on the right. Her heart grew heavy at the sight of it. She ran her hand over the dark wood lining the doorway. Jared had literally flown up the stairs and down this very hallway the night before, sailing past the room she now stood before—the room where Kat had nursed her older sister and her mother in their last days. Last night, cradled in Jared's arms, she had not given it a second thought ... didn't even glance that way.

Guilt. It hung over her like an anvil waiting to descend. It was an endless burden, and now, it became a double-edged sword. She couldn't do anything for her older sister, Stacy, or her mother. Grace Sullivan had succumbed to more than her physical illness; she had surrendered to the deep despair that only a broken heart could bring. She had never been right after Stacy died. Kat had come back to Summerville after her marriage to Arthur crumbled, then her heart shattered when her only remaining family succumbed to illness. If it hadn't been for Lilith, Doris, Fred, and her other friends in Summerville, she would have never been able to cope with the devastating loss of her family and her marriage.

The sword of guilt dangled before her. Last night, she had not given this room a backward glance. Cradled in Jared's arms as he made his way toward her bedroom, she could only

think of being with him, and of the sensual promise his hands and lips wrought.

Guilt descended further, the sword of blame's tip balanced right above her head. She opened the door to her mother's bedroom. Kat tried to walk in, like she attempted a hundred times before, but it was no use. She quickly shut the door against the odor that always assailed her nostrils. It was the smell of sickness and ... death. No matter how often she had cleaned the room, or had hired a service to clean it, the room still held the stale odor of illness.

She padded down the hallway and stopped, rooted to the spot she was in. Another smell drifted past her nose. The strong, heady scent of coffee wafted toward her. Kat shut her eyes and inhaled deeply, savoring the rich, fragrant smell.

Her eyes flew open. How could she smell coffee?

Jared.

Jared hadn't left!

Her heart skipped several beats as she flew down the steps to her kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

Jared cracked some eggs into a bowl then glanced at his watch. It was eight a.m. and Kat still hadn't risen. He smiled, thinking that was just fine by him. He'd make her breakfast and bring it up to her, then have the pleasure of holding her warm, pliant body on his lap, where he'd feed her the omelet and toast he prepared. He would enjoy waking her, kissing her body, inch by lovely inch. Then he'd take his time giving her breakfast so he could take pleasure in watching her eat.

They might have skipped most of their dinner last night in their haste to make love, but he had glimpsed the carnal enjoyment Kat received from eating.

She made love the same way.

He woke up several times last night, just to watch her. She reminded him of a slumbering tigress, a woman whose passion lay dormant during the day, but at night, she became a wild, sensual creature, attune to his every desire. He had made love to her in the early morning hours to brand her so there'd be no question in her mind regarding his driving need for her.

He grew hard thinking about it. Glancing at the pan of sizzling butter, he removed it from the heat source and placed it on the back burner. The last thing he wanted to do was screw up Kat's breakfast.

Kat. Just thinking about her dressed in that corset set his world tipping on its axis. He shut his eyes, imagining how she looked last night. He smiled at the thought of her performing the way she did for him. Kat Sullivan was sensual fire ... and he should be careful playing with her. What he had hoped to find underneath all Kat's layers was her sensual core.

He found what he sought.

Now, he only had one problem...

One night with Kat Sullivan just wasn't enough.

\* \* \* \*

Kat sailed into the kitchen to find Jared rummaging around in her refrigerator. She skidded to a halt at the entranceway and stood there, drinking in the sight of him as he bent his

tall frame and reached in, extracting a container of milk. Her eyes traveled down the length of him, stopping at his long, bare, feet. He wore the shirt from the previous night, the tails hanging out of his trousers. When he turned, she noticed his shirt wasn't buttoned. Catching sight of his bare, bronze chest, she decided he looked deliciously rumpled and sexy and...

Like he belonged in her kitchen.

Her sworn enemy had made himself at home. She narrowed her eyes. The nerve! How dare he...

The delicious coffee odor wafted toward her again, cutting into her thoughts. Her stomach growled, its noisy gurgle echoed through her kitchen.

He turned and glanced her way. "Good morning, beautiful," he said softly. Placing the milk container on the counter, he walked over to her, his eyes scanning her silk and lace clad form. Kat swallowed hard, suddenly realizing that she had nothing on underneath but a pair of panties. She *felt* naked, though the robe covered her from feet to chin.

She didn't know how to answer his greeting. He stood before her, smelling of that deliciously spicy-citrusy cologne. Kat noticed his beard-shadowed chin. It made her blush clear down to her toes. She remembered the feel of that chin when his mouth and hands had worked their magic on her breasts—and every other part of her.

Her stomach growled again, this time, even louder.

"Dinner was apparently the last thing on our minds last night," he said.

Dinner? She had a vague recollection of going to Harry's, of dancing with Jared, of being held in his arms and...

"So, I figured I should feed you this morning, my lovely opponent." He grinned at her.

Kat felt tongue-tied. She had to will her lips to move. "You're still here," is what finally came out.

He narrowed his eyes. "Of course I am."

*Oh, Kat, you're an ass! Can't you think of something better to say?*

Jared shook his head. "What kind of men do you keep company with that would walk out on you in the morning?"

*Arthur. He walked out on me! He left me for another woman ... for brighter, greener, younger pastures...*

"They're fools, Kat, all of them."

She blinked once. "Who?"

Jared leaned down to kiss her. His warm, soft lips tasted of coffee as he nipped and sipped hers.

"You're not much of a morning person, are you?" He grinned down into her face and brushed some stray, fiery strands of hair from her cheek and neck. He trailed his fingers across her throat, down her collarbone.

"The coffee ... the smell got to me."

"Coming right up." He moved to the counter and reached into a cabinet for a mug. She noticed the one he already had filled with steaming coffee on her kitchen table. He seemed to know where everything was...

...Just like, he seemed to know every single, sensual, sensitive, spot on her body.

"Y-yes, I think coffee would be a good idea." She plunked down into a chair, her legs suddenly wobbly.

*Damn! Why did the morning-after thing have to be so awkward?*

He placed a mug full of steaming coffee in front of her. "Sugar?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, please. Two."

Kat sat there and watched his long fingers open two packets of sugar. He sprinkled them in her coffee and stirred. "How about milk?" he queried.

"I like it ... light."

*Just like I like the light touch of your fingers on my...*

Kat shook her head to clear it of her wayward thoughts and took a sip of coffee. It's heady, mocha-vanilla flavors acted as an elixir for her muddled thoughts.

"Now, onto breakfast." Jared walked over to the stove and moved the skillet to the front burner. He lit the pilot light underneath then turned his attention to the bowl on the counter, whipping the eggs into a creamy froth.

Kat took another sip of coffee. Eyeing him over the rim, she asked, "Is this the part where I'm supposed to say, 'Gee, he cooks, too!'"

Jared threw back his head and laughed. "Ah, Kat, you are a delight."

She blew out a pent-up breath, relieved to break the tension that permeated the air. It irked her no end that he didn't seem the least bit tense or ... confused.

Kat plunked down her mug. "Just for the record, this doesn't change a thing."

He lifted a brow in her direction as he poured the eggs into the sizzling butter. The odor got to her, making her stomach growl again.

"I'd say it changes things quite a bit," he replied as he grabbed a spatula from a nearby hook and pushed the cooked portion of egg into the center of the pan, letting the wet, uncooked batch swirl around the outside. He tilted the pan to make sure it all leveled out. "It means I have to make sure that we eat dinner next time before we ... play." He drew out the word 'play' suggestively and grinned.

The lunatic! Did he honestly think there'd be a next time? She didn't think she could stand the sweet, exquisite torture. Besides, they were enemies ... and Summerville's future was at stake. She couldn't forget that—*wouldn't* forget it.

"Look, I think we should..."

"Cheese?" he asked her.

"I ... cheese? What about cheese?"

"In your omelet. I want to know whether you like cheese in your omelet."

"Oh, well, yes. Lots of it."

He walked over to the fridge and rummaged around inside, withdrawing a cellophane packet of shredded cheddar cheese. Then he looked back inside the fridge. "Must be one of your weaknesses."

"What is?" *Oh, if he ever knew how weak in the knees she felt every time he looked at her, she'd be in big trouble.*

"Cheese. You certainly have quite a collection of it." He angled his head toward her refrigerator. "But then again, as I

said last night, you're aptly named. Cats like milk, don't they? And cheese and..."

She sighed. "I wish you'd stop referring to last night."

He opened the cellophane pack and sprinkled a liberal amount of cheese over the center of her omelet then folded it over and lowered the burner under the pan. Jared turned to face her. "Why should I stop referring to last night?"

"Because it was—" she stopped, taking in the dark look he aimed in her direction.

He plated her eggs. Opening the oven, he extracted another plate bearing another fluffy, cheesy omelet and brought both of them to the kitchen table. He set his plate down, then hers. Kat's nerves were strung tight, she felt the pull of tension again as she watched him amble around her kitchen as though he didn't have a care in the world. When two pieces of perfectly browned toast popped out of the toaster, he grabbed them and tossed them on a plate, buttering them liberally.

He set the toast in front of her and grabbed a pitcher of orange juice from the fridge. Jared didn't miss a beat as he walked passed her cabinets, pulling one open and taking out two small juice glasses.

He plunked them all down in front of her, aiming another hard look in her direction.

Her breath caught in her chest when she glanced up at him as he reached down and nudged her chin up with his long fingers. His coffee-colored eyes bored into hers. "Whatever you do, Kat, don't say last night was a mistake because it wasn't. We both got what we wanted, but I want more. You're

a beautiful, sensual woman." He released her chin and sat down in the chair next to her. He grabbed the saltshaker, sprinkling his omelet liberally then stabbed a piece of it with the tines of his fork.

Summerville's enemy—*her* enemy—sat in her kitchen, eating breakfast with her and spouting nonsense. Beautiful? Sensual? How many women had he said *that* to, she wondered? Kat speared a piece of egg, the cheese sliding downward. She dipped the ends of her fork and caught the small mass of cheese, then popped it into her mouth, savoring the richness of the melted cheese and the buttery, light fluffy eggs.

"I'd still like to know what kind of man would walk out on a woman like you." Jared shook his head full of dark hair in disbelief and took a sip of his juice. "Are the men in this town stupid?"

She glared at him around a bite of toast. "Don't you dare call anyone in this town 'stupid.'"

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, they must be." He took a healthy bite of his eggs and asked, "Who was it? The dentist?"

Kat slammed her fork down on the table. "Who I see is not your damn concern."

He shook his head, completely ignoring her outburst. "No, it couldn't be him—he doesn't have the balls for much of anything, let alone to walk out on a gorgeous, smart, creative woman like you."

She wanted to smack him, but a little voice in her head told her what he said about Summerville's dentist was the absolute truth.

Jared swiveled his gaze in her direction. "Was it Fred?"

"You know, I could be asking you these same questions."

"Go ahead." He replied around a bite of toast and a sip of coffee.

Kat took another bite of her eggs and put down her fork with regret. She looked down at the eggs with longing. *Okay, so he could cook. Big deal!* "How about the blonde?"

He beetled his brows. "What blonde?"

Kat leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her breasts. "The blonde you've been photographed with ... I saw the picture in *People* magazine."

He sipped his coffee, lost in thought for a few seconds. Suddenly, his eyes grew wide. "You *must* be kidding me. Her? I told you before, she's the daughter of an old family friend."

"Right..." Kat stabbed another piece of her omelet. "I'm sure she's *somebody's* daughter."

Jared held up a hand. "Now hold on just one minute..."

"It's good to know you're such a gentleman that you don't walk out on your lovers ... even if they're uh, *quite young*."

"Kat," his eyes turned stormy. "You're treading on dangerous ground."

She sat up straight, pushing her plate aside. Leaning her elbows on the table and cupping her chin with her hands, she asked, "What is she ... twenty? Twenty-five?"

"She's twenty-eight, and for the record, I happen to like women my own age."

"Uh huh," she replied, her tone disbelieving.

He shook his head. "It's a real pity that whoever walked out on you took a piece of you with them."

She shot up from the table and grabbed her plate. Turning to face him she said curtly, "Thanks for breakfast." Kat marched over to the sink and dumped her plate into it.

She turned on the water to rinse the remnants of egg from the dish when she felt Jared move behind her.

"Don't let him get the best of you. You're worth more than that."

She whirled to face him. "Yes. I know." Kat assumed a thoughtful pose. "What did your letters from MegaMart corporate office say? Fifty-thousand?"

He winced. "That was before I knew you. That was before I knew what KISS was all about."

She paled suddenly. Did he know what was going on behind KISS' closed doors? Is that what he meant? Had he been spying on her?

He moved closer. "What's wrong?" he asked softly. "Why are you so pale?"

She let go of a pent-up breath. Maybe he didn't know what was really going on at KISS, or ... he was lying. *Be careful, Kat, be very, very careful.*

"Nothing's wrong. Look," she told him. "Last night was—"

He grinned. "Incredible."

"Yes, well, be that as it may, I'm still not selling out to you and I'm not changing my mind about MegaMart. You're not right for this town ... and neither is MegaMart."

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He reached for her then and took her in his arms, lifting her high against his chest. She struggled in his hold, but he wouldn't release her, and sat down on a chair with her cradled in his lap.

"God I love fighting with you," he murmured as his lips descended upon hers. Her body ignited and her head spun. She pushed against his chest. The more she pushed, the more intense the kiss became. He drove his tongue inside her mouth and battled with hers, sliding the tip of his tongue down and around the sides of hers. Kat moaned once as his kiss became more urgent. She felt his arousal nudge her bottom through the thin silk of her robe. Soon, she stopped struggling, and settled against him.

He slowed the kiss, and allowed her to control it. She grabbed his face in her hands and nipped at his lower lip, then touched the corner of his mouth with the tip of her tongue.

"That's my wild she-cat," he said softly. He groaned when she nibbled his chin. "God, Kat, I want to stay here with you today," he said softly.

Her eyes flew open. "Y-you can't ... I've got to get to work, to KISS."

Jared rested his forehead against hers. "And I've got an appointment this afternoon."

She slanted him a look.

Jared shifted her off his lap and stood. "I've got an appointment with the ladies of the Historical Society at noon." He glanced her way as he gathered up his plate and utensils. Walking to the sink, he asked, "Want to join us?"

Kat folded her arms over her chest. "Oh, I wouldn't miss *that* for the world, but ... I have an appointment, too."

"What do you mean, 'you wouldn't miss it for the world?'"

Kat thought he seemed a tad bit nervous. She shrugged. "The ladies of Summerville's historical society are tough cookies. It's going to take a lot to get them to agree to allowing MegaMart to set up camp here."

He scraped his plate into her garbage then placed it in the sink. "I'll use my extensive charm."

She rolled her eyes and made a face.

"And I intend to show them my ideas. I think they will like it. I wish you'd come," he gave her a long look.

"I told you, I have an appointment."

Jared cleared the table of the remaining cups, placing them in the sink. He started to wash the dishes, running water over the plates and cups.

She walked up to him. "You can cook me a hundred breakfasts, take me to a hundred dinners ... in fact, you can even try your hand again at seducing me, but I will tell you this—Summerville will never be yours."

Jared shut off the water in the sink and dried his hands. Then he walked to a nearby chair to grab his suit jacket. He shrugged it over his broad shoulders and pulled his keys from his jacket pocket. Walking to her, his movements slowed. His golden-flecked eyes burned into hers.

"Is that a challenge, Kat?" he asked, his voice silky.

"It's not a challenge, it's a fact. I can't be bought."

He reached a hand out to brush some stray locks of hair from her neck, trailing that same hand down her neck and across her breasts. "Everyone and everything has a price."

"That's a very cynical point of view." She shuddered from his touch, became hot all over.

He shrugged. "Maybe, but what I said is true." He leaned down and placed a soft, moist kiss to her breast.

Kat closed her eyes for a few seconds, savoring the feel of his lips against the thin silk of her robe. When she looked down, he had left a wet spot on her right nipple.

"Everyone has a price. Everyone wants something ... what do you want?" he queried softly.

*You.* That single word almost slipped from her lips.

"I want you to leave Summerville. Leave us alone."

"That's not going to happen."

Kat moved toward him and cupped his balls in her hand. Jared's eyes dilated, his face filled with desire. She massaged his sack with her fingers. "Your theory on buying everyone and everything is an interesting one." She gave his groin a gentle squeeze.

Sweat broke out on his forehead. Kat noticed him gritting his teeth against her sweet, sensual assault. "But I have a theory of my own," she purred.

"What's that?" His voice sounded hoarse.

"That everyone has something to hide."

Jared reached down and pushed her hand away. Then he hooked a finger in the neckline of her robe and yanked her forward. "You're skating on very thin ice, Kat. If I were you, I'd watch my step."

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She slapped his hand, leaving a bright red mark on his bronze skin. Jared retaliated by wrapping her in a tight embrace, teasing her pelvis with his arousal.

"Are you threatening me?" she asked, emboldened by his obvious desire for her.

"No, but as you said before, I'm stating a fact. Don't mess with me. Don't think you can find out something about me and use it against me. I'll retaliate, sweetheart, and you won't like it."

He finished by leaning down and grinding his lips against hers. She should have been repelled by the action, but the sweet, delicious sensations swirling within her had Kat kissing him back, thrusting and parrying her tongue with his. Jared slid his hand into her robe, lifting a breast, fingering her nipple—it grew hard and peaked from his touch. Kat whimpered from the heat and desire pooling between her thighs. She rode him, rubbing her clit against his hard, hot cock.

He pulled away from her, breathing hard.

Like two fighters squaring off, they stood and glared at each other.

"You can be certain of one thing, Kat."

She glanced at his arousal and licked her lips.

Jared laughed. "I'll be back for more, my lovely opponent."

He turned on his heel and marched out of her kitchen.

Kat didn't move. She heard her garage door open, heard the roar of the Jag's engine.

The clocked ticked on the wall.

She glanced up. Nine a.m. It was time to get to KISS...

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And work on finding the secret she was now positive Jared hid from the world.

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## Chapter Ten

Later that day Jared glanced at his watch for what must have been the hundredth time.

"Shall we get started?" he asked the group of silver-haired septuagenarian women seated around his table at Summerville's Sunshine Café. The day was gorgeous. Not a cloud in the sky. Jared opted for a table on the deck outside so he could look out at the calm, clear water of the Long Island Sound out back.

"Well, it wouldn't be right to start a meeting of the Summerville Historical Society without her," a trim, elderly lady named Mildred Cummings replied. "We should wait."

There were murmurs of agreement from the assembled group.

"Whom, exactly, are we waiting for?" he asked.

Evelyn Rogers, Summerville's historian, patted his hand gently. "Why, we're waiting for our president, dear."

Jared took a sip of his water and nodded. "I see..."

"She should be along any minute now."

He wanted to tell her that she said that a half an hour ago. Instead, he opted for, "Then I guess we'll wait."

The women beamed at him.

"Are you enjoying your stay with us, Mr. Martin?" Annabelle Lewis, the caretaker of one of Summerville's oldest homes asked him.

"Please, call me Jared, and yes, I'm enjoying myself very much."

"What sights have you seen?" she asked, her bright blue eyes didn't leave his face. "How about the Captain Hill House? Have you seen it?"

"Uh, well, no..."

"Oh! You should!" The women all said in unison.

"It is wonderful, I must tell you," Annabelle continued. "It's been completely remodeled to resemble what it used to look like. It has this beautifully redone watchtower. You can see for miles when you're up there ... the vineyards, the farmlands surrounding the house. It's really quite an impressive sight."

The only sight Jared could seem to concentrate on was that of Kat dressed in that coral-colored corset from last night. He couldn't get that vision of her out of his head. Moreover, he didn't want to. Kat was an addiction. He knew she wasn't good for him, knew she'd probably try to do him in, but he wanted her any way. He took a healthy sip of water to cool down and grabbed a bread stick from the basket in front of him.

"Oh look, here comes our president now."

Jared glanced at the entrance to the small deck. A woman made her approach. She had on a pair of sleek, dark sunglasses. Her hair had been fashioned into a stylish up-do and the cream-colored, body-hugging sundress she wore outlined her every curve. The heart-shaped neckline hugged her magnificent breasts. Small, bronze-colored grommets highlighted the neckline and waist. The flounced bottom of the dress skirted her knees—it billowed in the slight breeze that kicked up, showing off her long, shapely legs.

"Good afternoon, ladies," she said in greeting as she walked around and hugged each of them at the table. When she got to Jared, she stopped.

He rose from his chair as she removed her sunglasses to reveal a pair of sea-green eyes.

"Why, Mr. Martin, how lovely to see you."

"Kat..." her name slipped from his lips.

She stuck out her hand and angled her chin.

A muscle in Jared's cheek quivered. The minx! She never said one word to him about being part of the historical society, let alone being its president. In fact, she had said that she had an appointment that afternoon...

Of course ... with him!

A new battlefield in which she could fight him on.

"Kat," he said again, refusing to accede to her. "A pleasure to see you again." He held out a chair. She slipped into it. He grasped the arms and leaned over the back to help slide it under the table. He whispered in her ear, "Score one for you and your surprise attack."

She smiled charmingly. "Why thank you, Mr. Martin. That's very kind of you."

He wasn't feeling the least bit ... kind. In fact, he had the most unholy urge to haul her out of the chair, toss her over his shoulder, and march out of the restaurant. Then he wanted to make love to her for the rest of the day and ... night.

When he was sure she was settled he whispered again, "If you play with fire Kat, you get burned. You won't win this battle."

Her look grew sly. "We'll see," she replied, her voice a whisper on the breeze.

Jared settled his tall frame into his own chair.

Evelyn Rogers glanced at Jared, then Kat. "Well, now that we're all here, let me just say that this wonderful lady," she held her hand, palm out, in Kat's direction, "does an excellent job as president of Summerville's Historical Society."

The women raised their glasses in tribute, forcing Jared to do the same. "I didn't know this about you ... Kat." He drew out her name. "It never came up in our, um ... discussions yesterday evening."

She turned to face him, her eyes stormy. "I told you ... its Ms. Sullivan."

He cocked his head at her. "That's funny."

"What is?"

"Last night it was ... Jared."

She had lifted her fork to spear an olive from the dish in front of her. The fork slipped from her hand and fell to the ground. Kat leaned down to retrieve it. Jared met her halfway.

"Don't you dare mention last night again," she whispered furiously from her position under the table as she rummaged on the ground for the fork.

He grinned at her and held the fork toward her. "It's odd that in the throes of passion, you used my first name. That was when you came in my hand, wasn't it?" He asked, angling his head under the table to get a better look at her.

Kat growled low in her throat. "You bastard," she hissed.

"Waiter!" he called out, sitting upright and swiveling around in his chair. "The lady needs a clean fork." He waved it in the air next to Kat's head. She balled her hand into a fist, resting it on the napkin in her lap.

Jared looked down at it. "If you take a swing at me here, I'll retaliate. You'll be very embarrassed." He pitched his voice low and pinned her with a dark look.

"Shut up," she replied under her breath.

"Kat, dear, you look wonderful." Evelyn Rogers piped in. "That dress is divine. Did you design it?"

Kat smiled at her and sipped her water. "Yes, I did."

Evelyn smiled. "That's wonderful. Are you going to offer a clothing line, too, at KISS?"

"I just might, Evelyn. I haven't decided yet."

Jared sipped his water, eyeing her over the rim. "Kat seems to have a huge following with her lingerie line."

"Oh, yes, she does. We're so proud of her," came Evelyn's reply. "Aren't we ladies?" Several silver-haired heads bobbed up and down in unison.

Jared sighed, smiling. "I know that I, for one, have now been transformed into a devoted fan of Kat's."

"Really?" Kat's voice dripped acid.

"Really." He offered her a breadstick. She snatched it from his hands.

"As a matter of fact, there's that coral-colored cors..." He jumped when he felt a sharp pain in his left thigh. His water glass tumbled over—he managed to catch it just as liquid sloshed over the side. Jared massaged his leg to ease the

sting in his thigh and noticed Kat placing her fork on the edge of the table.

Her eyes grew wide, her look pure innocence. "Oh my, is there something wrong, Mr. Martin?"

"No," he replied, his voice tight. "Nothing."

"Oh well then, I guess we should order, shouldn't we ladies?" Kat asked brightly. "What does everyone feel like eating today? Annabelle, didn't you say the swordfish was terrific the last time?"

The waiter came by and handed each of them menus then rattled off the specials. Jared didn't hear a thing he said. He was acutely aware of Kat sitting next to him and the sting in his thigh. The tigress' claws were out. He glanced down at his leg. *Well, at least she didn't draw any blood!* Oh what he wouldn't give to drag her away from there and make her pay for what she just did. He could smell her perfume. The light, fresh floral fragrance drifted by his nose. When she shifted in the chair, the flounced bottom of the dress rode up her thighs. Jared glanced down at her feet. They were encased in a pair of matching, cream-colored, canvas cork-wedge sandals, decorated with the same small grommets she had used at the neckline and waist of the dress. From his vantage point next to her, he also had a clear view of her cleavage.

Lovely. How lucky could he be to have such a beautiful, sexy opponent? He'd take a hundred jabs in his thigh for a chance to tussle with her again—in bed. Glancing at his menu, he said in a low voice. "So, are you the mayor, too?"

She studied her own menu. "Just until last year," she replied, smiling sweetly. "Now Mildred is our mayor."

The older woman smiled back at Kat from across the table.

Jared chatted with the women, but remained acutely aware of Kat next to him. Occasionally, he'd brush his thigh against hers. She'd respond in kind, sending shock waves of hot need through him. He'd sip his water, hoping to cool the banked, low fire Kat apparently intended to build within him. Did she think she could throw him off the track that way? He smiled slowly, and slipped his hand under the table. With his fingers, he lifted the hem of her dress and trailed them across the bare skin of her thigh.

Her eyes widened in shock as she spoke with Annabelle. She didn't stop, didn't hesitate, but slipped her hand under the table to stroke his swollen member.

Lunch passed by in a blur for Jared. The sun's rays beat down, simultaneously, a cloud of hazy, sexual need passed over him. Reaching under the table once more, he twined his fingers in hers and squeezed them gently. She gazed over at him as she sipped a frosty, cold glass of iced tea, but the look that passed between them sizzled. A cool breeze wafted by, lifting the ends of the umbrella that shaded their table, but Jared felt hotter than ever. A small beat of sweat trickled down his chest under his shirt.

"Well, Kat, should we begin?" Evelyn Rogers' sweet, lilting voice broke through his heated thoughts.

Kat turned stormy, sea-green eyes on Jared. "Why not?" She pushed her plate away. "Let's hear what Mr. Martin has to say." Assuming a relaxed pose, she leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms under her breasts. The slight breeze kicked up, tickling the few strands of hair at the nape

of her neck. Jared cocked his head at her to study her profile. He couldn't decide if he liked her hair up like that in that twist or...

"Mr. Martin?"

His gaze swiveled in the direction of the voice he just heard.

"Would you like to begin?"

It was Annabelle. Sweet Annabelle. Here he thought he'd be stuck with a bunch of old biddies, but once more, Summerville proved him wrong. Jared suddenly felt at odds. Glancing at the portfolio next to him, his mind filled with doubt. Would they like what he planned? He ran a finger around his shirt collar. Heat seared his skin, but this time, he couldn't blame Kat.

"Yes, I think we'll begin." He reached over to grab the portfolio, withdrawing several large sheets of drawings.

The waiter cleared the table as the women passed the drawings around.

"Oh my, look!" Evelyn cried out. "He's drawn Main Street perfectly." She clapped her hands in front of her.

"And there's 'The Yarn Barn' and Fred's place and..."

"KISS." Kat finished curtly.

Evelyn smiled at her then turned her attention back to Jared. "This is quite an accurate rendering, Mr. Martin."

"Thank you."

Kat gazed at the sketch in front of her. He held his breath, anticipation building inside him. Jared's stomach lurched; his hands became moist. He stifled the urge he had to sit on them.

Her eyes continued to scan the drawing in front of her. She lifted them to look directly into his. "Where's MegaMart?" she asked.

Jared shifted his chair closer to Kat's, bumping her knee with his. "There it is, right there." Jared pointed to a large, Victorian style building at the end of Main Street.

Kat peered down at the drawing. "That?" she pointed at the building. "That's MegaMart?"

Jared smiled at her. "It is. It's the new and improved MegaMart."

She gazed at him, her eyes taking on a wary look. "What on earth are you talking about, 'new and improved'?"

"It's my MegaMart complex. Of course, we won't be calling it that. We'll call it 'The Shops at Summerville Inn.'"

"I'm not sure I'm following you."

Jared spoke quickly. "It's a one hundred room inn at the beginning of Main Street. See all the stores in back? Those are all the existing stores and shops. They'll be part of the complex. They'll form the courtyard in back."

Her eyes widened. "An inn? We already have a bed and breakfast. Betty's 'Pink Lily.' We don't need a ... hotel," she sneered, then tossed the drawing on the table in front of her. The corner of the sketch landed in a small pool of water near her iced tea glass.

Jared snatched the drawing before any damage could be done. The damn artwork cost him a fortune, not to mention all the time and energy he put into it. He glared at Kat, but she ignored him. She shifted in her seat and angled her body, signaling her disdain ... and her defiance.

Never in all his born days had he encountered a woman as rude and so adverse to change as Kat Sullivan. He still had an urge to scoop her up out of her chair, only this time, he wanted to lay her facedown across his lap and spank the shit out of her.

He addressed the assembled group before him. "What Ka— Ms. Sullivan says has some merit to it."

The women stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Ms. Sullivan is right, you *do* already have a bed and breakfast." He gave Kat a hard look. "But it's in trouble."

"Of all the nerve!" Kat threw down her napkin and faced him. "You're staying there yourself," she aimed her index finger at him, her long, French-manicured fingernail slashed through the air. "You said you liked it. You said—"

He held up a hand. "I do like it. But we did some research..."

"Who did?" Kat's eyes grew sharp, revealing the depths of their icy, blue-green color.

"I did. MegaMart did. We noticed that, well ... for lack of a better term, The Pink Lily didn't do so well last year."

Kat's face paled. "So? Betty will have a better year *this* year."

Annabelle tapped her shoulder. "But he's right, Kat. Even Betty said she had a miserable year."

"Look," Jared pulled his chair closer to Kat's. Leaning one arm over his knee, he bent his tall frame in her direction. "I have no intention of putting Betty Horan out of business."

"Not much you don't!" Kat snorted. She shifted away from him.

*No, I'm not going to use my hand on her lovely backside, I'm going to...*

He struggled to rein in his burgeoning temper. "I do not intend to put anyone out of business. I lo ... I mean, I *like* it here in Summerville. I like the people. My new MegaMart idea has been in the works for quite some time. It's worth a shot, especially here in this town. Nothing would change, I promise you..."

Kat turned her head away. This time, Jared didn't hesitate. He reached out and snatched her stubborn chin in his hand, turning her to face him.

"All the stores and shops will fall under the MegaMart banner, but they'll stay the same. The inn will be the draw. It's only a hundred rooms. That'll fill up quickly, especially in the summer months. Betty's place can take the overflow."

Kat pulled out of his grasp.

"I don't like it. And I don't like your underhanded business practices, Mr. Martin."

The ladies at the table grew quiet. No one spoke for quite some time.

Jared struggled to maintain his composure. "And just what are the underhanded business practices you're referring to?"

"This same thing happened in Hillside two years ago, ladies." Kat glanced at the women sitting around the table. "He told them that if they let MegaMart into Hillside, the town would benefit. He'd build them a new high school and a new library."

"I have every intention of doing that. It's just—"

"He has absolutely *no* intention of doing that!" Kat lifted a hand and slashed it through the air, right under Jared's nose. He leaned back for fear of being scraped by her long nails. "They haven't even begun construction of the new high school, which, I may add, Hillside badly needs, and which *he* promised."

"I wanted more say in the plans!" Lowering his voice, he continued. "I didn't think what they were proposing for the new school was right, I wanted ... well, let's just say we've got some issues at Hillside, but the new library..."

"Isn't built yet, either, is it?" she sneered.

Jared's face grew hard. "It's MegaMart's money, not theirs. If I don't think something's right, I won't do it."

"You're full of sh..." Kat glanced at the assembled group. "...garbage," she finished.

"Mr. Martin..." Annabelle began.

"Jared," he corrected.

She smiled a little. "Jared. While most of us here are quite impressed with what you've done, we can't just go ahead and give you an all-out 'yes' to your proposed project, we'd have to vote."

He slumped back in his chair. All his hopes and dreams for MegaMart, for making his father's company shine were vanishing like a puff of smoke into the air. He owed him this ... and he owed himself. Damn Kat Sullivan!

"And we, well, the historical society likes a unanimous vote. While all of us are quite impressed and feel that these drawings have a great deal of merit and wouldn't change the

unique look and feel of Summerville, I'm afraid we have to say, 'no,' at this time."

Jared shook his head, puzzled. "But you just said that you *all* are in agreement that it's good for the town."

"If Kat doesn't agree, then, well ... it's quite out of the question," Evelyn Rogers piped up.

Jared swiveled his head in Kat's direction. "But you're the president. Presidents don't vote on issues."

Annabelle spoke again. "We're quite an informal group here, Jared. Moreover, we respect Kat's opinion. After all, *she's* done quite a lot of research on *you*." Her sweet smile belied the steel in her voice.

*Oh, she did all right, last night proved that!*

"For the record," he spoke slowly in an attempt to keep his voice steady. "I'm also presenting this idea at the next Civic Association Meeting." He smiled thinly at Kat and held up a hand. "I know, don't tell me, you're co-president of that, too, right?"

Kat smiled back. "No, Mr. Martin, I'm not the co-president."

*Yes, there is a God!*

"But I *do* sit on the board and there, the president does not vote, but the board members all do, and unless it's unanimous, you've got a snowball's chance in hell of bringing MegaMart into Summerville."

Kat reached for her bag. She drew out her sunglasses and adjusted them on her nose. Rising, she told him, "Have a good afternoon, Mr. Martin."

He sat there and watched her walk away, the flounce of her body-hugging dress blowing in the breeze as she made her way across the deck and through the door.

Jared wondered if she knew that she'd also taken his dream with her.

No way would he surrender, he thought as he threw his napkin down on the table and rose to his feet. No way!

It was time to bring out the big guns.

\* \* \* \*

Later, Jared pulled into the small parking lot of the Pink Lily. He got out of the car, slamming the driver's side door, and strode up the walkway. As he walked, he unbuttoned the top button on his dress shirt and yanked off his tie. The heat intensified the sweet smell of the trumpet lilies lining the walkway. Funny, he thought, that's almost what Kat's perfume had smelled like...

Kat. Damn it, why couldn't he stop thinking about her? Anger mushroomed, rising inside him, like a big explosive cloud of energy. It fueled each step he took. He marched up the steps of the wide porch and stepped inside the lobby. Cool air washed over him, but it didn't help to quell his hot need for the she-cat that thwarted his plans. He strode past the front desk, intent on getting to his room and jumping into a refreshing shower. Then he'd relax a little on the terrace and enjoy some of the Pink Lily's amenities, like a glass of that great Pinot Grigio wine Betty had...

What in hell was wrong with him? He had work to do! No more Mr. Nice Guy, no more letting Kat get under his skin. If

she wanted to fight him tooth and nail, then he'd do the same.

"Mr. Martin!" he stopped when he heard Betty call his name. "You have a message." She waved a slip of paper in the air.

He walked over to her and retrieved the message.

"Did you have a pleasant lunch?"

Jared scanned the message. George. He sighed, thinking that maybe it would have been from Kat.

Ridiculous. Why would she contact him? To apologize? Maybe to work things out...

"Was Evelyn at the meeting? Did you see Annabelle?"

His head snapped up. "How did you know I met with them?"

Betty shrugged. "News travels fast."

He groaned inwardly. "I see."

Betty walked around the corner of the front desk. Hesitant at first, she took a few tentative steps until she stood in front of him. Her face seemed pinched and drawn. Oh boy, he thought, she heard what I said about the Pink Lily. Now she probably thinks I want to put her out of business! Seconds went by. When she still didn't speak, he asked, "Is there something you wanted to say to me?"

She swallowed. "I like Kat. I always have. And ... well, like everyone here in Summerville, we go back a long way."

"Right. I know, look what went on during lunch. It..."

Betty held up a hand. "But I have to say, you're right."

"I didn't mean what I ... huh? What did you say?"

She gave him a small smile. "You're right. I did have a miserable year last year. And ... that inn ... it *will* be the draw and ... the vacancies I can fill here from the," she wrinkled her brow in thought, "what did you call it?"

"The overflow."

"Right, the overflow. I think it's going to be a big help for my place."

"Betty, I want you to know, I have no intention of putting anyone out of business here in Summerville. Including you."

"I know. And, I appreciate that. Believe me. I know what you're trying to do. It's just that sometimes, well, Kat..."

He cocked his head. "What about Kat?"

Betty squared her shoulders. "Look, I shouldn't tell you this, but..."

He leaned down, "What? What shouldn't you tell me?"

"Kat had it pretty rough when she came back to Summerville."

Ah. So, here it was. The pity pitch. They were always revealing, he thought.

"Why'd she have it rough, Betty?"

Betty shifted from one foot to the other. "I-I think I said too much..." She turned and walked away, making herself busy behind the front desk.

Jared walked over. "Come on, Betty. Tell me. I won't say a word."

She shot him a look. "It's just that I've noticed how ... close you two have become lately."

He felt himself blush. He hadn't blushed since he was a boy!

Now, he shifted from one foot to the other. "Yes, well, I can assure you, I wouldn't do anything to hurt Kat."

"You don't strike me as that kind of man. Not like Arthur." She picked up a stack of papers and shuffled them in her hands.

Jared beetled his brows. "Who's ... Arthur?"

"Kat's ex."

"Ex ... what?"

"Husband. He wasn't so nice."

He filed that bit of information away. Now, they were getting somewhere.

"And then, well, she had lots of family problems."

"Like what?"

Betty restacked the pile of papers, then looked up at him. "I think I've said enough. You'll have to ask Kat if you want to know more. She's a good person. She's got a great heart. And she cares about Summerville..." Again she stopped mid-sentence.

"But you don't necessarily agree with her, do you?"

"Not in this case. I think Kat's maybe a little bogged down with, well, the past."

Bingo. The past. No wonder she didn't like change. She had a bastard of an ex-husband and whatever those family problems were—well, now he was beginning to understand what went on in that lovely head of hers.

He stuck his hand out over the counter. "Thank you, Betty."

She smiled and shook his hand. "You're welcome." Her face clouded over. "Just ... remember what I said. I love Kat."

So does everyone else in Summerville. She's a good person. Don't hurt her."

Whoa. Don't hurt her. Aside from laying his hand on her beautifully rounded fanny, he did not intend to hurt her ... much. His conscience leaped to the forefront of his mind. What in hell was he supposed to do now? He just promised one of Summerville's own that he wouldn't hurt Kat Sullivan, but isn't that what Kat wanted to do to him?

He sighed. "No Betty, I'd never hurt her."

She slanted him a look. "I can see that you're uh ... fond of her."

Right. Like oil loves water and sweet loves sour, he thought. Oh hell, whom was he kidding? He was so attracted to Kat Sullivan that he hurt inside. Who would protect him from getting hurt by *her*?

"I am fond of her, Betty, bless her stubborn little soul."

He heard Betty's laughter floating behind him on his trek up the stairs.

When he got to his room, he looked at the message again and dialed George's number.

George answered on the second ring. "Jared? It's about time!"

He flopped down on the bed. It sank under his weight. "I just got in from a meeting with the Historical Society."

"How'd it go?"

"Not good."

George snorted. "Figures. They're always a bunch of old biddies who..."

Jared cut George off. "What's doing there at corporate?"

"Well ... I've come across some information I think you'd like to know about."

"Like what?" Jared shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Ms. Upstart is involved in some very, shall we say, shady stuff. My source says that she's on the receiving end of some big, cash payments and ... get this, there's quite a few, oh, let's call them 'ladies of the evening' coming and going from KISS."

Jared's mind raced. So did his heart. He *had* seen some hot babes leaving the back door of KISS, but what was this about Kat getting large amounts of money from them?

"She's getting money from those women?"

"No, Jared. From a man. She's been seen accepting large wads of cash from a man who meets her and those ladies in the back of KISS."

Jared swallowed. Hard.

"Jared?"

"I'm here."

"You could use this. *This* is what Ms. Upstart's been hiding."

*She's a good person. Don't hurt her...*

Betty's words echoed through his mind.

"For right now, let's just keep this between you and me, George."

"Jared, look, this is what we need. We can't afford to wait anymore. You're wasting time..."

KISS  
by Catherine Chernow

"I'll decide if I'm wasting time. You ... you just sit on that information. Keep it to yourself. I have my own ideas on how to handle Ms. Upst ... I mean, Kat."

George snorted. "Like kissing her?"

Jared felt his temper soar. "Stop harping on that. It was a kiss at a kid's ball game. Nothing more."

"Right, sure. Whatever you say."

"It is. And I mean it, George. Don't do anything with that information."

"Fine. I won't do ... anything with it. When will you be wrapping this all up then?"

"Soon."

Again George sighed. "What's *your* definition of *soon*?"

Jared ignored George's latest comment. "Goodbye, George."

"Jared..."

He ended the call and flipped his cell phone closed.

Flopping back down on the bed, he shut his eyes again and saw Kat in his mind's eye.

In that coral-colored corset. Touching herself. Like she did the previous evening...

He groaned.

Maybe George was right. He *was* thinking with his dick.

*She's a good person. Don't hurt her...*

Or maybe, he was thinking with his heart.

\* \* \* \*

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

George O'Reilly sat staring at the phone for a long time. Several minutes went by. George leaned over and pressed the buzzer.

"Rebecca, get in here please."

George's secretary walked in a few seconds later. "What did you need?"

"A flight to Long Island, New York."

She cocked her head in George's direction. "When do you want to leave?"

George smiled thinly. "The sooner the better, honey."

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## **Chapter Eleven**

A few days later, Kat walked up the steps of 'Noone's Nest,' balancing two containers of coffee in her hands and her tote bag across one shoulder. She entered Nancy Noone's rare-bird emporium to hear Sammy, the Cockatiel, singing one of Kat's favorite oldies tunes. A grin lit Kat's face as she placed her bag and the coffees on Nancy's counter.

"Hello!" she called out. "I've got your favorite, my friend. French vanilla cappuccino."

Nancy came from the back of the store. "Hi Kat." Nancy seemed pale. Her fine-boned face appeared pinched and strained. Kat could have sworn there were tear tracks on her friend's face.

Bill. It had to be. Nancy had been looking at Bill's picture again.

Nancy approached the counter and grabbed one of the coffee containers. "Thanks, Kat. I could sure use this."

Kat waited for her to take a few sips. "Want to talk about it?"

Nancy shrugged. She angled her head toward the back of the store. "Come on, let's go into my office."

Kat followed her, the birds in the cages ruffled their bright plumage in greeting as she and Nancy passed by. One of them, an older parrot, looked at her with large, sad eyes. Birds couldn't look sad ... could they? Were the birds at Noone's nest mirroring Nancy's glum demeanor? Or was it a

harbinger of some bad thing to come? Kat shook her head to clear it of her crazy thoughts.

"I, uh, wanted to talk to you, Kat."

Oh boy. Not good. Maybe the birds *did* know something was up.

When they arrived at Nancy's backroom office, she plunked down into a chair. "Have a seat," she told Kat.

Kat eased into a chair. She and Nancy didn't speak for a few minutes. Kat's legs began to sweat, the backs of them sticking to the leather of the seat. She shifted, welcoming the cool air that drifted underneath her heated thighs.

"I think you should be the first to hear this."

Kat's heart pounded.

Nancy's brown eyes bored into hers. "Jared Martin offered me three hundred thousand dollars for 'Noone's Nest.'"

Kat's hand shook. She placed her Styrofoam container of coffee on the desk next to her.

"Nancy, you're not going to give in and take it, are you?"

Nancy angled her head. "We've been friends a long time."

Kat nodded, her throat feeling tight. "Since we were in elementary school."

Nancy looked away then back. "In all that time, we've never disagreed on much, did we?"

Kat gave her a small smile. "Except for when we got into high school. We couldn't agree on which boys were cuter."

Nancy's face lit with a smile, but it soon faded. "Bill was the cutest."

Kat felt a lump in her throat. Her voice grew soft. "I know you still miss him."

"Kat, I can't keep this place anymore." She swept a hand out in front of her. "I've got three kids, you know that. Michael's going to be thirteen next month, and the other two, well, I need the money, Kat."

Kat felt sick inside. Jared Martin played his trump card—money. She knew he upped the ante and many of Summerville's store owners were thrilled. Kat looked away from Nancy. How could a man be such a passionate lover, a man who could care enough to bring her to the very height of sensual desire and gratification, and be such a bastard in business? She shook her head. The fatal flaw Jared probably banked on. Kat had made the big mistake of mixing business and pleasure. Fool, she thought savagely. Fool! She pressed her fisted hand into her thigh.

"I can't pass on this offer, Kat. I just can't."

Kat stood and paced for a few seconds. She walked back over to Nancy and said, "Didn't you tell me you got some money after Bill died?"

Nancy waved a hand through the air. "Kat, he was a fireman. They didn't give them much money after ... after Nine Eleven."

Kat shuddered. Nancy was right. The government *didn't* give Nancy and her family a whole hell of a lot of money in the aftermath of September Eleventh. Bill's untimely death at the World Trade Center left a huge hole in Nancy's life...

...and her bank account.

"I need this money, Kat. The boys are getting older, they're going to need so much and ... I'm tired. I can't do the

hours here anymore and quite frankly, without Bill, I don't want to."

"But Bill didn't work here with you." The words spewed forth. Kat wanted to take them back when she saw Nancy's pale face turn white.

Nancy stood on shaky legs. "Yes, I know he didn't work here. This store was supposed to be my dream, my ... well, it was for a while. While Bill was alive. But it's not anymore. I want out."

Kat placed an arm around her shoulders. "I'll buy up your loan, Nancy, I'll..."

Nancy pulled away. "Buying up my loan won't solve anything. Jared Martin is offering me three hundred thousand dollars for my store and another fifty thousand for the birds."

Kat got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Can you offer me that much, Kat? Is that what *you* want to do? Buy up the whole town? Look, I know you don't like change..."

"That's bull. I'm tired of hearing that!" Kat slashed a hand through the air. "It's not that I don't like change, it's..."

"What? Who are you kidding? You *don't* like change, Kat. You never did. I know you've been through a lot, too, but things *do* change. People change. The world changes. We have to get on with our lives and try to live without the people we love." Nancy squared her shoulders. "I have three sons to think about, you don't."

Kat felt as though she'd been slapped. She backed away from Nancy.

"Kat," Nancy reached for her. "I'm sorry, but..."

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

Kat held up a hand. "No, don't say anymore." She grabbed her tote bag from Nancy's desk.

"Kat!"

She hurried out the door of Nancy's office and ran through the store. The birds cawed and squawked in the wake of her hasty departure.

Kat flew down the street and up the steps of KISS. She unlocked the front door with shaky hands and entered the dim coolness of her store.

KISS...

Her haven. It didn't change. It stayed exactly the way she wanted. Here, people came to buy her exquisite creations. They always returned, wanting more.

Not like Bill Noone. He was never coming back.

*...and neither were her mother and sister ... or Arthur.*

Kat made her way to the back of the store and entered her workroom. She shut the door behind her and made her way over to her design table where she plunked her weary body into a chair.

She was tired ... so tired of fighting Jared Martin.

Kat laid her head down on her folded arms and cried.

She didn't stop until she heard the bell above the door to KISS jangle.

\* \* \* \*

Kat lifted her head from her worktable. She rose from her seat and quickly assessed her appearance in the mirror at the far end of the room. Swiping her fingers across her cheeks,

she managed to diminish her tear tracks, but the evidence of her crying jag remained.

She squared her shoulders and marched out of the workroom toward the front of KISS, only to stop dead in her tracks.

Jared stood by one of the lingerie forms, running his hand over a turquoise-colored, see-through, mini-length chemise, trimmed with layers upon layers of tiny ruffles at the hem and neckline. Thin, spaghetti-style straps offered support at the shoulders and a silky ribbon at the bust line drew the layers of ruffles together near the décolletage. A matching thong was visible underneath. Kat watched Jared lift the hem of the chemise and run his fingers along the top band of the thong. He must have sensed her watching him, for he swiveled his head in her direction, pinning her with his dark, golden-flecked eyes.

"Very nice, Kat," he intoned reverently as he withdrew his hand from under the chemise. He adjusted the hem down over the form then smoothed his hand over it once more. Kat imagined him doing that to her ... like he did during that wonderful, wild crazy night they had spent together.

"It's beautiful." He was staring at her, not her turquoise creation.

"What do you want?" she snapped. She hated that he looked so damn sexy, dressed in a pair of faded jeans that hugged his lean, tight backside and long legs. His dark hair, whisked back from his forehead, seemed a tad bit damp. It shined in the soft light of the power track lighting overhead. What she hated even more was her reaction to his dark, good

looks. Her pulse skidded, and her stomach took on a strange, light, tickling feeling.

Jared ambled toward her, his gait slow and purposeful. He gazed at her face for a few seconds, then reached out his hand and touched her cheek. The tip of his finger came away wet. "Why were you crying?" he asked softly.

"I was not crying."

"Kat..." he admonished. "It's very obvious that you were."

"Look, what exactly do you want? I haven't got all day."

"All right, fine, don't tell me what you're upset about." He released a sigh. "I came to see if you were busy today. I thought that if you could take off a couple of hours, we might go sailing together."

She snorted. "Like I would go with *you*."

"Look, if we spent some ... quality time together, out of bed," his eyes glowed, the look that passed between them, hot, "we might be able to come to some sort of understanding."

"Yes, we probably could. I could understand that *you* are a conniving, scheming bastard, and *you* could understand that you don't stand a chance of getting your way."

A muscle jumped in his cheek. He moved until he was right in front of her, but Kat stood her ground.

"You are coming dangerously close to me hauling you over my knee."

She smiled charmingly. "Where would you like to do it? Right here?" Kat surveyed KISS' interior. "There are some chairs over there by the dressing room."

"Don't push me, Kat," he growled. "I'd like nothing more than to give you a few good swats on your backside."

"While I do think it would heighten the sexual experience for both of us, you may want to reconsider what people would think if they walked into KISS and saw you hitting me."

"Some of them might think you deserve it."

She batted her eyes, but her voice took on a steely, hard edge. "And some of them might think you're a real bastard."

He shook his head. "You throw the word 'bastard' around quite a bit. I don't think you'd like it much if I called you a bitch."

Kat shrugged her shoulders and moved away from him. "Be my guest. I'm sure I've been called worse."

"I doubt it. Everyone here loves you."

Kat shot him a look from her spot by the far counter. She walked around the back of it and grabbed a box full of price tags from a shelf underneath. "So, now that we've established the fact that everyone loves *me* and hates *you*, what else did you want to chat about?"

"I told you, I want you to come sailing with me. It's a beautiful day. We could talk."

She slammed the tags down on the counter. "Forget it."

"God almighty, you are stubborn."

"And you're a..."

He held up a hand. "I know. I know. I'm a bastard. Look, let's at least try to meet halfway on all this."

"The only meeting I'll have with you is the next Civic Association Meeting. That's when I'll inform everyone of what you're doing to Nancy Noone."

He narrowed his eyes and leaned his hands on the counter. "What am I doing to Nancy Noone?"

"How about ... ruining her life? Making her give up her dream?"

"I'm doing no such thing! I offered her a deal that I'm not offering everyone else." He lifted one hand and aimed his index finger at her.

"Money. That's how you solve all your problems, isn't it?"

"It'll solve plenty of hers. She's got three young kids to consider. I told her she could come back to work in the store and put in some hours if she wants. I won't change a thing..."

Kat covered her ears. "The same old tune. 'I won't change a thing.'" She dropped her hands. "It's not enough you want to take her business away from her, you want to take my friend away, too." Kat wanted to bite her tongue. How had she let that slip out?

Jared folded his arms across his chest. "Now I see what this is about. You think I'm taking your friends away from you." He angled his head in her direction. "If you're Nancy's friend, why don't you support her in her decision to provide for her children?"

Kat opened her mouth, intent on a snide reply, but closed it instead. Her heart started to pound.

"I'll tell you why you won't support her. It's easier to blame *me* for all her woes than for you to support what must have been a very tough decision on her part."

Kat folded her arms across her chest. It was more a defense than defiance, but he didn't have to know that. "For your information, I *am* helping her. I'm taking over her loan

payments for Noone's Nest." The lie slipped from her lips. Kat had the most ungodly urge to stick her tongue out at him. She would have, too, if she didn't know in her heart of hearts that she told a lie.

He shook his head and rubbed his forehead with the tips of his fingers. "You're a business woman, for God's sake. How in hell is buying up her loan going to help her? She needs cash, and quite a bit of it. She'll pay off her expenses then have enough to start over somewhere. When she sells her house..."

"Her house! What do you mean, she's selling her house?"

He circled the counter and stood directly in front of her. "I thought you knew that, I thought..."

"Get away from me," she managed through gritted teeth. He was too close. Too close physically ... and too close to the truth.

"No, not unless you come with me. Come sailing with me. Get away for a while. Let's see if we can't work all this out." He reached for her, but she slapped his hand away.

Nancy was leaving. Next he'd tell her that Lilith and Doris and Fred were leaving, too, and Betty and...

It was too much. *He* was too much.

"Leave me alone. Get out of KISS now! You want me to think you're some sort of ... of ... 'do-gooder,' is that it? You think you can buy everything you want, well you can't."

His face grew stormy, and his golden-flecked eyes honed in on her face. "No, the only 'do-gooder' I see is standing right here in front of me. You," he jabbed his finger in her

chest, "want everyone to think that's what *you* are, but I know differently."

Silence charged the air immediately after the words left his mouth.

"You know different," she repeated, her tone flat. "You know nothing." *Or did he? What did he know about what she did for many of the women of Summerville?*

He grabbed her shoulders and gave her a little shake. "I'm sorry, I-I didn't mean that. I meant that you do care, that you want what's best for Summerville."

"What you *meant* is that this is going to get real dirty, isn't it?"

"No ... no!"

"Well, it is, Jared, because I'm going to use every means at my disposal to find out every dirty little secret you're hiding."

He hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her flush against his body. Kat felt the hard, hot length of his desire through the thin cotton of her sundress. "Don't mess with me or mine, Kat. You'll be very sorry." His lips crashed down on hers. She struggled in his hold, pushed at his chest, but the sweet, hot, delicious assault on her mouth didn't stop.

"Ah ... Kat, Kat..." his lips slid upwards, across her cheek, her temple and settled in her hair. "This is where we suit. *This is our* neutral ground. KISS."

He nuzzled his face in her hair and breathed deep. His hand crept to the bodice of her dress, where he eased it inside and began to massage and knead her breasts. Kat moaned, her head thrown back as he continued to caress her.

She clutched his shoulders and brought her body upright in his arms. "Someone could walk in here." She grabbed his face and kissed him hard. Shock waves of hot, molten pleasure poured through her.

She heard the low rumble in his chest. When he looked at her next, he smiled. "Yes, they could, couldn't they? And what a sight they'd see. The owner of KISS, Summerville's ex-mayor, and head of the Historical Society, everyone's favorite lady, locked in the throws of passion with her most hated enemy."

He slipped her breast free from the lacy confines of her bra. When he bent his head to tongue her nipple, Kat was positive that she didn't hate *anyone* in that moment.

"It turns you on, doesn't it?" he asked, his voice silky and deep. "Knowing that someone could march in here at any second," he whispered in her ear. She felt the hem of her dress being lifted then his hand slid up her leg and cupped her between her legs. With his other hand, he cupped her bottom and squeezed it gently.

She gasped once, when the heel of his hand brushed across her labia. Stars danced before her eyes, like little pinpricks of light. "Oh my," she breathed. Then she looked him right in the eyes. "You bastard," she whispered and slumped against him.

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. "Bitch," he replied, but his voice held a note of tenderness. "My she-cat," he crooned as he stroked her back, and caressed her buttocks. "KISS is where we belong, Kat. We belong *here*, where you design all these glorious creations meant to tease

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and taunt." The more he spoke, the harder he began to rub her mons. When he reached underneath her panties to stroke her bud, she almost came right there. "Your designs leave just enough to the imagination to whet the male animal's sexual appetite," he continued. "It's what lies beneath that keeps the male coming back ... begging for more."

His words washed over her, filling her mind with a cloud of lust. She ground her pelvis into his hand. In one swift movement, Jared backed her over the counter, the box of price tags sliding across the smooth glass. The box hit the floor, the tags scattering everywhere. He hiked her dress up over her legs and shoved her panties down. Kat felt totally naked and exposed. A dark, swirling thrill stormed through her, filling her with anticipation and an acute awareness that the door to KISS could burst open any second.

Jared inserted two fingers into her hot, moist clit and pushed them slowly, in then out. The pad of his thumb massaged her sensitive nubbin, bringing her to the edge of that dark, sensual abyss. She cried out his name as it loomed before her, growing wider with each pass of his fingers across her wet, heated passage. Jared covered her mouth with his, swallowing her hoarse cries, and kissed her long, hard and deep. His tongue battled with hers, imitating the same in and out movements of his fingers.

When her orgasm hit, her entire body shook. She raked her nails over his bare arms, leaving a trail of minute, bloody scratches in their wake. His body covered hers, head-to-head, chest-to-chest, and belly-to-belly.

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Jared pulled her tight against him. Kat didn't think she could ever move again. Slowly, she opened her eyes and met his. "My cat's claws were out," he laughed, the sound rich and warm. "She's left her mark."

Kat looked at the scratches on his arms and shuddered.

"What you do to me, Kat..." his breath caught and held. Jared smoothed the hair from her face and eased away from her. Kat could see his stiff shaft straining against the denim of his jeans. He lifted her from the counter and adjusted her panties, sliding them up her legs. Kat's legs trembled. She had to clutch his shoulders to steady her body.

"Come with me this afternoon ... we'll sail the day away and make love until the wee hours of the morning," he bent near her ear and whispered as he pulled her dress down. He smoothed the wrinkles from it then patted her bottom.

Kat came crashing back down to earth. "No," she stepped away from him.

"Kat..." he reached out, but she moved back another step.

"Get out of here. Now." The reality of what she had just done inside KISS hit her square in the chest. If he spent one more second with her, she feared she'd give in to the driving passion he brought to the surface each time they got together. She needed to cool down and get away, yes, but not with him!

He shook his head. "Why deny what we both want? I don't understand you, Kat. I really don't. If you care about this town like you say, then come with me and talk about it. Let's work this all out." He gave her a long, level look. "I know you

don't believe it, but I swear to you, I care about this town, too."

"Well, I certainly don't care about *you*."

She hated that his face fell. She hated herself for caring about him. She didn't care! She didn't!

"Get out," she ground out. "Now."

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," was all he said as he strode out of KISS that afternoon.

Leaving Kat to wonder if she had just completely lost her mind.

\* \* \* \*

Jared arrived at the marina a little while later. He parked the Jag and reached for the baskets of treats he had intended to share with Kat that afternoon. A small fortune, he thought, he had spent a small fortune on the most exotic, delicious food he could find. He had the best time combing the shelves of Summerville's gourmet shop, grabbing every jar of caviar and gourmet jellies he could find. Brie and Camembert cheese lined the basket he carried, as well as an assortment of crackers and a few bottles of the best wine from the local wineries.

To hell with her, he thought, as anger simmered inside him. He'd planned to make it an afternoon of erotic, sensual eating. It was to act as the foreplay to an evening of wonderful lovemaking with his fiery, auburn-haired tigress. He would have enjoyed holding her, feeding her the tempting treats he had brought along. And *she*, damn her stubborn soul, would have enjoyed it the most. Her beautiful face

would soften—her exquisite, sea-green eyes would dilate as her need for him built, as *his* need for her rose.

Fool! He had been a fool to think Kat would surrender. He had crossed that line he always drew, the line where business did not collide with passion and pleasure. He wanted Kat. He needed her so that he could find that haven again, the way he did the other night. With Kat nestled in his arms, he had no worries...

Now, he had a big one. Kat. She had mentioned things getting dirty...

Would they? Would she manage to do what Plasticmate had not succeeded in doing and tell the world about Sam Martin? It grew more difficult each day his father stayed hidden away in the nursing home. Dawn gave him good care, but it was Sam Martin's prison just the same. How many people had Jared paid off to keep it a secret? He grew cold inside, though it was a balmy eighty degrees outside. No, Kat wouldn't ... she couldn't...

He refused to believe that Kat would stoop that low. He'd tighten the security around his father. He had to. It would break his mother's heart if the world knew that Sam Martin had succumbed to illness and lost his mind.

Jared arrived at the marina office. The man behind the counter greeted him when he walked in.

"Hello Mr. Martin! Are you ready to set sail? I've got a beauty all ready for you. Take a look." The man pointed outside.

Jared looked at the large sailboat tied to the dock. It was indeed a beauty. The forty-two foot cruising sailboat lay in wait, ready for Jared's skilled sailor's hands.

"If you're ready, we'll get you set up and on board."

Jared's shoulders slumped. He shook his head. "I changed my mind. I, uh, don't want to sail today."

The man narrowed his eyes. "I see..."

"My plans changed."

The man behind the counter adjusted the hat on his head and replied, "Well, I have to keep your deposit."

"That's fine," Jared murmured in response. What was the use? If Kat wasn't there, he wouldn't enjoy it anyway. Fool, he thought, you're such a damn fool.

"Look," the man said, pushing the cap further back on his head. "If I can loan it to someone else today, I'll return your deposit, fair enough?"

Jared nodded. "Fair enough." He looked out at the large boat again. "Just keep it," he quickly finished. Money. Kat was right. He had scads of it. But, what did it really do for him? What had it done for his father?

Nothing.

He strode out of the marina office, basket in hand, and stopped when he saw a family of four getting into a boat near the dock. The young couple had two small children with them. Jared walked up to them. "Here," he said, handing the basket to the man. The man just stared at him. "I bought a lot of food today, but my outing was canceled. Maybe you could use it."

The man lifted the lid of the basket. When he viewed the basket's contents, he called his wife over. "Honey, look at this!" She came over to peer inside the basket. The man looked back at Jared. "How much do you want for all that?"

Jared shook his head, "Nothing," he replied. "Nothing at all."

He plunked the basket down on the dock and walked away.

When he got to his car, he got in and turned on the air conditioner full blast, letting the cool air wash over him. He leaned his head back on the seat and shut his eyes.

Kat accused him of taking Nancy's dream away for her. Had he? Had he taken away Nancy's dream because he had lost his own? Maybe Kat was right...

He shook his head, but it didn't clear Kat from the forefront of his thoughts. He grew hard thinking of how good she felt back at the store, of how soft and fragrant her skin was ... of how wet she became, like liquid fire, when he palmed her. Jared shifted on the seat to relieve the pressure of his tight, aching member. Kat...

He had left her satisfied that afternoon. No matter what, he wanted her happy.

As he gunned the engine and took off out of the marina parking lot, he had so many crazy thoughts. Maybe she was right about him using his money to buy everything and anything that stood in the way of MegaMart. When he came to a red light at the corner of Main Street and Route Twenty-Five, he slowed the Jag, and then stopped. Another thought popped into his head...

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Kat's needs that afternoon had far outweighed his. He had every intention of marching back into KISS and pulling her straight into his arms when his cell phone rang. Jared pulled the Jag to a nearby curb and answered the call, only to see that he had a voice mail message. He flipped open the phone and retrieved it.

"Jared, this is Dawn. Listen, Dad's not having such a good day today. In fact, I think he's worse. He's been asking for you."

He pinched the bridge of his nose as he listened to the rest of the message.

*I think he's worse...*

This day couldn't possibly get any worse, but Jared had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that it already had.

He turned the Jag around, heading back on Route Twenty-Five, intent on seeing Sam Martin...

And wondered if it would be for the last time.

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## **Chapter Twelve**

The next couple of days found Kat busy at KISS. It was the height of the summer tourist season. Customers flowed in and out. Most went away with their arms laden with pink shopping bags and packages bearing KISS' logo. She stayed late most nights, using the excuse that work is what kept her at KISS so late, but could only fool herself so much ... the truth of the matter was, she didn't want to go home and face her big, empty, lonely bed. Stupid ... she had gotten stupid and sappy and saved that silly pillowcase Jared had used. It still held his scent. She would take it out and breathe deep of the delicious, citrusy smell. She hadn't removed the corset, thong, and garter from her bedroom chair, either. They remained there, a shrine to the thrilling night of passion she shared with Jared.

Now, serving customers, she felt grateful for the summer help she hired. Doris and Harvey's granddaughter, Melissa, was a bright, eager eighteen-year-old, bent on being a clothing designer. She was a big help with the customers—she looked great, spoke well ... knew Kat's designs inside and out. Melissa's presence also enabled Kat to avoid the far counter of KISS where Jared had brought her to the height of passion. It seemed as though everywhere she went in Summerville—her home, KISS, or even the Sunshine Café—she was reminded of him.

Where *was* Jared? She hadn't seen him for days. Had she scared him off? She doubted that. He'd be back, as sure as

the sun always shone in Summerville, she knew he'd be back. He had to make a presentation to the Civic Association at the meeting next Thursday. No way would Mr. Moneybags pass up that chance.

The bell above the door to KISS jangled. Kat looked up from her position by one of the lingerie forms where she adjusted a magenta and deep purple lace baby-doll gown. On the legs of the form were wide, matching 'indulgence' garters, made of deep purple silk. Small magenta tassels dangled from the ends. Kat glanced over at KISS' entranceway, expecting to see another tourist, but it was Patrice who waited there.

"Melissa," Kat whispered in the young girl's ear. "Will you come here and help this customer when you're done ringing up that other lady, please?"

"Of course!" Melissa replied. "I'll be right there."

Kat gave her a small smile. "Great," she replied, patting her shoulder. "It's just that I've got to speak with someone."

Melissa handed the customer a pink KISS shopping bag. "Come back real soon." She told her. "Okay, here I go," she shot around the counter's edge.

Kat gazed at the well-dressed woman she had been helping. "Melissa will help you with sizing, if that's all right."

Kat hurried away to greet Patrice.

"It's nice to see you again, Patrice."

"Oh Kat, have I got some news for you. Arnya's shower was this past weekend and ... well, I've got a new client, thanks to you."

Kat smiled. "I'm so glad Patrice."

Patrice's long, dangling earrings bobbed in unison. She bent her head near Kat's and said, "And that means it's a customer for you, as well. They loved your designs."

Kat took Patrice's arm and led her toward the back of KISS. "Come and tell me about it over a cup of coffee."

"Gladly," Patrice walked along side her.

Kat opened the door to her office and ushered her in. Patrice took a seat and accepted a cup of coffee from Kat.

"So, who's the new client?" Kat asked, taking a sip from her mug. She slid into another chair, across from Patrice's, grateful to be off her feet, if only for a few minutes.

"Jerome Waters."

The mug almost slipped from Kat's hand. Kat schooled her features. "Really?"

"Really," Patrice crowed. "The Waters ladies loved everything I bought for Arnya, so when I told them I got it all at KISS, they, of course, passed the word around and now Jerome Waters sent me here today to get a birthday present for his wife."

Kat placed her mug down on the desk. "That's terrific."

Patrice took a sip from her cup and crossed one leg over another. Settling back in the chair, she said, "I, uh, also had an opportunity to speak with Mr. Waters about what we chatted about the last time."

Kat's heartbeat kicked into high gear. "And what did Mr. Waters say?"

Patrice sat up straight and reached for her handbag. She dug through the leather satchel and took out a small

business-card size case. "Here," she handed Kat a card. "I got Mr. Waters' private number for you."

Kat accepted the card and had to stop herself from snatching it from Patrice's outstretched hand. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I kid you not, my friend!" Patrice grinned at her. In a low voice she continued, "He said to tell you that if you wanted to discuss anything at all about MegaMart, he'd gladly meet with you. I gave him a little bit of background on you, and what I knew about your uh, situation here with MegaMart and Summerville."

Kat shook her head. "I-I can't believe this."

"Believe it, Kat. He's more than eager to tell his story to anyone, it seems, to anyone who'll listen to him trash the 'money giant,' as he calls it."

Kat slumped back in her chair. It finally happened—her chance to find out the real truth about how MegaMart screwed Plasticmate.

She just couldn't believe it!

"All I can say is ... thank you."

Patrice grinned. "Nope. All *I* can say is thanks. Waters gave me carte blanche and told me to pick out a few things for his wife's birthday. He's paying me a small fortune, and I have you to thank for it."

Kat schooled her features once more. No, what Waters was doing was buying an opportunity to tell his story to someone, Kat thought.

Either way, she and Patrice turned out to be the winners...

...and it looked like Jared Martin would be the biggest loser yet.

\* \* \* \*

"Dad, Jared's here."

Jared stood next to his father's wheelchair and watched as Dawn brushed their father's shoulder. When he didn't move, she bent and spoke next to his ear. "Jared's here to see you, Dad. How about saying hello?"

Jared held his breath as Sam Martin lifted his head. He looked at Jared, his eyes vacant. Jared sighed, wishing for what he knew would never happen, that Sam would recognize him. The last two times he had visited, Sam hadn't even acknowledged him...

That's because he thought Jared was *his* father.

Jared had played along, acting the part of the elder Martin's father, answering Sam's childish questions, mostly about things that didn't make much sense to Jared.

"The dementia's been worse these past couple of days," Dawn laid a hand on Jared's shoulder as she spoke. "That's why I called you."

Jared looked down at his father and ran a hand through the elder Martin's thinning, gray hair. He smoothed the wayward strands sticking up on the top of his head. "I'm here Dad," Jared crooned to him. "I'm here."

Sam's hands shook for a few seconds then he lifted his eyes and gazed at Jared. "Hey, Dad." Jared smiled. "How are you? Look what I brought..." Jared held up a bag. "It's your

favorite, remember? Blueberry muffins." He laid the bag down on Sam's lap.

Sam looked down at the bag. He shoved it from his lap and shouted, "I want ... I want..." he looked around, confusion lining his weathered face. "I want them all to leave me alone!" he shouted.

Jared rose to his feet. He bent his tall frame and clamped his hands down on the arms of Sam's wheelchair. "It's okay, Dad. It's okay..." He repeated, like a mantra. Soon, the deep sound of Jared's voice acted like an elixir. Sam quieted, but his eyes became glassy. When he looked up again, he stared directly into Jared's eyes. "Daddy," he said.

Jared swallowed. Hard. "Yeah, I'm here, son."

Sam shook his head. "Knew you'd come. Knew you'd come."

Jared nodded. "I'm here. I'm not leaving."

Sam looked over at Dawn. "You see? He came. Daddy always comes to my games."

Jared grabbed a chair and drew it over by Sam. He eased his tall frame into it and took Sam's stiff, clawed hand into his own. Running his thumb over the dry skin on the back, he held onto his father's hand like a lifeline.

"I'll just be over there if you need me," Dawn bent and whispered. She glanced at her watch. "It's going to be time for his medicine soon."

"Right." Jared let go of a breath.

Dawn patted his shoulder and sat in a chair on the other side of the room. She nodded her head in a gesture of encouragement. Jared took it as his cue to speak with Sam.

"How was school today, Da ... I mean, son."

Sam shook his head. "Math."

Jared angled his head. "What?"

Sam made a fist and ground it into his thigh. "Hate ... math."

Jared shook his head and sighed at Sam's childish answer. At least the last time he visited with his father, Sam had spoken in complete sentences. Now, his speech grew fragmented. He wondered how long it would be before Sam didn't answer at all.

He shook his head to clear it of his morose thoughts. Kat, he thought, think of Kat ... dressed in that coral-colored, satin corset and that garter belt. Did it have lace on it, he asked himself. Yes, yes it had lace...

"No more school." Sam told him. "No like."

Jared tried to swallow past the lump in his throat. "I know you don't like it, son. Tomorrow ... tomorrow's Saturday. You won't have to go to school tomorrow."

Sam nodded, and soon his eyes grew heavy. When he nodded next, his head didn't come back up. Jared got up and wiped the small pool of drool forming on the corner of Sam's mouth. Dawn got up from her chair and walked over to them.

"Want to help me get him to bed?" she asked Jared.

"Sure."

She nodded and stepped aside so that Jared could lift his father from the wheelchair. He cradled the older man in his arms, lifting him effortlessly from the seat of the wheelchair. Jared walked over to the bed and laid his father on it then watched Sam roll over into a fetal position.

It broke his heart to see it. Jared turned away, so he wouldn't have to look at the wasted man his father had become. He walked over to the windows and stared out at the overcast day. Summerville never looked like this, he thought. He glanced up at the clouds, thinking of Kat and how she looked that day she walked into the Sunshine Café. Class. She had an animal's wild grace, the way she moved ... her steps long and light.

His she-cat.

Dawn eased her father under the sheets and blankets, being careful not to wake him. "He'll sleep for a while now."

Jared glanced at his watch. "How about his meds?"

"Soon," Dawn patted his shoulder. "Thanks for the help."

Jared took her hand and squeezed it. "For nothing. I should be thanking you."

"Mom spent the morning here, but I called the house, and they sent the car. She just can't handle this anymore."

Jared sighed and ran a hand around the back of his neck. He thanked his lucky stars for the loyal staff his parents employed over the years. Jeffrey, his father's driver, was as a godsend.

"The staff at this nursing home is great, Jared. I can't thank you enough for finding this place." She gazed out the window for a few seconds then said, "Oh! I almost forgot. I saved something for you."

She walked soundlessly across the floor to the other side of the room. Reaching into her bag, she withdrew a folded piece of paper. On her way back to Jared, she stopped to

check on Sam, pulling the blanket up and over him when Sam kicked it off. He rolled slightly, curling tighter into his body.

Jared tried not to watch, but he couldn't help it. The image burned into his brain. He tried to recall the last good memory he had of Sam, but couldn't. It was getting harder and harder not to think of his father as a sick man.

"Here," Dawn stood beside him again. "This is what I saved."

She shoved a piece of folded newspaper into his hand. When he opened it, he saw Kat with her arms entwined around his neck, the two of them in a passionate kiss. The game! The soccer game he helped coach. He ran his hand over Kat's picture, wishing he could get lost now in a heated kiss with her.

"She's beautiful," Dawn said softly.

Jared looked down at his sister's smiling face. It was good to see her smile. "Yes, she is," he blurted.

Dawn angled her chin. "Is she the one you told me about ... Ms. Upstart?"

Jared flushed crimson. "That's her."

"I really love that nightshirt she designed, Jared. It's so soft and silky. But, you didn't have to do that..."

He held up a hand. "I wanted to. And I'm glad you like it. Kat's ... talented." In more ways than one ... he thought of their love-play in bed and grew hard. He shifted, praying Dawn didn't see.

"I can see why you love her."

*That* snapped him out of his thoughts. He handed the picture back to Dawn. "Who said anything about love?"

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*by Catherine Chernow*

Dawn looked down at the picture and shrugged. "It's just that, well, you got that look on your face."

He frowned. "What look?"

She gazed up and laughed. "Certainly not that one, silly." She chuckled him on the chin. His face softened.

"That look ... right now. You looked at her picture the way you look at me and Mom and Dad. It makes me feel, well, good inside ... warm ... loved."

Jared didn't speak. He couldn't. Love? No ... no!

Dawn grinned. "Of course, when you look at Ms. Up ... I mean, Kat, your eyes were certainly a lot hotter than they are when you give me that loving look, big brother," she teased. "Those little gold flecks in your eyes burn just a little brighter."

Jared stood there, dumbstruck.

Love.

Maybe Dawn was losing *her* mind.

"It's not such a bad thing, Jared. Love. You should try it." Dawn glanced at Sam, then back at Jared. "Before it's too late. Before life passes you by and..." Her eyes filled. "You've given up one dream, don't give up another."

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## **Chapter Thirteen**

Kat made the four-hour drive to Plasticmate's headquarters located on the outskirts of Tarrytown, New York. She gripped the steering wheel of her Lexus as she cruised along the scenic Saw Mill River Parkway, wishing she was back at KISS. Whatever secret Jared held, Jerome Waters had the key, and Kat intended to unlock the door of truth that would lead to Mr. Moneybag's downfall.

The only problem being ... she couldn't seem to quell the voice of her conscience. She shoved it aside, telling herself that again, she was doing this for Summerville. Once she knew Jared's dirty little secret, she could blackmail him and he'd be gone. For good. Never to be seen again in Summerville.

A black cloud of depression loomed, making Kat's heart ache at the thought. She pushed that emotion aside, too, in favor of anger—at Jared—for daring to tell her the truth. It was a bitter pill to swallow and if Jared forced the truth about Nancy Noone down her throat and the fact that she had let her friend down, then she'd force him to swallow his own medicine, too.

Tit for tat. An eye for an eye. Truth for truth.

The truth was ... Kat felt miserable inside. She hated this. Sneaking around. Spying. Getting information on a man who made her feel alive—in bed and out—it wasn't right. But it was for Summerville. She shook her head and gripped the

steering wheel tighter. Maybe, just maybe, that tune was getting a little played out.

Soon, she was seeing signs for 'Tarrytown, the Gateway to the Hudson.' She followed the directions she got, and fifteen minutes later, she pulled into the parking lot of Plasticmate's corporate office.

Kat got out and walked up the front steps of the sleek, modern-design building, feeling as though her legs turned to rubber.

\* \* \* \*

A little while later, Kat sat in the reception area of the country's leading producer of plastic storage containers and watched the busy, bustling office come to life. She had an early appointment, one of the first, she'd been told by Mr. Waters' administrative assistant. Kat sat on a leather couch and watched everything, feeling like a small fish in the big corporate pond of America. It was the same feeling she had when she had been married to Arthur. His money and power had swallowed her whole then he spit out what remained of her pride and dignity—and her.

She shifted on the leather seat and ran a finger over the dark blue skirt she wore. When she looked up next, a young woman stood in front of her. "Mr. Waters will see you now, Ms. Sullivan."

She rose from the sofa and followed behind the young woman as they walked down a long corridor. Kat inhaled what she always called the 'phony-fresh' smell of a large corporate office. Arthur's advertising firm had smelled much the same

way. They finally stopped in front of a door at the end of the hallway. The receptionist knocked then opened the double doors, allowing them entrance.

"Mr. Waters, Ms. Sullivan is here."

Jerome Waters looked up and pinned Kat with a pair of silver-blue eyes. His hair, white as snow and perfectly cut, capped an unlined face. Kat wondered about his age, and whether he had some plastic surgery. Crazy. Her head was filled with crazy thoughts.

"Come in, Ms. Sullivan."

His voice was deep, inviting.

*Come in, said the spider to the fly...*

She squashed the insane thoughts racing around her brain.

Her feet felt leaden as they skimmed the carpet. A wall of windows gave her a clear view of Tarrytown and the surrounding area. Tall buildings and New York City's skyline, could be seen in the distance.

Jerome Waters didn't rise to greet her, choosing to remain behind his massive desk. He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers under his chin studying her with his crystal-blue eyes.

*Okay, he's sizing me up. I don't blame him ... after all, why should he trust me?*

"Have a seat, Ms. Sullivan," he drew out her name and pointed to a large club chair near his desk.

Kat walked over and eased into it.

"I thought you'd look different."

She angled her head in his direction. "Why?"

He shrugged then pulled his chair forward until it was right under his desk. "You're a clothing designer, aren't you?"

"Yes," she crossed one leg over the other, in an effort to get comfortable. The large, leather club chair had big grommets, which traveled down either side of the arms. Kat felt lost in it. When she glanced in Waters' direction, she swore he had a sly look to his eyes—as though he sensed her discomfort. He seemed pleased.

The bastard.

She gave herself a mental shake. That's what she called Jared. But Jared wasn't Waters. When Jared looked at her, his dark, golden-flecked eyes were warm. Waters' crystal-blue eyes were ... icy.

She let go of a breath. "I designed the lingerie for your future daughter-in-law, Arnya."

He smiled thinly, but didn't say anything. Finally, after a few seconds, he spoke. "I just thought you'd be dressed, well, a little more, how shall we say it..."

Kat lifted one brow in his direction. "Bohemian?"

He laughed. "Right. 'Bohemian.' I had something else in mind, but if I said it to you, Ms. Sullivan, I'd have a harassment suit on my hands. Now days," he held his hands open in front of him, palms out. "You can't say a damn thing to a woman without getting slapped with a lawsuit."

She returned his thin smile. "I'd say these are better days, then, wouldn't you?"

He shook his head. "Touché. Now. You're here to discuss MegaMart is that it?"

"Yes. I am."

Waters cocked his head. "And just how do I know you're not a ... spy ... secretly working for them?"

She sat up straighter. "You don't. But trust me when I say, I'm no spy. I'm here strictly on business. I need to know what happened between you and Jared Martin. I need to know, because," her throat got tight. She swallowed around a lump. "My hometown is at stake."

Waters stood and walked over to the wall of windows at the other end of his office. "So, he's going to buy up your town, too, is that it?"

"Precisely."

Waters turned around and walked over to her. He stood right by her chair. Kat didn't move a muscle. She looked up and met his look squarely. "Martin tried to blackmail me," he told her. "I begged him, literally begged him to raise the price of my products just a few cents because the price of resin went up. My expenses were higher. He told me, the only way the price of Plasticmate products would go up is if *he* decided to raise it and ... he would get the profit."

Kat's heart pounded. Her palms grew moist. She wiped them on her skirt and shifted in the chair.

"When I refused, he threatened me with blackmail. He had only one problem..."

"Which was?"

"I know something about his family that no one else does. You see, we used to get along. I made money and so did MegaMart ... until Martin got greedy. He pushed me, threatened to ... well, all I can say is, *I* pushed back. I told

him I'd go public with the skeletons hanging in his family's closet."

Kat rose to her feet and folded her arms across her chest. No way was she going to carry on a conversation by looking up at him. It was too ... disconcerting. But her curiosity was piqued. She had to know more!

"What's his secret, Mr. Waters?"

"What's it worth to you, Ms. Sullivan?" He smiled, revealing a mouth full of white, even teeth. She thought that smile would dazzle someone else, but for her, it seemed ... feral.

She dropped her hands to her sides. "What do you mean?"

He moved closer. She backed up a step, but his hand shot out and grabbed her arm. "I mean, what will you give *me* if I tell you what Martin hides from the world?"

Kat looked down at his hand. She managed to pry his fingers loose and stepped away from him.

"You're a beautiful woman, Ms. Sullivan, surely a beautiful woman like you has a few uh, favors, she can bestow on a man like me."

Kat felt sick. Waters stood there, like a strutting peacock with his plumage raised. Did he think she was impressed by the likes of him?

She squared her shoulders and raised her chin. "I bestow no favors on anyone, Mr. Waters. You can either tell me what I want to know or ... not." She grabbed her bag from the chair and slung it across her shoulder. Then she walked to the door. Waters' low laugh floated toward her.

"It was worth a try."

She turned and faced him.

"Martin's father is a Looney-tune. They've got him locked away someplace."

Kat felt a bead of sweat trickle down between her breasts.

"He's crazy, Ms. Sullivan. Out of his mind. And *that's* what Jared Martin keeps hidden from the world."

She blew out a breath. "Thank you for the information." Kat kept her voice even, how, she didn't know, but she managed to keep it steady.

"If you ever decide to change your mind, I'm here," he told her.

Kat took a deep breath, let it out. "How about you?" she asked. "What are *you* hiding, Mr. Waters?"

He narrowed his eyes. "What in hell is that supposed to mean?"

Kat shrugged, appearing unconcerned, but inside, she was a mess. All she wanted to do was get the hell out of there. "It's been my experience that when someone pushes someone else—like you pushed MegaMart—they tend to push back, to use your earlier words."

"So?"

Again, she shrugged, appearing innocent. "So ... maybe, just maybe, MegaMart had something on *you*, too."

Seconds went by, Waters didn't say a word. Then he strode toward the desk and wrote something on a pad, ripping it from the binding when he finished scribbling. He walked over to her and held it in his outstretched hand. "This is where they keep their nutty relative. Supposedly, the

daughter keeps an eye on him and Jared Martin has a watchdog posted to guard against unwanted visitors."

Kat reached for the paper, but he snatched it back. "Are you sure you don't want to change your mind? I'm a very vigorous ... lover." Her drew out the word 'lover.'

"I'm sure you are," Kat said evenly. She glanced at the pictures on his desk and spotted a photo of an attractive older woman, surrounded by three younger women.

"Your wife?" Kat angled her chin toward his desk, her eyes landing on the photo of the older woman.

Waters glanced back and looked at the pictures. "Yes. My wife." His voice grew tight.

Kat walked up to him and snatched the paper from his hands. "It's very evident to me, Mr. Waters, what Martin blackmailed *you* with." She looked him right in the eye. "I take it I'm not the first one you've ... asked for favors."

He shook his head and smiled thinly. "Touché again, Ms. Sullivan."

"Exactly."

Kat opened the door and strode out of his office. The 'phony-fresh' odor of Corporate America assailed her nostrils once more as she made her way down the hall and into the reception area.

She didn't stop until she got to her car.

Kat started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot.

Fifteen minutes later, she drove off the highway at the closest exit. She pulled over to the side of the road, and got out of the car....

...and deposited the contents of her stomach in the bushes nearby.

\* \* \* \*

Luckily, the Riverdale Nursing Home wasn't too far from Plasticmate's Headquarters. Kat made the drive in an hour, and pulled into the parking lot at two that afternoon. The early July day proved hot and humid. Kat walked up the steps of the facility, feeling hot, tired and out of sorts.

But she had to see. She had to find out if what Waters told her was true. She had to know if Jared's father was ... insane. She shuddered just thinking about it. No wonder Sam Martin had vanished. The stockholders of MegaMart wouldn't condone a crazy old man running their corporation. Moreover, Jared's family certainly didn't need any undue media attention.

It would ruin their family ... and their business.

She hurried up the steps and sailed through the front door, stopping at the reception area. There, a nurse greeted her.

"I'd like to see..." Kat stopped. If she said Sam Martin, would they let her in? If Jared kept this a guarded family secret, he surely wouldn't allow just *anyone* in to see his father. Her mind raced. What was the sister's name?

Dawn!

"I'd like to see ... Dawn Martin, please. I'm her friend, Kat." Kat prayed that Jared might have mentioned something to Dawn about her, and hopefully, something good, but after their last intense argument, Kat realized that the only thing on her side in that minute was ... luck.

The nurse behind the desk smiled. "All right. Let me just call up there and see if she's free."

Kat waited for what seemed like an indeterminate amount of time. She plopped down in a chair in the lobby and drummed her fingers on the arm until she saw the nurse return.

"Ms. Martin said to come up."

Kat let go of a breath. "Where, uh, am I going, exactly?"

"Third floor. Room three sixteen."

"Thank you." Kat hurried toward an elevator. She hit the 'up' button and a few seconds later, the elevator whisked her to the third floor.

She found room three sixteen, and a burly man sitting on a chair outside the door. He stood when she approached. "I'm here to see Ms. Martin. I'm Kat Sullivan, her ... friend."

"Right. She said you could come in."

The big man opened the door. Kat scooted by him and walked in, feeling his watchful eyes bore into her back. Immediately after she entered the room, that familiar odor of sickness hit her. She squashed her urge to turn around and flee and continued advancing into the room.

An old man sat in a wheelchair by the windows. A nurse sat by him. As Kat made her way over to him, the nurse looked up at her.

"Hi," she smiled, causing Kat to stop her approach. The nurse had the same dark hair and eyes as Jared, but her face was a classic oval. Pretty, Kat thought, so pretty...

"Jared's spoke about you often. I'm Dawn."

Kat swallowed hard as Dawn met her halfway. She stuck out her hand. Kat reached for it and gave it a shake.

"It's nice of you to come and visit. I, uh, only wish Jared were here ... you just missed him."

Kat sagged against the bed.

Dawn's arm snaked out. "Are you okay?"

Kat smiled thinly. "It was a long drive. I'm just ... a little tired."

"Of course you are. Come on ... sit down. Visit with us for a while."

Kat felt her stomach lurch. Jared had just been there! And now, she would be meeting his crazy father. This was too much, she had to get out, she had to...

"I wish you knew my father," Dawn said softly. "He was a really great guy. A hard worker. And community-minded." She smiled at Kat. "He keeps drifting in and out of time. He goes from the present to the past constantly. I think it's odd that he keeps talking about his school days. He keeps saying how he hated math and yet, he was a whiz with numbers."

Kat managed to speak. "Sometimes, people love numbers, they just hate to study." Kat looked over at Sam. "May I see him?"

"Of course." Dawn led her over to Sam's chair and squatted next to him. "Dad," she shook him. His eyes opened. "Dad, this is Kat ... Jared's girl."

*Jared's girl...*

Dawn's words floated around her, acting like a balm to her nerves. Jared's girl. It had such a nice sound to it.

"She's come to visit, Dad." She motioned Kat to come closer.

"Hello, Mr. Martin."

Sam gazed up at her. "You know my boy?"

Dawn's eyes grew as wide as her smile.

Kat swallowed. "Yes sir, I know your boy."

"He's a good boy, my boy. Loves gym. Gym..."

Kat shook her head and glanced at Dawn. "Who's Jim?"

Dawn smiled and got to her feet. "He means, gym, as in physical education. My brother was big into sports growing up. Still is."

Kat suddenly remembered Jared's skill with a soccer ball.

"My boy loves you."

Kat stilled. At the same time, her heart raced.

"I, uh ... I..."

"My boy..." Sam's eyes grew heavy, his head dropped to his chest.

Dawn looked at Kat. "Would you mind waiting outside for just a few minutes, Kat? I need to get him into bed. Jared usually helps when he's here, but today, I have to rely on one of the staff."

"No problem. I'll just be right outside."

Dawn smiled. "Jeffrey will keep you company."

Kat left the room and ran headlong into Jeffrey. She bounced against his large, muscled frame. Soon, an orderly came down the hall. He entered Sam's room and shut the door behind him.

"Some say that Mr. Sam is nuts."

Kat shot Jeffrey a look.

"He's not nuts, he's ... just sick is all."

"I'm sure," she murmured.

"That Alzheimer's Miss Dawn says he's got, well, that did him in you know."

Kat's mouth hung open. Alzheimer's! Sam Martin wasn't crazy he was ... sick ... just like Jeffrey said.

"You've known Mr. Martin long, Jeffrey?"

"I've been working for the Martins since I was eighteen. They're nice folks. Always were. It's a shame what happened to Mr. Sam."

Yes, she thought.

A damn shame.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Kat bid farewell to Dawn. Sam had slept peacefully while she and Dawn chatted. Her heart ached to see him in his curled, fetal position.

"It's been hard on all of us, but I think Jared really took it the worst. My father got sick, and Jared had to assume all his responsibilities at MegaMart. The stockholders were breathing down our necks. Someone had to take over for my father, and that someone was Jared."

"He didn't want to?" Kat asked.

"No, he had his own dreams." Dawn grinned. "He wanted to be a gym teacher. My brother loves kids. That's really what he wanted, you know, to teach physical education at this special school for autistic kids."

Kat recalled how he treated Allie. Her eyes stung traitorously.

"But ... things change. And Jared did his duty, or, what he thinks was his duty."

"Your father would be proud," came out of Kat's mouth.

"Yes, he would. To know that Jared's doing such a great job at MegaMart."

Kat's heart lurched at the mention of MegaMart.

Dawn glanced at her watch. "As much as I loved meeting you Kat, and, by the way, I loved the nightshirt! It's beautiful."

So, Kat thought, he really didn't give it to the blonde!

"I'm glad."

"Anyway, you should get going. You'll hit traffic if you don't. Jared would kill me if he knew I'd kept you too long, but I really enjoyed our time together."

Guilt. It hit Kat hard. What would Dawn think of her if she knew Kat's only reason in coming was to find out if Sam Martin was nuts? And now that she met Dawn and knew Sam's real problem, she felt even worse.

"I'll tell Jared he missed you, Kat. He'll..."

"No!" Kat's eyes grew wide. Realizing she shouted, she lowered her voice. "I mean, you don't have to mention I was here. He might get upset ... knowing that ... he missed me. I don't want him upset."

Dawn shook her head. "He's lucky to have you. You really care about him, don't you?"

She had to leave ... fast!

"Y-yes, I care. About ... well, him." Kat stuck out her hand. "Goodbye Dawn."

Dawn grabbed it and shook it. Then she leaned over and kissed Kat on the cheek.

"I'm going to love having you for a sister-in-law."

Kat's feet couldn't move fast enough as she ran down the hall to the elevators. She punched the 'down' button and climbed aboard when the doors opened. Grateful to be alone, she sagged against the wall and gripped the railing.

*I'm going to love having you for a sister-in-law.*

When the elevator doors opened, Kat rushed outside. The warm air hit her face. Her skin grew clammy. She made her way to her car, and got in, grateful for the cool air that hit her when she put on the air conditioning.

Jared's secret. His father had Alzheimer's. To Jared and his family, Sam Martin was a sick man. To the rest of the world, he'd be viewed as ... crazy. She could use that ... she could use Jared's father as a weapon in her fight for Summerville.

It could be *her* trump card, her ace-in-the-hole.

She gripped the steering wheel and rested her head against the back of her hands.

All she had to do now was silence that little voice in her head—the one that kept telling her it wasn't right. To use a sick old man as a pawn, had to be the lowest of the low.

Kat wondered how she let herself sink that far.

She continued to think about that as she made her way back to Long Island and Summerville.

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## **Chapter Fourteen**

Jared pulled the Jag into the parking lot of the Pink Lily at nine o'clock that evening. He felt bone-tired, hungry, and had a burning, aching need to see Kat. First things first. He'd grab a bite, then take a shower and wash the travel dust from his skin. Then he'd call Kat.

There had to be some way to resolve their differences. After seeing his father, he realized that the only thing that mattered was ... Kat. He had given his life over to MegaMart, had kept Sam Martin's dream of quality merchandise at discount prices alive. Now, like Dawn said, it was time for his dream. That dream was Kat.

Jared walked up the brick path of the Pink Lily and breathed deep of the trumpet lily's heavy, sweet odor. He bounded up the porch steps and was greeted by Betty in the lobby.

"Hi there!" she called out. "How was your trip?"

Jared neared the bottom steps. He turned to face her. "Let's just say I'm glad to be ho ... here. I'm glad to be back."

Betty smiled. "Good. We missed you."

Jared smiled back, but his throat felt tight and his eyes stung. Damn but Summerville was getting to him. How he was going to hate leaving it. When the time came to return to MegaMart's corporate offices, he knew he'd be leaving with a heavy heart.

He bounded up the steps and strode to his room. When he got inside, he stripped out of his clothes and lay down on the

soft bed, dressed in nothing but his boxers. Before he got in the shower, he decided to call Dawn and check on his father.

She answered on the second ring. "Hi there, big brother."

He shook his head, thinking he was hearing things. She sounded happy.

"I had the most wonderful rest of the day, and, so did Dad. Jared..." her voice quivered with excitement. "I only wish you had stayed a little longer, because Kat stopped by and well, I have to tell you, she..."

He shot forward, pushing up from the bed with one arm. "Did you just say, Kat was there?" Now he was hearing things. Great. He was more tired than he thought. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and switched the phone to his other ear. Maybe he had a bad connection.

"Yes, I just said Kat was here, silly. She said not to tell you, that you might get upset, but, while she was here, Dad said your name."

His mind reeled. Kat had been there! How had she found out about Sam?

"Dawn, please tell me exactly what happened," his voice became steely.

She sighed. "She said you'd be upset. I can hear it in your voice."

He made his voice sound even. "I'm not. Look, I just wish I had known, that's all."

"I know. I know. But, I have to tell you Jared—she's wonderful. She's smart..."

*Oh, she's smart all right. Smart enough to find my father!*

"And she told me all about KISS and her designs and ... well, she's great. I really like her."

"I'm glad," he replied in a tight, clipped voice.

"So listen, don't worry about anything. Dad seemed a little better, and all I can say is seeing you, then seeing Kat, really helped him today."

"Wonderful."

"Jared?"

"What?"

"What's wrong?"

He swallowed. "Nothing, Dawn, I'm just a little tired."

"Well, okay. Get some sleep. I'll speak with you soon, okay?"

"Okay."

"And say 'hello' to Kat for me, will you? Will you come with her next time?"

*If I don't kill her first, he thought savagely.*

"Good night, Jared. Love you."

"I love you, too, Dawn. Take care."

"Bye."

He ended the call and flipped his cell phone closed. He rose from the bed and paced like a caged wild animal, stalking from one end of his room to the other. The bitch had found out. Kat Sullivan had done what she said, and found out his 'dirty little secret.'

Jared grabbed his trousers and shoved his feet into them, yanking them up his legs. He zipped and buttoned them, then shoved his arms into his shirt. He glanced down at the

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scrapes on his forearms, reminded again of Kat's passionate nature.

Oh, he couldn't wait to get his hands on her.

Jared shoved his feet into his shoes and grabbed his suit jacket. He yanked open the door to his room and stalked out, eager to get back into his car and begin the hunt...

For Kat.

When he found her ... oh, when he found her...

She didn't stand a chance!

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Kat's dressing rooms in the back of KISS transformed into a cacophony of bubbling, bright conversation and laughter. Six women, including Kat, had the time of their lives as they went from Kat's workroom to the dressing rooms, carrying armloads of frilly, sexy, lingerie gowns and accessories. Kat's office held a sumptuous mini buffet, where Kat laid out an array of sweets, cheeses, fruit and coffee. Three bottles of champagne lay chilling in their own buckets. The happy occasion called for only the best, so Kat brought out the Limoges china and fancy crystal glasses. It had belonged to her mother and Kat's grandmother, and her mother ... passed down from one daughter to the next. It was only fitting, Kat thought, that she used it for these special nights. The nights when the women in Kat's life who mattered the most all got together.

They bustled back and forth, chatting with each other, eating, and trying on the array of designs that hung on two racks in Kat's workroom. Evelyn Rogers wore one of Kat's

newest designs, her foray into designing vintage lingerie. The 'Petipone' gown hugged Evelyn's still-trim figure. The lacey bodice and straps led into an elegant, yet simple cut gown, embroidered in tulle and stretch lace, and featured lacy, venise trim at the hem. The matching robe complemented the gown perfectly.

"You look beautiful," Kat said to her. "I like that on you."

"Thank you, dear." Evelyn smiled at her. "I do so look forward to these evenings together, Kat."

"I know. I do, too."

Kat's eyes strayed to the far side of the room where three young women gathered. They stood apart from the rest, their postures stiff.

"They always start out like that," Evelyn told Kat. "We'll loosen them up, you'll see."

"April should be here soon," Kat glanced at her watch. She prayed she would show like she promised. If anyone could help the three young women Evelyn, Annabelle and Doris invited tonight, April could. She and her husband Bill were staying at their summer home in the Hamptons, not too far from Summerville. Kat knew that April's presence would help the three young women who remained isolated from the rest of Kat's friends.

A familiar voice cut through Kat's thoughts. It belonged to Lilith. "Hi Ladies!" she called out. She peeked her head into Kat's workroom and grinned. "Annabelle's trying on that Chantal bed jacket. It looks great on her ... oh! Hi Evelyn." She waved at Evelyn then blew Kat a kiss.

Kat returned it. Her heart felt light. *This* was what life was about, she thought. These women. Her friends.

"Oh, hi Doris!" A chorus of greetings met Doris Henderson. Kat could hear excited chatter outside the workroom then everyone came inside. The chatter grew louder as everyone admired Evelyn's ensemble and the jacket Annabelle wore. Kat moved away from the group and walked over to the three women who stood near the racks of outfits.

Kat's mouth grew dry at the sight of the brightly colored scarves adorning their heads. Her mother and sister had worn scarves just like that. She swallowed and approached, intent on making this night one of their best.

"Hi," she stuck her hand out. Each of them passed her a small smile and shook her hand. "I'm Kat Sullivan. Welcome to GISS."

There was a few seconds of awkward silence. Finally, one of them spoke. "It's very nice of you to do this, Ms. Sullivan..."

"Kat. Please. Call me Kat."

"Kat." The young woman glanced at the racks of lingerie. "I don't think there's much of a selection for us."

"Ah," Kat held up a finger. "*That's* where you're wrong. Come with me ladies." She walked over to one of the racks and pushed some gowns aside, stopping to pull a stunning, above-the-knee gown from the rack. "Here," she told one of them. "Why don't one of you try this on?"

Kat saw their eyes light up, but just as quick, the spark faded. This was the hardest part, she thought. Reviving your dignity. It was like taking a plunge into ice-cold water.

"I-I don't think any of us could wear that."

Kat said in a low voice. "Yes, you can. Look..." She showed them the inside of the bodice. "I designed it for comfort. You can step into it. See?" She pulled on the bodice, stretching it from side-to-side. "The neckline is extendable."

"Oh my..." The women moved toward Kat. "And ... I can fit all of you, it's no problem. There's plenty of support here in the bodice. I designed it that way."

The women reached out and touched the gown, rubbing it between their fingers.

"It's silk," Kat said. "And see?" She fingered the tiny flowers adorning the straps. "Aren't they pretty? French rosettes."

"The design on the gown is different. I really like it," one of them told Kat.

Kat beamed a smile back at her. It was the first smile she saw from any of them, and it warmed her heart.

"Yes, the bands of lace *are* different, aren't they?" Kat ran her hand over the alternating bands of black, gray and brown lace running horizontally across the bodice and in a vertical pattern down the length of the gown. Alternating bands of white Chantilly lace were placed between the colored bands. A wide swath of the elegant white lace ran around the waistline.

"This is gorgeous," one of them said. They each stuck out a hand, running it across the gown, and began to chatter. "Sure beats that old ratty t-shirt I've been sleeping in," one of them piped up.

"I know," one of the other young women joined in. "Maybe it *is* time we chucked our husband's football jerseys and ratty old nightshirts in favor of this!"

They all laughed, including Kat.

"That's right, no more t-shirts, ladies."

They continued to chatter.

Keep them talking, Kat, she told herself. Let them get their minds off their problems ... at least just for this evening. Let them feel pretty, feminine, and desirable.

"So, who's going to try it on?"

The chattering ceased.

Oh boy.

"I, uh ... I don't know..." one of them replied.

"Well, there's a matching jacket." Kat reached into the rack again and removed the jacket. The same white Chantilly lace trimmed the cuffs and ran down the inside, where a matching French rosette covered the hook and eye closure.

She saw the women relax. "Well, if there's a jacket, maybe I'll try in on," one of them volunteered.

"Good." Kat placed the gown and jacket in her hands.

Lilith appeared by her side. "I'll help you," she smiled at the young woman. "Come on," she placed an arm around her shoulders and led her out of the workroom.

Kat continued to help the other two, finding a gown each of them liked. Their eyes lit, the spark sprang to life when Kat handed each of them above-the-knee length chemises and matching jackets, too. One of them was decorated with stretch lace and venise appliqués from the straps to the hem.

The other, one of Kat's favorites, was made of silk, animal-printed fabric, trimmed with chocolate brown lace.

Lilith brought the other young woman back into the workroom. Kat heard everyone's collective gasp, then sigh. One of the young women stood next to Lilith, the chemise hugging her thin frame. Kat thought she looked beautiful, but knew the young woman didn't. It would take a lot of convincing. God, where was April when she needed her most? If anyone could convince this young woman that she was still an attractive, desirable woman, April could.

It was then that the subject of Kat's thoughts made her appearance.

"Hi everyone, I'm sorry I'm late."

Several pairs of eyes were glued to April's tall, six-foot, frame.

April gazed at the young women, then at Kat. Kat nodded in her direction. "Hi," she said softly. "I'm glad you could make it." April didn't hesitate. She walked up to each of the young women, and touched the brightly patterned scarves adorning their heads.

Kat felt her throat constrict. Her hand strayed to her neck.

April gazed at the three young women once more then she reached up and removed the wig from her head, revealing its naked surface.

No one said a word.

"Come on ladies," April turned and grinned at all of them. "Let's have a good time, shall we, and show the world that *this*," she patted her bald head, "*this* won't defeat us."

Kat turned away, for fear someone would see her tears.

This wasn't an evening for tears she scolded herself, wiping them away. It was an evening for celebration.

Life.

They would all celebrate life tonight!

\* \* \* \*

As the evening progressed, so did the merriment. Everyone continued to try on the beautiful lingerie Kat provided. They ate, chatted and spoke of the things near and dear to their hearts. April brought an arsenal of makeup and beauty supplies. A section of Kat's workroom had been transformed to resemble a makeup studio, so the women could sample the beauty products April provided—and the fine, human-hair wigs Kat donated.

April's tall, lithe frame reflected in the mirrors set up in front of the small tables. "Try this shade," she told one of the young women. She picked up a large brush and dipped it into a rosy shade of face powder. "I think it'll look fabulous on you." The young woman's pale face glowed with a soft, pink hue in the lighting Kat had set up.

April stood behind her and ran a brush through her hair. The soft blonde, chin-length curls softened the young woman's thin face.

"Oh my," she whispered. Her eyes grew shiny. "My hair..." she reached up and caressed the ends of the wig, rubbing the hair between her fingers. "This is what I used to look like."

April gave her shoulders a squeeze. "I'm so pleased you like it."

"I-I don't wear much makeup."

"I know," she patted her shoulders. "And you don't have to. Just a little foundation, that rosy powder ... some lipstick, and you're good to go." She smiled into the mirror—the young woman returned it.

Kat felt better than she had in days, watching the bi-play between April and the evening's beneficiaries of a complete makeover. April moved from one young woman to the other, fussing and chatting and just having a good time. Kat caught April's eye and mouthed 'thank you.' April mouthed 'you're welcome' back in the mirror and grinned.

A little while later, Lilith walked up to Kat, a glass of champagne in hand. "This is great, Kat, really." She sipped the champagne then placed the glass down on the table. "I don't know how Annabelle, Evelyn and Doris find these ladies, but I'm glad they do. Makes you feel good to help someone, doesn't it?"

Kat didn't speak for a few seconds, when she did, she looked up into Lilith's striking violet-colored eyes. "My grandmother used to say, 'If you're feeling lousy, thinking you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders, go and help someone. You'll find your burden grows lighter when you do.'"

"Your grandmother sounds like one smart lady," Lilith replied, her voice soft.

"Yes, she was." Kat looked away for a second, then back at Lilith. "I wish you knew her."

"I think your mother and sister would be so proud of you, Kat. Just look at what you did tonight."

Her throat constricted just thinking about them. She spoke around a lump. "It wasn't just me tonight, Lilith. It's ... all of you. You, Doris, Annabelle, Evelyn and ... April. I'm so glad April made it." She ran a finger around the rim of her coffee mug and gazed at the golden, creamy brew. Kat lifted and swirled the mug's contents, the rich, dark espresso and ribbons of golden creamer, reminding her of Jared's exquisite, dark eyes, highlighted with their golden flecks of color.

"I just don't know how Doris, Annabelle and Evelyn find these ladies, Kat."

Kat grinned. "I've started calling them the three 'Fairy Godmothers.'"

Lilith grinned back. "You've got that right."

Kat reached for Lilith's hand and squeezed. "Thanks for donating the knitting lessons. It will help them take their minds off things."

"Oh posh ... it was nothing, Kat, trust me. I'm glad to do it."

There was a few seconds of silence. Finally, Lilith broke the quiet in Kat's small office.

"Is Nancy coming tonight?"

Kat shook her head and said around a bite of cheese, "No, and I really can't blame her."

Lilith shook her head. "She'll come around, Kat, you'll see. You two have been friends for a long time."

Kat replied around a sigh. "I owe her ... I owe her an apology, and that's just for starters. I keep thinking about what I want for Summerville and not what's good for my friend."

Lilith placed her hand on Kat's arm. "Look, it's because you care about Summerville. It's just that sometimes, well, you look at the big picture when it comes to this town and you forget, it's made up of individuals. Didn't you once say that the heart of Summerville was the people, that a town was a sum total of all the individuals that lived in it? Each individual brings something unique to Summerville."

Kat smiled and buffed her on the shoulder. "That was my campaign speech when I was running for mayor."

Lilith remained serious. "And I never forgot it. Neither should you. Those individuals you spoke of, they're what counts. The town has to serve the needs of the individual..."

Kat held up a hand. "I know. I know. 'And the individual must serve the town.'"

Lilith blew out a breath. "Maybe Nancy can't serve this town anymore Kat, and maybe ... this town can't fill *her* needs anymore."

Kat's throat grew tight. She looked away for a second. Lilith was right. It was time for Nancy to move on. She'd speak with her tomorrow ... make things right.

*If you're Nancy's friend, why don't you support her in her decision to provide for her children?* Jared's words came back to her. Jared.... Jared....

She couldn't get him out of her mind. All day, all night, she'd been thinking about him. And about his father. Jared was another person she had to make amends with. They had to resolve the MegaMart issue. Somehow, someday they had to meet at the crossroads and finish the journey. Kat just wasn't sure where that road would take them ... or

Summerville. Nevertheless, maybe, just maybe if they met and she could look at those plans again, they could reach a conclusion even if she had to give up something in the process.

Her heart. She already knew that was a forgone conclusion. Jared stirred something deep inside her. He had woken the sleeping tiger of desire within her, and now, he was inside her head, making her think ... forcing her to change. She still hated change, but maybe it would be easier with Jared.

She shook her head to clear it of her crazy thoughts. She was thinking about him as though they shared a future together. Stupid. Where had that crazy idea come from? In her heart of hearts, Kat knew she had no future with any man, especially someone like Jared. He was Corporate America at its best and brightest ... a man who would swallow her whole and spit out the pieces, just like Arthur had done.

"How goes it with Jared?"

The sound of Lilith's voice broke Kat's reverie. "I, uh, haven't seen him for a few days."

"Yeah. Heard he left town pretty quick." Lilith grinned at her. "Did you scare him off?"

"No," Kat told her. "I did *not* scare him off."

"Good," Lilith popped another piece of cheese in her mouth and wiped her hands on a napkin. "Hear him out over this MegaMart thing. He's a nice guy and he's ... nice for you." She took another sip of champagne, eyeing Kat over the rim.

"Always the matchmaker."

Lilith grinned and toasted her with her champagne glass.  
"That's me!"

Kat smiled at her. "And Fred should see you in that."

Lilith looked down at the gown she wore. Her face turned pink at the mention of Fred. "Fat chance of that happening."

"Oh, I don't know about that ... I see that hot look in his eyes whenever he's around you, Lilith."

Lilith shrugged her shoulders and blew out a breath. "He's still the same tall, quiet guy he was in high school."

Kat patted her shoulder. "I know one thing, everything changes. You'll see, he'll come around."

As the evening progressed, Kat continued to help the three young women who were the focus of the night's activities. She went into her office to grab another cup of coffee when she heard the buzzer, and what sounded like furious pounding at KISS' front door.

Lilith peeked her head into Kat's office. "Want me to see who it is?"

"No," Kat shook her head and put her mug full of coffee down on her desk. "I'll do it. You stay in the back here with everyone."

Kat walked to the front of the store and glanced at her watch. Nine-thirty p.m. Who could possibly think she'd be open at this hour?

The pounding on the front door increased. The doorknob rattled. Kat slowed her approach when she heard someone shout her name.

"Kat!"

The banging intensified. The door rattled against its frame.

"Kat, open this door, I know you're in there!"

Jared!

She flipped on some lights, then ran to the door and peeked through the slats of the blinds to see Jared's tall frame on the other side. Kat unset the alarm and deadbolt then opened the door a fraction of an inch. The last thing she needed was for Jared to see what was going on in the back of KISS. The three ladies she had promised to help she swore she'd do with the utmost confidence and anonymity. Aside from her close friends present at tonight's 'lingerie party,' no one else knew. It was always their motto, 'aide with anonymity.'

She peered at Jared and sucked in a breath. He looked rumpled and handsome and sexy and...

Furious.

"I want to talk to you," he ground out. "Now."

She bristled at the command.

"Now is not a good time."

In the next instant, he pushed the door open wide, causing Kat to step back. One look at his angry face had Kat's heart skip several beats.

He shut the door behind him with a resounding click, and stood there, arms folded across his chest. Though he appeared calm, a muscle jumped in his cheek. Kat's eyes lowered to the bulge between his legs, outlined by his trousers. The angry, aroused male animal. She felt her panties grow damp at the sight of him.

"I want to know how you found out about my father." He stepped closer, his pace slow, measured. The gold flecks of his eyes burned brightly.

She was going to kill Dawn! She sighed inwardly. No, Dawn wasn't to blame for this. She had taken it upon herself to visit Jared's father and now, she'd have to shoulder the aftermath. If only Jared would listen, if only he would understand that she did not intend to use this against him.

"Kat, I'm warning you ... I'm this close," he pinched the tip of his thumb and index finger together. "To giving you the beating you deserve."

She moved forward. "Look, I know you're angry. I had asked Dawn not to say anything to you about my visit with your father today and..."

He laughed—a cold, snide laugh. "Well, *of course* you did, why wouldn't you? You used our relationship to get on Dawn's good side this afternoon."

"I..." she shut her mouth. He was right. She *had* used their relationship. She had counted on Dawn knowing about her, had hoped Jared had mentioned something to his sister about her, and then used it to gain entry into Sam Martin's residence at Riverdale. "I did," she admitted. "But, this isn't what you think, Jared. I-I wouldn't do anything to ... to hurt you."

"Get your things," he said through gritted teeth. "You're coming with me, now. I want to know exactly how you found out."

"I will," she held up a hand. "I promise, just not ... now."

"Kat, I'm warning you..." he moved until he stood directly in front of her, crowding the space between them. His knees bumped hers, causing her to step back. "I'm out of patience."

Kat was slowly losing patience with *him*. There was no way she could just leave the ladies in the back of KISS by themselves. She folded her arms and angled her chin. "I told you, I'll tell you everything, but not now, I'm busy."

He glanced around KISS, but his eyes didn't stray to the lingerie forms. "It's way past closing time here, and way past time for you and me to have a reckoning."

She didn't like the tone of his voice. It sounded flat ... devoid of emotion.

"If you don't come with me willingly, I will drag you out of KISS bodily."

"Why you..."

"Yeah. I know. I'm a real bastard." He moved with lightning speed and reached out for her. "But you haven't seen anything yet, lady!"

Kat cried out when he snagged the waistband of her skirt in his hand. She managed to break free from his hold and ran to the back of the store with him hot on her heels. She flew by a lingerie form, knocking it over in her haste to put distance between them. When she got to the back of the store, she rounded the corner of the counter by the cash register. Kat managed to lock the small door that barricaded the counter from the public just as Jared skidded to a halt nearby. She stood there, breathing hard, trying to anticipate his next move.

"You think hiding back there will keep you from me?" He strode forward. Kat watched as he hoisted his body up onto the counter top. In all her born days, she had never seen anyone so angry. Even when their lovemaking had become fevered and frenzied, and turned him into the wild, passionate, sensual creature she knew him to be, he hadn't harmed one hair on her head.

As she gazed into his furious face and watched him rise up on the counter on those muscled forearms which still bore the marks of their last heated encounter where they both now stood, Kat wasn't so sure of anything. In fact, he seemed capable of just about *anything* in that moment. She looked around for something she could use as a weapon. Suddenly, her eyes lit upon a box of lacy bras stashed underneath the counter's edge. She reached under, grabbed a handful of her sexy, lacy creations, and hurled them at Jared.

She heard him growl low in his throat and looked back once as she wrenched the small door open and ran out from behind the counter. The bras covered his face and chest, one dangled by its strap from around his earlobe. She would have laughed, if she didn't see his face turn white with fury. He wrenched the bras away then turned to face *her*.

Kat's pulse raced—so did her mind. There was only one way out, and that was to run past him. Her feet never moved so fast as she flew by in her attempt to escape Jared's wrath.

In the next instant, his arm snaked out. Jared grabbed her around the waist, wrenching her forward. She felt the air 'whoosh' from her lungs as something hard dug into her diaphragm. For just a minute, she was completely

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disoriented. The room spun as blood rushed to her head. When she could catch her breath, she managed to open her eyes. The sight of KISS' pink and white geometric-patterned floor greeted her.

"Put me down!" she shouted when she realized what happened. Jared had hoisted her onto his shoulder. He grabbed the back of her calves and jostled her once, the bony end of his shoulder digging into her gut. Kat's stomach roiled in response.

"Jared ... please, I'm getting nauseous."

He ignored her plea.

"Put me down!" she shouted.

Again, he ignored her, his hold tightening on her calves. He slid a hand up her silk-stockings legs, all the way up to her thighs, pushing her skirt up to reveal her delicate, lacy garters. Awareness of her vulnerable position shot through her, her blood heating in response. She heard Jared's low chuckle, felt the vibration of the laugh that rumbled through his shoulders and back.

His hand slid over the garters and the top band of her silk stockings. "Do you like this Kat?" He patted her fanny. "Anyone could walk in here and see you like this ... it's exciting isn't it?"

A thrill of dark desire swept over her as Jared displayed more of her silk-adorned body. When cool air swirled over her backside, anger mushroomed inside her, too.

"You like this, don't you, my little she-cat." His deep, husky voice washed over her, just as passion took hold, causing a hot, aching need to build between her legs.

Damn him!

She made a fist and punched him on his back. This time, she heard *his* breath leave *his* body on a 'whoosh.'

She cried out when she felt her backside leap into flames.

"If you hit me again, I'll paddle your ass black and blue right here." His voice echoed through the confines of KISS' interior.

"You deserve it, you bastard!" She shrieked when his hand connected with her bottom again. "Animal!" Again, he pummeled her bottom cheeks. Twice. Tears sprang to her eyes. "You son of a..."

"Kat?"

She groaned. It was Lilith.

Jared swiveled his body toward the sound of Lilith's voice, exposing Kat's silk-and-lace clad bottom. Kat had to look at her upside down. Her head spun in a thousand different directions.

"Having fun?" Lilith angled her head, wagging her fingers at Kat.

Kat managed to pick up her head. She saw Lilith and everyone else. "I'll, uh ... I'll be with you all in a second."

Jared turned and slipped her from his shoulder. Kat landed on her feet with a hard bounce, her head reeling. He didn't bother to steady her when she swayed. She clutched the end of a counter for support until her head stopped spinning then straightened her skirt, her face a heated mass of rosy color.

When she looked at Jared next, he was staring at the group of women, dressed in her exquisite creations, each one looking sexier than the other.

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## **Chapter Fifteen**

Jared's gaze slid over the women clustered in front of him. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off Lilith. Her magnificent violet-colored eyes matched the deep purple-blue of the gown she wore. The cowl neck dipped low, highlighting her deep décolletage. Glittery rhinestones highlighted the tips of the flowers on the gown's floral print. They shined in the soft light that glowed from above. The gown had tiny side openings and a wispy, handkerchief hem, the uneven tips whispering across her knees and calves. His eyes slid to her feet, encased in a pair of purple satin, low-heeled sandals, adorned with the same glittery rhinestones as her gown. When he looked up, it was to see her blue-black hair, piled in an artful array of curls atop her head. Her shiny locks bore the same, sparkly rhinestones that lined her dress and shoes.

Lilith's beautiful, deep-violet eyes zeroed in on his face. She opened them wide, her mouth parting sweetly, revealing the deep pink gloss lining her full, lush lips. Lilith had been transformed into an enchanting creature, a dark, fairy-goddess from another world.

She looked down at her gown then her eyes opened wider, revealing even more of their deep violet depths. "Oh my, ladies ... come on! Shoosh!" She turned and shooed them all back, away from his prying eyes, but Jared got a good look at her rounded backside.

Holy shit, he thought. No wonder Fred Meyers was smitten. The last time Jared had stopped into Summerville's

Sweet Shoppe, he had seen Fred and Lilith involved in a conversation, and all Fred seemed to be able to do was ... look and pant.

Now, he knew why.

It was the sight of the other women assembled in the back of KISS that got his attention, too. Each one looked sexier and more beguiling than the other. A tall, thin woman, a head taller than them all met his eyes from where she stood. A feeling of vague awareness ran through him. He got the oddest feeling that he had seen her somewhere before, but he couldn't place her. Her fine-boned features and head full of shiny, blonde hair screamed sex and sensual pleasure.

But, it was the three young women standing near her that grabbed his attention the most. They seemed too young to be a part of whatever was going on that night at KISS. Dressed in short, knee length, lacy gowns, their skin glowed in the light, the silk of their short gowns outlined their every curve. Innocence. Their large, round, made-up eyes spoke of virginity and sexual innocence.

He watched until they all disappeared into the back. A lovely group of fairy-nymphs, ripe and ready for love.

What in hell had KISS done to him, he wondered. Had Kat and her stunning creations finally snared him? He seemed to lose all his common sense when he walked into KISS.

He looked down into Kat's angry, sea-green eyes, their blue depths sparked, reminding him of the bluest, hottest part of the flame. In the next instant, her hand shot out, her palm extended toward his face. Jared caught it deftly before it made contact with his left cheek.

"Don't," he grasped her wrist. Kat struggled in his hold. He was keenly aware of the fine, delicate bones he held. She continued to struggle, but he held on, subduing her angry outburst. "Stop it, now, Kat, you're not going to win this one."

For just a second, guilt snagged him as he looked down on her angry face, but the light of surrender shone in her eyes. He had never hit a woman in his life, and here, at KISS, he had struck his fiery she-cat several times. Jared was positive he had left hand prints on her beautiful backside. He told himself it didn't matter. He told himself that's the least she deserved.

He leaned down until they were nose-to-nose. "You've got ten minutes to get your things together. I'll be outside waiting by my car. If you're not out there in ten minutes, I'll come back in here and make such a scene ... you won't be able to hold your head up in this town for months."

Kat's magnificent chest rose high—her eyes shot blue fire at him. She didn't move, didn't say a word. The air grew heavy with the charged electric current that seemed to flow between them.

He didn't say another word, but turned on his heel and strode out KISS' front door, relishing the thought of doing battle with his fiery, sexy, she-cat.

\* \* \* \*

Kat hurried toward the back of KISS. She stopped when she saw her assembled group of women holding their sides and laughing.

"Did you see the look on his face when he saw us?" April flopped back in the chair she occupied, one hand covering her mouth. Tears sprang to her eyes as laughter bubbled up to the surface.

"Lilith, he had his eyes on you, honey!"

Kat's shoulders sagged at the sight of Lilith, dressed in what Kat called her 'floral-silk burnout gown.' She leaned against the doorjamb for just a few seconds and watched her friends and the three young women she had promised to help, giggle with what was now turning into, high-pitched squeals.

Lilith spotted her and walked over, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes as she made her way toward Kat. Kat glanced at her watch. She had five minutes. Five minutes to go outside and try to reason with Jared, otherwise, he'd make good on his ... threat.

She grabbed Lilith by the arm and dragged her into her office. When they were inside, she shut the door. "Do you think you and Annabelle and Evelyn could lock up for me? I-I've got to ... to ... go to a ... a-a meeting."

Lilith's eyes danced. "A meeting, is it? A meeting with Jared Martin?"

Kat's mouth opened in denial, but she quickly shut it. What would be the use in lying? They had all seen Jared march in like a dark, avenging angel tonight.

"Oh, Kat," Lilith intoned. "Stop looking so serious, will you? You go on with Jared and have your 'meeting,' we'll take care of cleaning up and closing up for you, don't worry."

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Kat grabbed her bag and jacket. "Thanks, Lilith. You're a doll."

She walked over to the door and placed her hand on the knob. Jared. God, he was so damned angry. She'd have to channel the anger that emanated in waves from his lean, hard, body. There was only one way she knew that would do it ... making love to him.

Her palms grew moist just thinking about it. She had her hand on the doorknob when Lilith said from behind, "I'll bet you can't wait for him to get his hands on you."

Kat looked over at her friend. Lilith winked at her and blew her a kiss.

As Kat sailed out of her office, she thought about what Lilith said. Her bottom stung a little with each step she took on her journey toward Jared.

He'd have his hands on her all right, but for once, she didn't relish the thought of what he was capable of. She hurried out the door of KISS, her feet, encased in her blue high heels, clicking and tapping on the steps.

She stopped when she saw Jared lounging against the Jag, his tall form outlined by the light from the street lamp above. The night air had grown hot and sticky. Kat felt a bead of sweat trickle down between her breasts. She swiped at the tendrils of hair that had escaped her fancy up-do, as she watched him, his arms folded across his chest, feet crossed at the ankles, the light of battle shining in his magnificent, gold-flecked, dark eyes.

\* \* \* \*

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Click ... click ... click...

Vincent Galati sat in his Ford Taurus and snapped picture after picture as a group of women filed out the back of KISS. God, they were beauties!

Click ... click. He snapped two more with his digital camera.

Soon, a group of cars pulled into the back. Some men got out.

Galati sat up straighter and took five more pictures as each of the women got into a car with a man.

Holy shit. George would love this. Galati had balked at taking another job from George since his last encounter with that lunatic, but hey, money was money, no matter who or *where* it came from.

He stashed the camera in the glove compartment, content with the night's work. George would have the pictures via email and voila, Galati would have his money in the morning.

Five thousand bucks more.

Nice.

\* \* \* \*

"Get in," Jared told Kat as he held the passenger side door of the Jag open.

Kat looked at him for a few seconds, her eyes wary. Then she moved quickly and slid her body onto the leather seat. For just a second, his eyes caught sight of her long, silk-clad legs, the top band of one silk stocking peeked out from beneath the hem of her pencil-slim skirt. When she shifted to get her seat belt on, the sight of a deep-blue, lacy garter

greeted him. He grew hard watching her as she slid the seat belt across her chest. She locked it, the clicking sound snapping him from his hazy, sexual thoughts.

He slammed the door closed and sprinted to the driver's side. His lovely opponent, his she-cat, knew all the right moves ... knew exactly how to throw him off the track. He'd have to be very, very careful tonight, he thought. Ms. Upstart was going to get what she deserved, and he'd be damned if she'd get the upper hand this early in the game.

He slid into his seat and put on his own seatbelt, acutely aware of his lovely opponent sitting next to him. Kat's perfume wafted toward him in the close confines of the Jag's interior. He longed to reach out and place tender, nipping kisses along the side of her long, graceful neck. Her slim throat, encased in the wide, white collar of the blouse she wore appeared more alluring than ever before.

Jared started the ignition and gunned the engine, pulling away from the curb. As he drove down Main Street, he didn't utter a word, but continued to steal glances in Kat's direction. Tonight, she appeared different. He wasn't sure if he liked her hair up. She had worn it like that before, and he missed seeing her mass of fiery hair spilling down her shoulders. Stupid, he thought, you're stupid! Stop thinking about her hair ... stop thinking about ... *her* ... and think about what you owe your father.

Anger shot through him, hot swift and hard. It was the same feeling he got when he had made love to Kat the last time, a searing heat that tore through his body. He shifted in the seat to relieve the hard, pulsing ache in his groin. No way

would he allow her to use his father in their battle for Summerville! He glanced at her again, drinking in the sight of her slim, dark-blue skirt that hugged her tall, lithe, graceful body. She looked even more feminine and sexy dressed in the simple, classic-cut lines of that suit. He glanced at her lap where the jacket lay across her legs. He watched as she crossed and re-crossed them, causing the skirt to ride up her thighs again.

"Where are we going?" she asked, her eyes wide.

He slowed the car as they came to a red light at the end of Main Street. "Your house," he replied curtly.

"My house? Why?" She swallowed, the muscles of her throat worked convulsively.

He got a small, perverse thrill knowing he had gotten to her. Jared glanced at her, one brow raised. "I don't really care where we go, Kat," he said evenly. "We could go to the Pink Lily, if you want, I'm sure Betty would enjoy the show," he finished snidely.

She held up a hand. "Fine. Take me to my house." She angled her chin in his direction. "If you think for one minute that I'm afraid of you, you're mistaken."

Jared looked down at her hand. In the dim light of the Jag's interior, he could see it shake, the barely discernable tremble of her fingers made him mentally wince. Bastard, he thought. Yes, he was being such an abhorrent son-of-a-bitch scaring her this way, but goddamn it, she deserved it! To use his father as a pawn...

Again her fingers shook. She moved her hand from his prying eyes, and smoothed it across her jacket.

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He squashed the voice of conscience and reason in his head as he turned off Summerville's main drag and made his way to Kat's house.

\* \* \* \*

A little while later, Jared eased the Jaguar into Kat's driveway. She pulled her ring of keys from her bag, pressing the little red button on the remote that dangled from the key chain. She had to press it three times to get it to work; her mind couldn't seem to focus on the simple task. It raced with thoughts, the major one being how she would convince Jared that she wouldn't ... *couldn't* ... use his father to her advantage.

One glance at his angry face told her she had her work cut out for her. She shifted in the seat as he pulled the Jag into her garage. Her bottom still stung from their latest tussle at KISS. Repeatedly she kept telling herself that he really wouldn't hurt her...

Or would he?

She had felt the sting of his hand against her bottom, but the stinging blow to her pride she felt even more. Her thoughts were in a wild, crazy jumble as she got out of the car that evening. She had to convince him, she simply *had* to...

"Jared, please." She said as he made his way toward her. "Can't we talk about this? I know you're angry, but..." She stopped speaking when she realized his gait hadn't slowed. Soon, he crowded the space between them and snatched the keys from her hand.

"Get inside," he ordered.

Kat felt herded. He walked behind her, his hand pressing on the small of her back, applying slight pressure to keep her moving. Her legs felt rubbery and her feet felt as though cement lined her shoes as she trekked up the stairs with him directly behind her. When she slowed, she immediately picked up her pace again because the tips of his shoes skimmed the back of her high heels.

He gave her no quarter, allowed her no space, but continued to make her go in the direction he wanted, which was up the stairs. At the top of the steps, he grabbed her hand and pulled her along, not stopping until they got to her bedroom. Jared opened the door and shoved her inside, flipping the light switch. Soon, the room flooded with soft light. Kat moved to the center of the room and stood, not saying a word, watching him as he followed her in and shut the door.

When he shut and locked it, she knew she was lost.

\* \* \* \*

He circled her, like a jungle cat stalking and circling its prey, intent on attack. Jared stopped just long enough to trail a finger down her cheek. "You're looking very pretty tonight, my lovely opponent." He watched her shudder, smelled her fear. The heady, musky odor of panic, of heightened sexual arousal, permeated the air.

"Jared, please, I can explain."

He hooked a finger in the 'v' of her blouse, yanking her forward. "Say nothing," he whispered, his voice harsh. "Don't

say one, goddamned word unless I ask you to, do you understand me?"

Kat quivered against him. "Fine. I-I won't."

He released her and walked away, stopping by the upholstered chair where her satin, coral-colored corset set still lay. Jared bent and retrieved it, stroking his hands over the bony, inlaid stays. He tossed it back down on the chair and looked at her. "Collecting souvenirs, Kat?" He raised one dark brow and nodded toward the corset lying on its side on the seat of the chair.

"What do you mean?"

"Souvenirs. Mementos." He grabbed the corset and threw it at her. She caught it against her chest. "What I meant was ... are you collecting souvenirs of your latest sexual conquest?"

She wet her lips. Squaring her shoulders, she said. "For your information, Jared, I happened to enjoy our ... night together. I ... I look at that, and, I'm reminded of how passionate, how wild you can be, yet..."

"What? Oh, don't stop," he said snidely. "Continue. I'd like to hear your latest lie."

Her shoulders slumped. "I'm not lying. That night with you was the best sex I ever had. And I knew, no matter how wild it got, no matter how wild *you* could be ... you'd never hurt me."

Her last words were hurled at him in challenge. Hurt her? Oh, he hadn't begun to hurt Kat Sullivan! Jared walked over to the window thinking of the feel of that satin corset, of the smell ... of everything they had done the last time he was in

Kat's bedroom. His body hardened in response. He pushed away the unwelcome lust that tore through him and concentrated on the task at hand—taking down Kat Sullivan.

"I want to know how you found out." He flicked aside one of the blinds and peered out into the dark night sky. Stars shined down; the moon stood out full and bright. A perfect night, he thought, a perfect night for making love. He shoved the slat aside and turned to face her. "I want to know how you found out about my father."

"I-if I tell you, Jared, will you promise, please promise to listen, to try to understand what I tell you?" She tucked a wayward strand of hair behind one ear and folded her arms underneath her breasts.

He pinned her with a long, hard look. "The only thing I'll promise, my lovely opponent, is that you won't ever forget this night as long as you live."

\* \* \* \*

"Jared..."

"Don't say another word," he said savagely, "unless it's to answer my question."

"All right, all right." Kat replied testily. She felt vulnerable and exposed, standing in the middle of the room while Jared stood on the other side by the window. He raked her slender form with his eyes, as though he could see inside her. "This is what happened. Patrice Lyons is a personal shopper I know. She came into KISS to purchase some things for Jerome Waters' daughter-in-law..."

Jared's eyes widened. "Jerome Waters? Did you say ... Jerome Waters?"

"Yes," she swallowed hard. "Jerome Waters. You see, it was Arnya's bridal shower and ... and ... Patrice was sent to KISS to buy some lingerie for her and, well, to make a long story short she, well, the Waters' women were at the shower, saw my designs and loved them. They must have told Waters because he sent Patrice in to see me to buy something for his wife."

Jared clenched and unclenched his hands into fists at his sides. "Is that the truth, Kat?"

Her shoulders slumped. "No," she shook her head. "Not the whole truth. *I* really asked Patrice to find something out, anything she could because I had heard he owned Plasticmate."

Jared walked over to her. He cocked his head and folded his arms across his chest. Narrowing his eyes, he asked, "How in hell did you find my father, Kat? How?"

"I ... well, when Patrice came back into KISS to buy Waters' wife something, she gave me his card ... and his private number."

Jared dropped his hands to his sides.

"I-I went to see him, I spoke to him, Jared, and ... and ... he told me where your father was staying," came out in a rush. "But I swear to you that I wouldn't use that information against you. I swear it," her voice held a note of desperation.

Jared continued to stare at her. "Waters is a pig. A male whore," he spat.

"I know. He gave up the information so fast, I figured, *he* must have something to hide." She angled her head. "He does, doesn't he?"

Jared gave her a long, hard look. "Yes, he does. He's married, yet he keeps several mistresses."

Kat released a pent-up breath. "I figured it was something like that. He kept looking at me like I was nothing more than..."

"A piece of delicious meat?" he finished snidely.

"Exactly." She moved toward him, he didn't say anything. "I hated the way he kept looking at me."

"He treats all women that way, Kat."

When he said her name, Kat thought it held just a bit of tenderness. Maybe they were making headway.

"I figured, I mean, I got the feeling that, Waters *did* try to pull a fast one on you."

He sighed. "He did. It's just like I told you. He tried to get me to raise the price of Plasticmate products nearly seventy-five percent, claiming the rising price of resin was the cause. When I found out it wasn't, that he tried to pull the wool over my eyes," he aimed his thumb at his chest, "and subsequently, my MegaMart customers' eyes, I was furious. I refused. Then he threatened me with my father's ... well, with my father. When he did that, I threatened to go public with his mistresses."

"I knew it ... I knew it was something like that. He gave me the creeps, Jared. I couldn't stand to be in the same room with him, let alone the same state."

He smiled thinly. "What I should really do, is haul you over my lap and wail the daylights out of you. Do you realize he's been brought up on sexual harassment charges? That he supposedly forced himself on a young girl right in his office?"

Kat shuddered.

"I'm surprised, but grateful, he didn't force himself on you."

Her eyes flew to his. Slowly, tentatively, she smiled back at him. "We could save it all up, you know."

He beetled his brows. "Save what?"

She shrugged. "All my ... indiscretions ... my mistakes. We could save them all up and make one big, giant error out of all of them, sort of like one of those giant rubber-band balls."

He laughed. She was glad to see it. In fact, she felt downright giddy.

"You're crazy," he muttered.

She shrugged. "Like I said, we can save up all the errors of my way and ... well," she patted her fanny. "It might save some wear and tear on my posterior."

He threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing through her bedroom. In the next instant, he became serious again. "But when you saw my father..."

She held up a hand. "As soon as Waters gave me the address, I went there. And, yes, I admit I used our relationship, counted on Dawn knowing about us, to gain access to your father's room, but Jared, I *had* to see for myself. I had to see what Waters meant when he said your father was crazy."

He bristled. "My father is *not* crazy, he's..."

"I know, I know he's not crazy, Jared, he's ill. Very ill. I know all about the Alzheimer's."

Jared's shoulders slumped. He walked away from her to go stare out the window again. Kat's heart ached for him, for what he had to be feeling then. She knew all too well what it meant to care for an ill relative. "Listen, Jared. It doesn't matter."

His eyes flew to hers.

"I mean, to me, your father's illness doesn't matter. It doesn't change how I feel about you, and once I saw your father, I knew that all this had to stop."

"All what?"

She sighed. "Our war. Our MegaMart-Summerville war. Seeing your father only cemented in my mind, that, well, we have to at least try to compromise on all this."

He didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, he turned to face her, his dark eyes intense. "Do you swear to me, do you promise you won't tell anyone?"

"No one, Jared. I swear."

He ran a hand around the back of his neck. "Why should I believe you, Kat?"

Why, indeed, she thought? The tenuous thread of trust had been broken. To knit it back together would be hard. What could she possibly say to make him trust her?

"Because I love you," it came out on a whisper. Her heart thudded painfully against her ribs. She felt the room spin for just a second, much as it did when she had dangled over his broad shoulder. Minutes went by; they seemed like hours. Kat felt as though her heart lay open before him. She studied the

hard angles and planes of his face, of his beard-shadowed chin, for any sign that he believed her. She had just told him she loved him. *This* man was not Arthur. *This* man, with his magic hands and lips, with his tenderness and compassion ... his love of children and his father ... would never betray her, the way Arthur had.

His lips curved up. Kat thought that if he laughed now, she'd expire right on the spot.

Jared folded his arms across his chest, revealing his tanned, muscular forearms. She glanced at the faint scratches, the ones that she had marked him with. A hot need built inside her just seeing them. Her dark panther. Her wild, passionate lover.

"You love me, do you?"

She nodded, her throat tight, her mouth dry.

Jared reached out, cupping the back of her head in his hand. He pulled her forward and fused his mouth with hers. She felt him loosen the pins in back of her head, felt him run his fingers through her hair as it tumbled around her face. Her body softened and molded to his as the tension of the last couple of hours faded.

When she opened her eyes, he was smiling. "I like your hair down, Kat, don't put it up again."

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## Chapter Sixteen

Kat's eyes widened as Jared continued to fuss with her hair. He played with the fiery strands, pulling his fingers between them to separate them. She grabbed his wrist, pulling his hand away from her head, bringing it down to his side.

"Did you hear what I just said?" she asked him.

"Uh huh."

He still grinned like a lunatic, she wanted to smack him.

Jared walked away, whistling, and grabbed one of the lacy, coral-colored garters from the chair. He fingered it then twirled it around his index finger, as he sauntered back over to her.

"Are you going to wear this tonight?" he asked, holding the garter out toward her, his dark eyes smoldering.

She reached for the garter dangling at the end of his finger, but he snatched it away. "Uh, uh, it's *mine*," he crushed the garter in his hand and aimed a thumb at his chest, "Mine," he repeated. Then he leaned over and kissed her.

The wretch.

She blew out a breath. "Apparently, me telling *you* that I love you is no big deal."

"Oh ... I don't know..." he sauntered back over to the chair and flopped down on it, stretching his long legs out before him. He cupped his hands behind his head and smiled. "It might have some merit."

Her mouth hung open. She closed it, opened it then shouted, "Might have some merit! Why you—" Kat lunged for him, grabbing his shirtfront as she tumbled down into his lap. She pummeled his chest, shouting every curse word she could think of.

"Easy, my she-cat, go easy!" Jared laughed. "Enough!"

Kat was running out of steam, but she continued to pummel him until her hands were numb. She looked into his bronze face, a face she had come to love, and felt her throat constrict. Tears sprang to her eyes, the long day's events, and her sincere outpouring of love for Jared taking its toll. When the first tear trickled down her face, Jared ceased his laughter.

"Hey, hey..." he crooned. He pulled her down to his chest. "Kat, ah, Kat..." he rubbed her back. She struggled for a few seconds, but soon, she gave herself over to the sweet sensation of being held in his arms. "My she-cat," he whispered, kissing the top of her fiery-red hair. "Don't you know that I haven't been able to get you out of my mind? Since the day I walked into KISS, I haven't been able to walk, talk, eat or sleep without thinking of you."

She hiccupped once as the tears began to flow harder.

"I love you, Kat."

She stilled. Lifting her head a fraction, she stared into his handsome face. He wasn't laughing. He was serious. Stone cold serious. Kat sat up and pushed back from him, balancing on his outstretched thighs.

"Y-you love me?"

He wiped a tear from beneath one of her sea-green eyes.  
"I do."

"Oh," was all she managed. She sat there ... her mouth agape, eyes wide.

Jared started laughing all over again. "Ah, my she-cat, you should see your face..."

"Why? What's wrong with it?"

He shook his head, serious once more. "Nothing, sweetheart. There's not one damned thing wrong with that exquisite face of yours." He cupped her cheeks between his hands and kissed the breath from her body. When he released her, she sat there, still as a mouse, and didn't say a word.

Jared reached out to unbutton her blouse, one little, tiny button by one little, tiny button, taking his sweet time. She allowed him to get to the fourth one when she grabbed his wrist.

"What?" he asked, raising one dark brow in her direction.  
"You don't ... want to?"

"Oh," she said, sweetness and innocence lacing her voice.  
"It's not that. It's just that, like *you* say, 'paybacks are a bitch.'"

She scooted off his lap and pulled him up out of the chair. She sauntered to the bed, her hips and fanny swaying in a seductive rhythm. Flopping down onto the bed, she stretched her body, and angled her elbow, propping her chin in her hand.

"Go on," she made a little twirling motion in the air with the index finger of her other hand. "Turn around. I want to see you."

His eyes bugged out. "What? What do you mean, you want to see me?" Jared looked around. "I'm right here, Kat."

She sat up, schooling her features, trying not to laugh. "Are you going to do what I say, or do I have to get ... tough..." She drew out the word 'tough' and licked her lips, the pink tip of her tongue passing up and over her top lip, then her bottom lip. She touched the tip of her index finger to her lower lip, and flicked the wetness from it, running that same finger down her chin, her neck, her chest, ending at the deep cleft between her breasts. She shifted on the bed, making her pencil-slim skirt ride up her thighs, revealing the top of her silk stockings, attached to the lacy garters that dangled from her garter belt.

Jared's eyes smoldered. She crooked her finger, beckoning him to come closer. He did. When she held up her hand, palm out, he stopped dead in his tracks. "Good boy," she crooned. "That's my wild panther." When she glanced at him next, it was to see his hard, stiff member outlined underneath his trousers. "My, my ... are we excited?" she purred.

"Yes," he sounded choked, hoarse. "I'm ... excited."

"Then turn around. Show me." She made that twirling motion in the air again with her index finger. "I want to see just how ... anxious you are to be inside me."

He did as instructed, turning in a wide circle in front of the bed.

"Nice," she said, eyeing him. "Very nice. Now, strip," she commanded.

He yanked at his shirt, the buttons popping free. They scattered to the floor.

"No!" she shouted when he unzipped his pants. "No," she softened her tone. "Slowly," she purred. "Slow ... take off your clothes, Jared, but do it nice and slow."

Kat could have sworn she heard a low growl leave his throat when he started to take off his shirt in slow, leisurely movements.

\* \* \* \*

"That's too fast, Jared. Too fast," Kat patted the air with the palm of her hand. "Slow down. Take it all off ... nice and ... easy," again she drew out the last word, making Jared's already stiff member strain painfully against his trousers.

He continued to unbutton his shirt, his movements deliberate. When he looked at her next, she was grinning. The minx!

"Kat, I swear to God," he said through clenched teeth as he yanked his shirttails from the waistband of his trousers, "I'm going to..."

She held up a hand and sighed. "I know. I know. You're going to make me suffer." Her eyes lit up when he removed his shirt and undershirt to reveal his naked chest. "Like I told you before," she batted her eyes at him. "Just save it all up for one big spanking, okay? That way, it'll save a lot of wear and tear on your hand."

He did his best to glare at her when all he really wanted to do was climb in bed and make love to her until her bones melted.

"What's the matter," she said, her voice sultry. "Does the idea of paddling me get you all hot and bothered, Jared?"

How many times had she said his name tonight, he wondered, as he unbuttoned the top of his pants. The sound of his own name, uttered in her deep, sexy voice washed over him, creating tiny ripples of pleasure to snake down his back and buttocks, settling in his groin. He yanked down the zipper and stepped out of his pants, kicking off his shoes and pulling off his socks. The he stood before his beautiful she-cat in nothing but his boxers. He loved seeing the deep blue fire of passion smolder in her eyes.

The question now was, who was teasing whom? But he didn't much care. She had said his name ... she had said that she loved him. "Kat," he intoned, "Kat..."

"Take off your boxers, Jared. I need to see you."

He ripped them from his body and stood up straight. The proud, tall, male animal.

"Turn," she whispered, making that little motion in the air with her index fingers. "Turn and ... let me see..."

He did as instructed, turning slowly. Jared's cock stuck straight out, primed and ready. When Kat saw it, her eyes widened. "Oh my," she breathed, "Oh ... my...."

She pulled her blouse apart. Jared heard the material rip as she tore it from her body. Next, she bounded up from the bed and shimmied out of her slim skirt, kicking it away with the toes of one foot. Her white and blue patterned bra came

next. He smiled at the haste in which she yanked the clothes from her body. He folded his arms across his chest and whistled.

"I don't know, for someone who told me to move slow, you're sure in a hurry."

"Oh, shut up," she told him, brushing the hair from her eyes as she unhooked the garters. She bent down to roll her stockings down over her thighs and calves. Jared cocked his head, admiring the sweet curve of her bottom as it raised up before him. She stood and lifted her foot, intent on pulling off her stocking, but she lost her balance and tumbled backwards, right into him. He reveled in the feel of her bottom as it pressed into his hard, stiff cock.

"Whoa!" he shouted, catching her in her arms. "Slow down, she-cat."

She pushed him away and stood up again, balancing on one foot, then the other, as she ripped off her stockings. Kat pulled back the bed covers, grinning. "*This* time we take off the bedspread."

He folded his arms across his chest and grinned. "Whatever you say, my lovely opponent."

She climbed onto the mattress and patted the bed.

He didn't need to be asked twice. Jared flew to the bed and climbed in. He pulled Kat into his arms and kissed her, from the top of her fiery-red hair to the tips of her toes. She turned in his arms and hoisted herself up by grabbing the intricate-patterned iron headboard. Kat threw back her head and licked her lips as she rose to her knees. She turned her head to look back at him over her shoulder. Jared sat on the

bed, one leg up, his arm extended over one knee, watching her performance, staring at her bottom, and the sweet curls at the juncture of her thighs, as well as her swollen bud of desire.

"Take me," she breathed. "Take me, now, Jared. I-I can't wait much longer." She wiggled her bottom in his direction. Wetting two of her fingers, she inserted them in her labia, pulling them in, then out. He watched, fascinated, as her breathing quickened.

Jared moved, untangling his legs and climbing the bed in his sleek, panther way. He patted her bottom. Running both hands across both cheeks, he inserted his shaft into her hot, wet entrance, taking her like the wild, passionate creature she was. He pumped into her repeatedly as she clung to the headboard, her head thrown back, her cries of passion echoing in the confines of her bedroom. He felt her come. Kat's muscles contracted then eased around his swollen shaft. He pumped into her one last time, spilling his hot love fluid into her heated channel.

Jared didn't release her. They remained locked together, her hands gripping the headboard, as the aftershocks of their lovemaking passed. Jared could feel her shudder at the same time that he did. He eased his shaft from Kat and patted her bottom again. He loved touching it, molding the white, creamy globes in his hands. Then he pried her fingers gently from the headboard, kissing each one in turn, treating each of her digits with the utmost care.

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*by Catherine Chernow*

He tumbled down on the bed. Kat followed, nestling in his arms. Soon, their breathing grew deep and even. All was quiet.

The two great beasts of the jungle fell into a deep, peaceful sleep and didn't wake until late the next day.

\* \* \* \*

In the hazy time between sleep and wakefulness, Kat smelled the most delicious aromas. She dreamt of citrus—clean, fresh ... intoxicating. She licked her lips when she tasted the delicious, sweet juice of an orange, wanting more. Her brows knit together in a frown when the smell changed. Cinnamon. It wafted across her nose. She inhaled deeply, taking in the tantalizing aroma of sweet cinnamon rolls. Her tongue darted out to catch a bit of creamy icing on her lip.

"Ummmmm..." she murmured as she rolled to her side.

Coffee. The unmistakable odor of her favorite coffee wafted by.

She opened her eyes to see Jared sitting there, a mug full of vanilla-hazelnut coffee in his hands. He passed the mug under her nose again. Kat wrinkled it in response then sat up to see a tray laden with breakfast goodies on the night table next to her bed.

"Good morning, my she-cat." He brushed some fiery strands of hair from her eyes. "Did you sleep well?"

Sleep? She vaguely remembered falling asleep in his arms the previous night. The odor of sex filled her nostrils when she flopped back down on the pillows. She turned on her side

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to face him, pulling the covers up to her chin when the chilly, air-conditioned air danced across her skin.

Jared tugged the covers down a little to reveal her breasts, the tips of which stood straight up when the chilly air hit them. Kat saw his eyes dilate. She grinned. "Good morning to you, too," she said softly. She let go of a yawn and stretched, pushing the covers down all the way to reveal the rest of her body.

Jared sat back in the chair and chuckled. "Any more of that and I'll hop right back in there."

Kat turned sleepy eyes in his direction and patted the bed. "So join me."

"Nope, I have other plans for you." His tone was clipped.

Kat sat straight up and hurled a pillow at him. He caught it deftly.

"What time is it?" she asked, suddenly remembering she had to get to work.

Jared glanced at the clock. "It's eight-thirty."

She groaned and flopped back down. "I have to leave in half an hour to get to KISS."

"You will," he told her. "But for the next half-hour, you're mine." He got up and walked to the bed. He bent his tall frame and scooped her up, covers and all, walking back over to the chair with her nestled in his arms.

He sat down, cradling her in his lap. Her nude bottom skimmed his thighs, brushed his groin. Jared grew hard in response, but held himself in check. He'd give her what she wanted just as soon as *he* got what he wanted.

He lifted a ripe strawberry from the tray on the night table and held it near Kat's mouth. She looked up at him. "What?" she asked.

"Take a bite," he told her. "I want to see you enjoy it."

"Oh, Jared, that's silly..." she started.

"No, it's not. I've had this fantasy in my head for days. I want to hold my she-cat on my lap and feed her," he murmured. Again, he held the ripe strawberry to her lips. It's sweet odor filled her nostrils. Kat leaned over and took a bite, savoring the sweet, heady flavor of the berry.

Next, Jared held a piece of warm cinnamon roll next to her mouth. Kat bit down on it, reveling in the feeling of being held in his arms, enjoying the freedom of letting him feed her. She didn't have to think ... she didn't have to lift a finger. She sipped at a small glass full of fresh-squeezed juice and enjoyed the rest of the cinnamon roll.

All from his hands.

When she ate her fill, she sat up to kiss him, making sure to pass him a piece of ripe strawberry from her lips to his. He groaned when she lapped up a bit of juice from the corner of his lips. Kat ground her bottom onto his erect shaft. He stood with her in his arms and carried her to the bed. He stripped out of his pants and shirt and covered her body with his, kissing her until she went limp. Then he trailed a fiery path across her breasts, his rough, early-morning beard scraping across her sensitive nipples.

Kat almost came immediately.

He shifted so that he could push into her hot, wet channel, until he could go no farther and pumped her fiercely. Kat screamed his name just as his seed pulsed into her.

Jared rested his forehead against hers, his breathing coming in short pants. When it slowed, he gazed down into her face. "I'm going to enjoy feeding you every morning, my she-cat."

"Jared," she whispered. "Jared, Jared, Jared..." she intoned his name over and over again, placing small, nipping kisses to his face and throat.

He rolled off her. Kat rose from the bed, but not before he reached out to pat her bottom. She turned to look at him over her shoulder. Her panther. Her wild, sensual mate. Her soul mate.

The very thought filled her with joy and ... fear.

\* \* \* \*

Jared insisted on driving her to work that morning. At each red traffic light they stopped at, he grabbed her hand and squeezed it, bringing the back of it to his lips. He'd run his mouth across the back of it, pressing small, soft kisses to her skin. Kat reveled in the attention. At each stop sign, she'd reciprocate, leaning over to plant soft, nipping kisses to his chin and throat. At one intersection, they got so lost in a heated kiss that the blare of horns from behind was the only thing that shocked them both back into reality. Kat didn't care. She didn't have a single care in the world that bright summer morning.

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Jared pulled the Jag to the curb in front of KISS. He turned to face her, reaching for her hand. "Today's Friday."

Kat sighed and leaned back, resting her head on the back of the leather seat. She cracked one eye open and looked at him. "If you say so."

Jared chuckled then became serious. He squeezed her hand. "You work too hard."

She shrugged. "When you own your own business, you can't afford to take off much time."

"True," he agreed. He became thoughtful for a few seconds. "Didn't you say that oldies concert was on a Friday?"

She turned to face him, shifting in the seat. Kat tugged her right leg underneath her left thigh and replied, "It's tonight, why?"

"I said I would take you."

She shook her head. "You wouldn't enjoy it."

He frowned. "Why not?"

"A small town concert? All it's going to be is a Beatles tribute band. Then there are fireworks."

"Do a lot of people go?"

She grinned. "All of Summerville, Jared."

He felt warm inside when she said his name again. "Well, I will, too. It sounds like fun."

She angled her head. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

He pinned her with his dark eyes. "I've never been so sure about anything." Or you, went unsaid. "I want to go. I want to go with *you*."

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"All right then, it's a deal." She reached for his hand to shake it, but he grabbed it and pulled her toward him instead, kissing her on the lips.

"What will you do today, Jared?" she whispered, stroking her hands over his cheeks. They felt beard-rough, but she loved it. She ran her thumb across his upper lip, reveling in its silky, warm feel.

"I'm going to go and see my father this morning," he leaned down to kiss her hand, nipping the pad of the thumb she just used on his lip. "Then I'm going to run a few errands here in Summerville."

Kat pulled away and glanced at her watch. "I've got to open KISS." She looked out at the beautiful summer day. For once in her life, she didn't feel like going into KISS. She wanted to spend the day with Jared. She sighed regretfully.

"Listen, I'll do what I have to during the day, and I'll pick you up at ... what time does the concert start anyway?"

"Seven-thirty."

"Okay, then. I'll pick you up at six ... we'll have a picnic tonight before the concert starts."

"I'd love that."

His eyes glowed with desire. "I'll enjoy feeding you again on our own private blanket, under the stars and moonlight."

Kat shook her head. It was *her* fantasy come true, knowing that they'd make love under the stars. They'd listen to the band, kiss, talk, eat ... love each other. She couldn't wait.

She was ready to get out of the Jag when she noticed Michael Benton heading down the street toward them.

"Oh no," she groaned, flopping back down on the seat. "It's Michael."

"Michael?" Jared asked, beetling his brows. When he looked out, he saw Dr. Michael Benton, Summerville's lone dentist walking down the street. "Ah, right. Michael Benton, the dentist."

"Right," Kat said, mulish. "Michael. If he sees you with me, he'll just start pestering me with a load of questions."

Jared shook his head. "Have no fear, Jared's here." He got out of the car and circled the front of it, glancing in Michael's direction. He watched them, pushing his glasses up on his nose.

Jared arrived at the passenger side door and opened it for Kat. She stepped out, directly into his arms. Jared pushed her against the car and kissed her. Hard. He didn't stop for several minutes.

"Jared!" she gasped. "Oh my, Jared..." she kissed him back.

When she looked up next, Michael was gone. She heard the low rumble in Jared's chest—saw the mirth in his dark eyes. "He's such a chicken shit," he said, shaking his head.

She stuck her chin out at him. "Don't say that. It's not nice."

"But it's true, Kat. If that were me and I saw *you* kissing another man, I'd..."

"What?" she asked softly, trailing a finger over his chin. "What would you do?"

"Well, first I'd haul off and pound him to pieces, then ... well, then I'd drag you away and pound your bottom."

She grinned. "You wouldn't."

He frowned. "I would. Then I'd make love to you so long and hard, you would never, ever stray again."

"Ah, my panther," she crooned, reaching around his waist with both of her arms, she hauled him close to her. "So ... masterful."

He reached down and pinched her bottom. She yelped in response and sauntered away.

"Kat!" she heard him call out. She stopped at the first step and turned. "Your bag." He held it up, the strap dangling over two fingers.

She came back to retrieve it. When she reached for it, he leaned in and kissed her again. She walked away.

"Kat!" he called out again when she was on the fourth step. She turned back to look at him. A slight breeze ruffled his dark hair. The deep bronze of his skin glowed in the summer sun. "I love you." Jared mouthed to her.

She felt her insides turn to mush. Kat blew him a kiss and mouthed in return, 'I love you, too.'"

Then she let herself into KISS to begin her day, her heart feeling lighter than it had in ages.

\* \* \* \*

At two o'clock that afternoon, Kat turned to Melissa and said, "Think you could hold down the fort for a little while?"

"Sure," Melissa answered, excited. "It's no problem."

Kat reached for her handbag and withdrew her cell phone. "I'm just going next door for a little while." She studied Melissa's bright, eager face, remembering how it felt the first

time she went to work for one of the leading designers of women's lingerie. Excitement coursed through her veins every day, each new day being a wonderful, creative, learning experience. Maybe, she thought to herself, it was time she let go of some of the reins here at KISS and gave Melissa a little more responsibility. It would give her a little more free time ... to be with Jared.

Jared. She wondered how he was doing, wondered how his father was. If Melissa could spend some more time at KISS, Kat would be able to visit Sam Martin a little more often. It was the strangest thing ... when she had gone to see Jared's father, she had walked into his sick room, bold as brass. The odor hadn't consumed her the way it did when she walked into her mother's room at her house. She had smelled the odor of sickness, knew it was there, yet she had managed to stay with Sam.

"Kat?"

She turned toward the sound of Melissa's voice.

"You can go. Don't worry about anything. I'll handle KISS while you're gone." She patted Kat's hand. "You can trust me."

Trust. It was such a tenuous thing. She had to trust Melissa to give her more responsibilities at KISS. It was like entrusting someone with ... a beloved child. KISS was Kat's baby. She had nurtured it through its infancy, helped it grow, and now, it was time to let go...

If only a little. Baby steps. That's what she needed to do. KISS. Her haven. Her refuge.

She shook her head to clear it, placing her cell phone in the pocket of the Capri-style pants she wore.

"Okay then, I'll be back shortly. Call me if you need me." Kat grabbed a pink shopping bag bearing KISS' logo and walked out.

\* \* \* \*

Kat walked into Noone's Nest that afternoon, clutching the handles of the shopping bag. She wondered if Nancy would even bother to see her. After their last heated encounter, Kat didn't blame her in the least if she wouldn't speak with her. She had been selfish, so self-centered not to see that Nancy was hurting.

The birds in their cages cawed and squawked, ruffling the bright plumage.

"Hey, big boy," Kat crooned to the large Cockatiel, her favorite.

He spread his wings, and turned his head to look at her. "Hey, big boy," he repeated then squawked.

She laughed, realizing that soon, she wouldn't be able to come in here and see Nancy. They wouldn't be able to talk, to share, to sip their favorite coffee together...

"Hi Kat."

Kat turned to face Nancy. "Hi."

They stood like that for several seconds, not speaking. Finally, Nancy broke the strained silence. "Want to come in the back for a while? We could, uh, talk there."

"Sure," Kat replied, following Nancy as she led the way.

When they got to Nancy's office, she let Kat go in first and take a seat, then she did the same. Kat didn't know what to say. How do you say what a fool you've been? That you've been stupid and insensitive to one of your oldest, dearest, friends...

"Here," she reached down and grabbed the shopping bag. "This is for you."

Nancy took the bag from Kat's outstretched hands. "I ... for me?"

Kat smiled tentatively. "For you."

Nancy looked at the bright pink tissue lining the bag. She removed the pieces of tissue, placing them gently on the desk, smoothing out the wrinkles of each piece. Then she reached down into the bag and removed its contents.

It was the midnight blue illusion gown. Nancy ran her hand over the delicate Brazilian lace, trailing her fingers over the alternate diagonal stripes of silk and midnight blue mesh.

"I figured it would look nice on you ... against your coloring and your blonde hair."

"It's beautiful Kat." Nancy placed it back in the bag.

There was another few seconds of silence. Kat swallowed hard, thinking of what to say next. "I'm sorry," slipped from her lips. She said it at the exact same time that Nancy did.

She looked at Nancy. Nancy looked at her. The tension in the air eased as they smiled at each other.

Nancy reached for her hand. "I was stupid, Kat. I was feeling sorry for myself and well, I-I took it out on you that day you came to see me."

Kat shook her head. "You have every right to feel bad, Nancy. And I was being stupid ... stupid and selfish. I should have been there for you; I should have ... I shouldn't have been so wrapped up ... in Summerville."

Nancy grinned. "But Summerville is *you*, Kat. I know that." She looked away for a few seconds. "I'm going to miss it."

Kat's smile faded, her throat constricted. "I'll miss you and ... the boys."

Nancy swiped at her cheeks. "They'll miss you."

"Do you know where you're going?" Kat's heart pounded.

"I've got a buyer for the house. We're going to Florida. I-I think it's better if I make a clean break. Get off Long Island ... get out of New York."

"Of course," Kat replied, understanding ... but her heart was slowly breaking. "How are the boys taking that?"

Nancy shrugged. "The two younger ones are okay, but Michael, it's a little rough for him. He's got more going on here simply because he's older."

"Jared had mentioned that, well, you'd be back to work in the store. I-I guess," Kat shrugged, feeling helpless and rotten all at the same time. "I guess you can't ... I mean ... if you're going to be in Florida."

Nancy reached for Kat's hands, taking them in her own. "We'll always, always be friends. That won't ever change." She squeezed Kat's fingers gently. "But I've got to do this, Kat. I've got to start over."

"I know, I know ... I-I wish you well, Nancy. You have to know that. I really do."

"Thank you for understanding." She squeezed Kat's fingers one last time, then pulled away.

"When will you leave?"

Nancy thought for a few seconds. "By the time we close on the house and I get some things in order. We should be ... gone by next month."

"I-I didn't think it would that fast."

"You'll come and visit us, Kat." Nancy said quickly. "You know you can. I want you to visit and ... we'll be back to visit, too. Bill's parents are here; they're still my boys' grandparents."

"Of course." Her throat felt tight.

"Remember how we used to stay up all night ... doing our hair, putting on makeup?"

The memory Nancy spoke of surfaced in Kat's mind. "I remember. We used to do that on a Friday night. You'd sleep over my house..."

"...Or I'd sleep over yours. I used to love coming to your house; your mom had such great snacks."

"She did, didn't she?"

Nancy smiled. "You still do that."

"What?"

"You're still having makeup parties and dress-up parties only ... now, well, now it's for a different reason." Nancy leaned over to hug her. "You were always so talented, so kind, so caring..."

Kat shut her eyes, enjoying the closeness that only two lifelong friends could share. She hugged Nancy in return, patting her back.

"And you are, absolutely, one of the best, dearest friends. I love you," she whispered.

She broke away from Nancy when the tears started to flow. Reaching into her bag, she withdrew a pack of tissues. When she looked up next tears streamed from Nancy's eyes, too. "Here," she passed her a tissue. "Looks as though you need one, too."

Nancy laughed, blowing her nose loudly in the tissue.

Kat leaned back and smiled. "You always did sound like a foghorn when you do that."

That brought on a peal of laughter from Nancy.

Kat stood. "Well, I have to get back to KISS, but before I go..." She reached into her handbag one last time and withdrew an envelope. "The next installment." She smiled at Nancy.

Nancy reached for the envelope. She opened it, withdrawing a check.

"A thousand dollars," she whispered. She looked up at Kat, her eyes shiny. "You don't have to keep doing this. When I move..."

Kat reached out and squeezed Nancy's upper arm gently. "I want to. I ... need to. It's for the boys' college fund, you know that. I'll always want to do that."

"Thank you." Nancy placed the check back in the envelope and put it on the desk.

They walked to the front of Noone's Nest in silence. When they got to the birdcages, Kat's favorite began to sing...

*Hello, Dolly! Well, hello, Dolly. It's so nice to have you back where you belong...*

GISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

Summerville. It's where she belonged, but not Nancy. Summerville couldn't be Nancy's home anymore. It was time to move on.

"Goodbye, Kat and ... and..."

Kat reached for her friend and hugged her tight.

"You're a good person, Kat Sullivan," Nancy whispered.

With that, Kat made a hasty exit.

She didn't stop until she reached GISS.

*Her* haven ... her home.

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## **Chapter Seventeen**

That evening, Kat took great pains with her appearance. She fussed and fumed, trying to decide what to wear to the concert. Running a hand through her hair, she decided to wear it down ... for Jared.

Jared. She glanced at the clock. He'd be there in another hour. Her heart skipped a beat just thinking about it. Soon, she'd be in his arms again. The day had dragged, except for her time with Nancy. Kat couldn't wait for the last customer to leave KISS that evening. She left Melissa to close and lock up, and then she hurried home to get ready.

She looked at the array of clothing she had tossed on her bed, her eyes finally settling on a black and white floral print sundress. Kat grabbed it and walked over to the full-length mirror. Holding the dress up in front of her, she smiled at her reflection. Yes, she thought, perfect. The dress would be perfect for the evening's festivities. It had all the polish of a two-piece outfit, but with the casual ease of a sundress. The solid black, stretch-jersey bodice led into a black and white floral print skirt. Tiny birds peeked out from the stunning floral print.

Underneath the sundress, she decided to wear a black bandeau bra and 'shorts' set. Faux, inlaid lacing decorated the bra and thong-style 'shorts.' She slipped into the bandeau-bra and adjusted the array of sexy, crisscross straps in the back. Then she stepped into the panty, shimmying it up her legs. Kat turned to view the thong in the back, decorated with the

same crisscross pattern of beguiling straps, stretching across the top swell of her bottom. Kat viewed her reflection once more, turning this way and that, taking in every nuance of her appearance.

Jared didn't stand a chance.

She reached for the sundress, and stepped into it, sliding it up her body. When it was in place, she marveled at the effect. The bandeau bra gave the bodice a smooth, unlined appearance and supported her breasts beautifully. She slipped her feet into a pair of black leather, wedge-style flip-flops, decorated with small, black beads.

Kat walked over to her dressing table. Opening the jewelry box, she reached it and retrieved a pair of black onyx earrings. Her mother's. They would be the only jewelry she'd wear that evening. She placed them on her ears, securing the clasp in the back and gazed at her reflection in the dressing table mirror. It was her mother's face she saw, not hers. Kat turned around quickly, expecting to see her mother behind her, but there was no one there. Kat tidied up her bedroom and grabbed her handbag. She walked out and shut the door, then made her way down the hallway.

She stopped in front of her mother's bedroom. Without another thought, Kat opened the door and walked in. She shut the door quickly and leaned against it to steady her shaky legs. Then she looked around. Everything was still the same ... the bureau that stood at one end of the room, the end tables ... the double bed where her parents had slept ... the same bed that she and her mother nursed Stacy in, during Stacy's final days.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

It was the same bed Kat had nursed her mother in. Kat walked over and sat on the mattress, running her hand over the crocheted bedspread.

She shook her head. It was the strangest thing ... she didn't smell it. She didn't smell that horrible odor of sickness and death. A host of memories hit her instead. Memories of her and her older sister, Stacy, jumping into bed in the early morning hours ... waking their parents on the weekend when they wanted to sleep.

Memories of seeing her mother at her dressing table—putting on her makeup and jewelry. Her mother had loved getting dressed up, wearing makeup, even if it were just to take in a movie with Kat's father.

She shut her eyes as the sweet, sweet memories washed over her, opening them when she heard a car pull into her driveway. Kat got up from the bed and walked over to the window. She peered through the curtains and saw a black Jaguar pull into her driveway.

Jared.

She watched him as he got out of the car, uncurling his long, lean, muscled frame from the Jag's interior.

She hurried to the door, stopping one last time to look back at the bed. No more memories of sickness ... of death. From now on, there'd be only memories of life ... and love.

Kat opened the door and walked out, ready to begin a new journey.

Ready to begin a life that included Jared.

\* \* \* \*

Kat hurried down the steps and opened her door on the second ring of the bell. Jared stood on the other side, looking handsome and relaxed in a pair of classic cut, dark, straight leg trousers. The luxurious cotton fabric hugged his long, lean legs. His short-sleeve shirt stretched across the width of his broad chest, the subtle vertical patterning making his long torso appear even longer.

"Hi," she smiled and reached out to run a finger along his smooth, angled chin. "You shaved," she angled her head, her grin widening.

Jared laughed. "Typical woman. Here I go to great pains with my appearance and all she can say is, 'You shaved.'"

Quick as lightning he crossed the threshold of her door and picked Kat up in his arms, twirling her around in a wide arc. She clutched his shoulders as her feet left the floor, enjoying the feel of his hard body against hers. Jared kissed her soundly then stopped twirling long enough to let her slide down the front of him. He kissed her again, deeper and longer, releasing her just long enough to let her catch her breath.

"How is your father?" She asked on a whisper. Resting her forehead against his, she stayed within the circle of his arms.

"He had a good day today."

"I'm glad," she said around a sigh. Kat fingered the collar of his shirt, enjoying the light silky feel.

Jared leaned back to look down into her face—her eyes met his. He smiled and ran his fingers through her hair. "He had a lucid moment, Kat."

Her eyes widened. "He did? Oh Jared, that's wonderful."

His arms remained around her waist, loose, but secure.

"He did. And do you know what he asked me?"

"No, what?" She shook her head.

He grinned. "Kiss me again and I'll tell you."

"Oh, you!" She swatted his shoulder. "Don't keep me in suspense, tell me what he said."

He tugged her closer. "Uh, uh. Kiss me. Kiss me and then I'll tell you."

She lifted her face to his and planted a soft kiss on his lips.

"Nope," he told her. "Not good enough."

She sighed, "Jared..." she said in warning.

"If you want to know what my father said, then you'll have to do a better job of kissing me."

"God, you're silly!" She stood on her toes and reached up again, running the tip of her tongue across his lower lip, letting it settle in the corner of his mouth. She tickled it until his mouth opened then she fused her lips with his and kissed him deeply.

She felt him shudder.

"Now that's a kiss." He leaned down to kiss her again, but she pushed at his shoulders.

"You promised. You promised you'd tell me." She gave him an exasperated look.

"He said: 'Where's your girl?'"

Her heart pounded. "H-he did?"

"Uh huh." Jared pulled her forward and placed a tender kiss on her forehead. "My girl's right here," he whispered.

"Right here."

She felt her eyes sting.

"And she's looking prettier than ever. Go on," he told her making a twirling motion in the air with his index finger. "Let me see."

Kat twirled around, the skirt of her dress billowed around her.

Jared nodded his head in approval. "Very nice, Kat."

"Thank you, my wild panther." She reached out and grabbed his shirtfront, drawing him toward her. "I always want to please my ... mate."

"And well you should." Jared reached around to cup her bottom. He caressed her, moving his hands upward, stopping to run them over the crisscross bands of her panty. "My, my..." he said, his voice deep. "What's this?" He raised her skirt and ran his hands over her bottom again.

Kat's body sizzled as he toyed with the crisscross straps. Her panties grew damp—she could smell her arousal ... and his.

"Turn around."

"Uh uh," she grinned.

"I said," he growled in her ear as he massaged her bottom. "Turn around."

She yelped when he swatted her fanny. "Okay, okay," she laughed. Kat turned, her back facing him. The most erotic sensation tore through her as Jared lifted her patterned skirt. She couldn't see what he was doing and that made it more thrilling.

"Look at this," he whistled low, running his fingers over the crisscross bands. He snapped one that ran across her bottom. The gentle sting it made on the sensitive skin of her fanny

made her moan in response. She threw back her head and leaned back, grinding her backside against his groin.

He growled low in his throat and leaned down to nip at her neck, massaging her breasts through the bodice of her dress. Kat purred in his arms.

"My she-cat," he whispered near her ear. His warm breath tickled her lobe. "My beautiful, wild she-cat."

He kissed her neck and pulled down the back of her skirt, turning her to face him. Kat looked up into his face.

"Ready?" he asked her.

Kat grabbed her bag. "Ready."

She set her alarm and locks then followed him out. When they got to the Jag, he opened the door for her and she got in. He leaned in to adjust her seat belt, clicking it in place, then closed her door, and walked around to his side and got in.

He started the engine. It roared to life.

As they pulled out of their driveway, Kat gazed at him, burning his handsome face into the scrapbook of memories she now called life.

\* \* \* \*

Summerville's only park was crowded with visitors that evening. He pulled the Jag into one of the last remaining spaces near the amphitheater and helped Kat from the car. Then he walked to the back to retrieve some items from the trunk. She watched in fascination as he removed a large, square picnic basket. What followed next was what appeared to be a very old, large square basket with a hole in the top.

Jared handled it with care, holding it gently by the handle, placing it directly in her hands. "Here you take this one, it's light."

She turned the basket this way and that, admiring the faded slats of wood. "It's beautiful."

"It's an antique," he told her. "An antique fishing basket."

He pulled something else from the trunk, a large shopping bag. Kat's eyes widened when she recognized the distinctive green gingham pattern. It was from Doris and Harvey's Country Crafts Store. "What's in there?"

He grinned. "For you."

She grabbed the bag by its raffia handles and opened it. Peering inside, she pushed past the wads of tissue paper until her hands settled on something soft.

A quilt. Kat took it out of the bag, admiring the pink and white geometric pattern.

Jared didn't take his eyes off her as she ran her hands over it. "I-It's beautiful," she breathed. "Simply beautiful."

"I figured," he ran his hand over it. "The pink and white print would look nice at KISS. Doris said the smaller quilts are meant to be used as wall hangings."

She looked up at him and smiled. "It's perfect. It'll look great hanging up on the wall at KISS."

"Oh!" he said, opening the trunk again. "Almost forgot ... *our* quilt."

He withdrew a large plastic bag. MegaMart's logo appeared on the outside of it. Kat peered inside to see a large, pink and white floral-patterned quilt.

"This," he told her, lifting the bag. "Is the MegaMart blue-light special of the week."

She laughed and leaned against the Jag, her arms folded. "Very funny."

"Hey, I'm serious. This is what we're going to sit on tonight."

Kat shook her head. "You thought of everything."

He nodded. "Everything. I told you I would."

Jared strapped the quilt to the picnic basket and hefted it into one hand. With his other hand, he grabbed one of Kat's. They walked like that, hand-in-hand, until they arrived at the amphitheater, where they were greeted by a swarm of people.

Jared set down the basket and quilt, and took in the scene unfolding before him. Kat's friends—the people who encompassed all that was Summerville—stood together in greeting. He felt his heart swell at the sight and at the same time, he felt strangely detached, watching them interact.

He felt a tug on his hand. When he looked down, he saw Allie standing there.

"Hi," she waggled her fingers at him.

Jared smiled at her. "Hi Allie."

"I'm playing soccer this summer. I'm going to go to soccer camp here at the park then I'm going to a tournament in August."

Jared squatted down next to her. "That's great, Allie. I'm glad you like soccer."

"I uh..." she scraped the toe of her sneaker across the dirt. "I took another one of those goal shots like you told me."

"Did you now?" Jared reached for her hand and squeezed her fingers. "That's great! How'd it go?"

She grinned, revealing the gap between her two front teeth. "It went great. I got it in. Ya had to see the look on the goalie's face."

Jared winked at her. "Throws them off every time."

She turned when she heard her name. A group of girls stood off to the side, giggling and laughing.

"Well, I gotta go."

"Sure. You go join your friends."

Allie walked away, then turned and looked back. Jared watched as she sprinted toward him. As if on instinct, he bent and extended his arms. Allie hurled her small body into his embrace. "Thanks," she whispered. Then she pulled away and ran off to join her friends.

Jared stood up.

Then *he* turned away, fearing someone would see him cry.

\* \* \* \*

"My town beckons, calling me ... sweet. I hear its voice in the people I meet."

Jared turned to see Kat watching him. Under the shade of a large maple tree, she gazed at him, hands behind her back as she leaned against the tree's mighty trunk. She pushed away and walked over to him. Gazing into his eyes, she said, "Though I roam the earth in search of peace, I know I will find it ... in the hearts, minds and souls of the people who walk down Summerville's streets."

He blew out a breath. "How long were you standing there?"

She smiled. "Long enough to see you've made yourself quite a friend."

Jared smiled back, his heart soaring. "Yeah. But ... she's a little young for me." They stood together under the shade of the old tree. "I like my women older."

Kat raised a brow. "Women, you say?"

He shook his head. "Only one. You." Jared reached for her. "My she-cat." Jared kissed her long, hard and deep. "Only you," he repeated. He released her and grabbed the baskets. "Come, my wild tigress, let's go and watch the concert."

He found a secluded spot near a shady tree up on a small hill. They were far enough from any prying eyes and close enough to hear the strains of the music. She opened the picnic basket to reveal an array of crackers, breads and little smoked sausages. Fine china plates and gold silverware lined the basket's cover. Linen napkins were next, rolled into long tubes. They nested along side several wine bottles. Her mouth watered. When she looked up at Jared, his eyes looked ... hungry.

He was looking at her, the intense light of desire burned brightly in his gold-flecked eyes. As the early evening breeze kicked up, it chilled her skin, but gazing into his eyes warmed her.

She'd never be cold again.

Kat settled her body between the 'v' of his legs, resting her bottom against him. She settled back against his chest and

KISS  
by Catherine Chernow

listened to the music, content to have him feed her the treats he had provided. An old Beatles tune drifted toward her.

*In the town where I was born, lived a man who sailed to sea ... and he told us of his life, in the land of submarines...*

In the town where I was born ... Summerville.

It had become Jared's town, too. He had carved a niche for himself among the people of the town she loved. And her. He had settled in a corner of her heart, filling the empty space that had been there for so long.

"Did you write that poem you were reciting before?" he asked her, his voice languid.

She snuggled back further into his embrace.

"No," she shook her head against his chest. "Evelyn wrote it. She's not only our town historian, but she's quite the poet."

"Evelyn," he repeated. "Evelyn. You know, that was a quite a sight the other night."

"What?"

"What you had going on at KISS."

Kat swallowed. Hard. "Yes, well ... I..."

"Do you always do that?"

"What?"

He laughed. "It looked fun—like a girls night out."

Her heart kicked into high gear. "That's exactly what it was, a-a girl's night out."

Jared took a sip of wine, passing the glass near her lips. She sipped, too.

"And Lilith. Wow ... no wonder Fred's got his eye on her."

Kat sat up straight and turned, one hand on his chest.  
"You know about that?"

"It's so obvious, the way he looks at her."

She turned and fell back against him and smiled. "He always did. Unrequited love is a killer."

Jared laughed. "I'm sure it is, but then again, most love is, isn't it?"

Her heart ached a little at the thought. Jared was right. When you loved someone it was sweet and painful all rolled into one. You could never separate the two. Ever. It wouldn't be love if you did.

"Tell me about yourself, Kat. I want ... to know everything."

She shrugged. "There's not much to tell."

He tightened his arms around her. "Sure there is," he whispered next to her ear. "A woman as beautiful and talented as you has to have a story. Tell me. Tell me all about yourself."

"I-I don't know where to start."

"Okay, I will then. You grew up here in Summerville."

She snuggled against him. "Uh huh. In Summerville."

"And you went to school here."

"Of course."

"How about your family?"

Her heart thudded in her chest. Could she tell him? It was still painful. Painful to say that she hadn't a soul in the world left in Summerville, except for ... Doris. Her mother's best friend.

"Aunt Doris. That's my family."

He leaned down to look at her. "Right. When I was in her store these last couple of times, all she could do was talk about you and her daughter—how you two played together as kids."

She let go of a sigh of relief. Bless Doris for not spilling the beans. If anyone should tell Jared about it, it would be Kat. She would tell him about her mother and sister. She would...

"So, did you go to college here in Summerville?"

Kat shook her head against his chest again. "No," she replied, grateful for the change in subject. "I went to college at F.I.T. in New York City."

"Get out of here! The Fashion Institute of Technology?"

"On a full scholarship." She pushed away from him then, turning to gaze at his face.

"I shouldn't be surprised. After seeing everything you design," his eyes grew hot. "What you've got at KISS, well, it's terrific, Kat. I have to admit," he said, sheepish. "I had a completely different idea of your store in the beginning. I thought it was, well, some kind of oh ... I don't know, some cheap little mall store. Someone trying to imitate that well-known lingerie store but, your designs ... they're different. Exquisite. Sexy yet, superb."

She basked in his praise.

"So, you went to college in New York City. I find that interesting, considering you're a small-town girl."

She shrugged and took a sip of her wine, idly running the tip of her index finger around the rim of her glass. Kat met his eyes. "It was a mistake."

He cocked his head. "Why?"

"I should have never left Summerville." She shook her head. "Never."

Jared reached for her hand and squeezed it. "You went to one of the finest schools of design in the country. How could that have been a mistake?"

She looked away. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face him again. "New York City is where I met my ex-husband."

There was a few seconds of uncomfortable silence. Kat watched Jared. A myriad of emotions crossed his face. He seemed to be mulling over what she had just told him. When he looked up again, she saw it. It was a spark, a quick spurt of jealousy lit his magnificent, dark, golden-flecked eyes. Then it faded.

"I should have thought as much," he said quietly. "Who was your ex?"

She put her wineglass down on an empty dish. Slowly, Kat raised her eyes and met Jared's dark ones. "I met Arthur Hilliard at a very fancy restaurant one night in New York City. My roommates and I saved up enough money to go to Lutece—it cost us a fortune."

He smiled. "I've been there. It's great."

"As we approached Lutece that night, we wondered if we could pass for chic, urban sophisticates. The maitre d' met us at the door and took our coats. We passed by the bar ... eagerly anticipating the elegant food displayed. Then the maitre d' returned to our small group, by then we were chatting, so glad we passed muster when he held out a fabric softener sheet that had fallen out of my coat sleeve and said haughtily, 'Madam ... your Bounce.'"

Jared laughed, "Kat, that's priceless!"

"That night, a man sent a bottle of champagne to our table ... with a note for me," she continued softly. "Arthur was charming. We dated a few times, and then it became serious. I got a job after I finished college working for a designer. Arthur insisted I didn't have to work, but I was itching to be creative. Soon, I realized Arthur was having an affair." There, she thought, she said it.

"He was a fool."

"I was the fool. I thought Arthur loved me. The 'small town girl' should have stayed in the small town," she said quietly. "After my divorce I came back to Summerville and opened KISS. I didn't take a dime from Arthur."

"That must have been difficult."

"When I got back here, I had to work day and night ... running the store, filling orders..."

"How did you do all that?"

"My friends helped. I owe them so much for so many things. That's why I just couldn't say 'yes' to MegaMart. I honestly didn't think it was right for this town, or my friends." She reached out to touch his face. "But now that I know you, I feel, well ... like I feel for my friends here in Summerville. *They* are the heart and soul of the town and you ... *you* are the heart and soul of MegaMart. You love MegaMart like I love Summerville."

"It's because of my father, Kat. I'm doing this ... to keep the memory of all his hard work alive."

She grabbed both his hands, taking them in her own. "I know that, Jared. I understand that now." Kat released his

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hands, her shoulders slumping. "I wish I could see your drawings again. I was ... so rude that day in the Sunshine Café. I regret every second of how I treated you there."

He grinned at her, tucking some strands of fiery-red hair behind her ear. "My she-cat. Your claws were definitely out that day."

She sighed with regret. "Yes, they were."

He cocked his head at her. "I was tempted to paddle your fanny that day, too." Jared shook his head. "I'm never quite sure what I want to do with my she-cat first, tame her or ... claim her."

Now Kat laughed. "Oh, you!" She swatted at him, but he caught her hand deftly in his own, bringing her palm to his mouth to plant a small, soft kiss on the tender skin there.

"You happen to be in luck tonight, my lovely opponent." He grinned at her and reached into the picnic basket. Lifting the linen that lined the bottom, he withdrew an envelope. "Here," he passed it to her. "I just happened to bring one of the sketches with me."

She opened the envelope and took out the rendering of Summerville's Main Street. Kat examined it, running her hands over the drawing of KISS and her friends' stores and shops.

"This really is wonderful, Jared," she passed it back to him. "But I still want to know something."

"Shoot," he told her. "I'm an open book, Kat, I've got nothing to hide."

She mentally winced, knowing that she still hadn't told the entire truth to him about KISS and her mother and sister. A

tiny voice in her head, the voice of conscience kept telling her that a lie by omission was just as bad as an out-and-out lie. It would end up getting her in trouble. She squashed the voice and turned her attention back to him.

"I want to know why you didn't do what you promised in Hillside."

"You mean ... the school and library?"

"Yes."

"It's like I told you, Kat, I feel strongly that they aren't building the school the way it should be. They need..." he stopped.

She angled her head. "What?"

"They need more special education classrooms. More ... specialized equipment to service their large special education and autistic student population. The town of Hillside would like to believe it's a wealthy, very bright population, full of nothing but super-bright students, but," he held up a finger. "They fail to acknowledge the rather large population they have of very poor, academically-challenged youngsters."

Kat just stared, her mouth agape. She narrowed her eyes. "Dawn said..."

He looked at her sharply. "What did my sister say?"

"Dawn said you were a physical education teacher."

"*Were* being the operative word there. I have a Master's degree in physical education and a bachelor's in special ed. I had intended to teach before my father got sick, then ... well, everything changed."

*Everything changed...*

It always does, she thought.

"S-so you went to work for MegaMart?"

He smiled thinly. "The board of directors wasn't happy. My father insisted on running the company, even after the Alzheimer's took hold. They considered him ... an embarrassment. *I* for one did not relish the thought of my father, the founder of MegaMart, being thought of as ... crazy. So, I took over. I stepped in and took the reins."

"But that wasn't what you wanted."

"No, Kat, it wasn't. I wanted to be a gym teacher."

She smiled. "That's sweet and ... wonderful, Jared."

He shrugged. "Some dreams ... well, they aren't big dreams. At least, not to everyone."

"Oh, no! Jared, a dream is just that ... a dream. No matter how big."

"I guess..." He pulled at a few blades of grass and tossed them away.

"There's no guessing about it," she replied firmly. "And I think it's wonderful what you did for your father. He'd be proud of you Jared, very proud." Like I am, went unsaid.

For just a second he seemed unsure. Then he blurted out, "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Will you come to the Civic Association Meeting on Thursday? Will you come and endorse my idea?"

Her heart pounded. She didn't speak for a few seconds then she said simply, "Yes."

Jared kissed her soundly on the lips. They didn't say anything more for quite some time. Kat snuggled back down in Jared's arms as they listened to the music coming from the

amphitheater. He kissed and caressed her, stirring her desire for him, letting her glimpse at the night of passion that was to come.

Kat felt drowsy and replete. The next thing she knew, Jared whispered in her ear. "Before my she-cat takes her snooze, she has to open her presents."

She laughed, the sound lazy. "Presents? What presents?"

He reached for the old fishing basket, placing it between his legs. "This was the basket my father and I used to take on all our fishing trips together."

Kat eyed it. "It is?"

"We kept bait and tackle in it, our lunch and snacks. It's got a wealth of fond memories and history attached to it."

"I'm sure it does," she murmured, running her hand over the wooden slats. They felt rough, splintery.

"Open it," he told her.

She hesitated.

"Go on," he nodded toward the basket. "Take a look at the presents I got you."

Kat flipped open the lid, peering inside. She blinked once, not sure of what she was seeing at first, and then she pulled a long white, plastic-handled brush from the inside. "A toilet bowl brush?" Kat screwed up her face and shook her head in disbelief. "A toilet bowl brush is my present?"

"Now, now..." he grabbed it from her hand. "I told you the basket held a wealth of history. This," he pointed the brush at her. "Is MegaMart history. The ninety-nine-cent toilet bowl brush. It was MegaMart's blue-light special from August, two thousand and three."

Kat's mouth hung open. Then she covered it and fell back onto the blanket, a peal of laughter escaping as she did.

Jared followed her down on the blanket and covered her with his body. "You think it's funny? You're laughing at my family's history!" He tickled her ribs, making her laugh more.

"Oh, God, Jared, stop!" she squealed. "Jared!"

He did, helping her sit upright.

"Jared," she grinned. "That really is funny."

"Go on," he nodded in the direction of the basket again. "Open *all* your presents."

Kat reached in and pulled out a small box. A picture of what appeared to be a small plant on a pig lined the outside of the box. "What the ... oh no ... it's the 'Chia-Pet,' isn't it?" Again she laughed.

"The MegaMart blue-light *holiday* special, December, nineteen eighty-five."

"Oh, oh ... Jared, it's *priceless*." She dug through the basket and came away with a box containing a ... rock. "No ... this isn't..."

"The 'Pet Rock,' the MegaMart, blue-light special, circa nineteen seventy-five."

Again, Kat erupted into peals of laughter.

"Okay, dig again, my lovely opponent. I've got something else for my she-cat."

She reached in and withdrew a clear, plastic bag. Kat read the label on the outside of the plastic covering aloud, "Ladies two-piece baby-doll pajamas, one size-fits-all." Kat's eyes widened. "No..."

"Sure. The MegaMart blue-light special of the week, circa ... the present."

He grabbed the package from her and opened it, taking out the bloomer-style bottom and wide pajama top, decorated with little blue flowers.

Kat covered her mouth, trying to hold in her laughter as Jared held them up, first the top then the bottom. "Looks great on you," he told her as he placed the pajama top near the front of the bodice of her dress. "And the bottom ... real sexy."

Kat couldn't stop laughing. She didn't want to. She was having the time of her life. It felt good.

"Okay, one more thing."

She sighed and hiccupped. "Jared, I don't think I could stand anymore."

"Just one more thing, I promise."

Kat sighed. "Okay, then, one more." She dug down to the bottom of the basket and withdrew a large envelope bearing the MegaMart logo.

"Go on, open it." Jared told her, his eyes intense.

She did, and removed what appeared to be a ... contract. Kat scanned it, her eyes widening. Her hands shook, the papers falling from her hands.

"Jared ... it's ... it's..."

"A contract. Between you and MegaMart. I want you by my side, Kat, here in Summerville. When we start this project, I want your help and advice. I can't think of a better person to have at my side than you."

"But ... Jared. I'm not cut out to be ... I mean. I'm not the corporate type. I never was." It's what Arthur was, went unsaid. He was Corporate America ... money, power ... her downfall.

He grabbed her hands, taking them in his own. "You'd be perfect for this. I know you would. You're the heart and soul of Summerville."

She pulled away, shaking her head. "It's the people, Jared, not just me."

"Yes, but ... I see what you've done here, Kat. *You've* given *your* life to Summerville. That's all I need to know about you—that you care."

Her throat felt tight.

"And if that's not enough to convince you, maybe this will."

He withdrew another envelope from the basket and placed it in her hands. Kat opened it with trepidation, withdrawing a check made out to her from MegaMart. Her eyes flew to his dark ones. "Jared ... thi-this is a check for a hundred thousand dollars."

"According to that contract, we pay you half now, after signing, then the other half upon completion of the project."

Two hundred thousand dollars! What she couldn't do with that ... it would help a lot of women.

Kat smiled at him, her heart swelling with joy.

"Show me where to sign," she said softly. Then she leaned over and kissed him.

When she finished, she handed the contract back to him. He folded it and placed it back in the old fishing basket, but not before he withdrew a long, black jeweler's box.

Kat shook her head, eyeing the box "Y-you said that was it."

"I couldn't let that be the last thing my she-cat received tonight." He placed the box in her hands. "This is strictly from me. It has nothing to do with MegaMart."

Her hands trembled as she untied the pink ribbon lining the outside of the box. When she opened it, she gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Jared..." she breathed. "I-I can't accept this."

"Yes, you can, my lovely opponent." Jared grasped the box and lifted the necklace from the black satin lining the inside of the box. Kat swallowed as she watched him open the clasp. "Come here," he said softly. "Turn around and lift your hair."

She did, allowing him to place the necklace around her throat. When she turned to face him, he whistled. "I knew it. It's *you*."

Kat grabbed her handbag and withdrew a small mirror. She gazed at her reflection, her neck adorned with the diamond and pink sapphire tiger hanging from an exquisitely crafted, gold-mirrored chain.

"Its twenty-two-karat white and yellow gold," Jared told her.

Kat couldn't speak, all she could do was stare. The tiger's eyes stared back at her—they were crafted entirely of emeralds. Their deep green color winked at her, the cat's eyes glowing softly against its pave-diamond-crusted face. Small strips of pink sapphire lined the jeweled animal's sleek body.

He smiled, reaching out to finger the tiger. "The pink sapphires and white diamonds remind me of KISS and the tiger—that's you." Jared dropped his hand.

"I-it's too much," she said softly. "You shouldn't have." She fingered the necklace at her throat.

"I wanted to, Kat. I wanted you to have something just from me."

They made love that night as the fireworks went off overhead. The bright, spinning, noisy lights invaded the summer sky, lighting up Summerville. They showered down all around them, a sparkling, glittering array of colors.

Kat saw her own shimmering stars that evening as Jared brought her to passion's wide abyss, loving her until her body went limp, until her mind knew nothing but him.

But in the back of her mind, a little voice kept saying, 'Everything changes, Kat. It always does.'

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## **Chapter Eighteen**

That Saturday morning, Kat stood at the front door of KISS. Balancing her bags and keys, she managed to open the front door and frowned. She gazed upwards just as a passing cloud blocked out the early morning sun. Strange, she mused, when a breeze kicked up. Kat could have sworn it would rain. It never rained in Summerville. She kicked the front door closed with the heel of her shoe and strode to the back of KISS. Depositing her bags on the desk in her office, she heard the bell jangle.

Kat glanced at her watch. Ten fifteen. Whew! She had just made it in ... barely. Jared's vigorous loving had her sleeping later than usual. She walked to the front of KISS then heard Lilith.

"Good morning!" her friend called out.

"Hi Lilith." Kat walked over to the cash register and turned it on.

"Have a good time last night at the concert?" Lilith asked, her violet eyes dancing.

"I did. How about you?"

Lilith shrugged. "Sure, but I'm more interested in how you and Jared made out."

Kat stuck her tongue out at her. "Very funny. Nice play on words."

Lilith erupted into peals of laughter. "You know what I mean."

Kat sighed. "I never kiss and tell. You should know that."

"Oh you!" Lilith giggled. "Stop already."

Kat grinned at her as she opened the door to the register then closed it. "I had a *marvelous* time Lilith. Jared's..."

"Wonderful?"

Kat became serious. "Yes. Wonderful."

The bell above the front door jangled in warning. Kat looked over to see a tall, thin, elegantly dressed woman walk in. Her sleek, blonde hair had a zillion different shades in it. Kat imagined it must cost her a small fortune to get it highlighted that way. She had on a pair of stylish, dark glasses, the white frames a fashionable contrast to the black-tinted lenses. Kat sized her up immediately. One of Long Island's Gold Coast Blue Bloods.

"I'll chat with you later, okay? I see you've got a customer."

"Okay, Lilith."

Lilith walked by the woman standing at the entrance. As she did, Kat noticed how the woman looked Lilith up and down.

Oh boy, this was going to be some morning ... but a customer was a customer.

Kat walked over to her. "Can I help you?"

The woman removed her dark glasses revealing a pair of pale blue eyes. Vague recognition stirred within Kat. She felt like she knew her...

"You're Kaitlyn Sullivan, aren't you?"

Kat smiled. "I am. But please, call me 'Kat.' Did someone recommend KISS to you?"

The woman gave a shrill laugh. "Oh ... oh no. Not in the least."

Kat bristled. "Well then, how can I help you? Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Just you," the woman laughed snidely.

"All right," Kat said, impatient. "You found me, now, what do you want?"

"Well now, no need to get testy."

Kat balled her right hand into a fist at her side. She had the most unholy urge to take a swing at the woman.

"I'd like to introduce myself," the woman stuck out her hand. Long, red nails adorned each finger. "My name is Georgia O'Reilly." She smiled thinly, and finished by saying, "But everyone calls *me* George."

\* \* \* \*

That vague feeling of recollection continued to haunt Kat as she stood there, looking at the blonde woman. "Ms. O'Reilly." Kat stated, her tone flat. "Do I ... know you? Should I?"

George snorted. "I'm only Jared Martin's assistant. I think you *would* know me."

"Jared never mentioned you," Kat murmured in response. Her stomach did a little flip.

"Oh, he didn't? I'm surprised. I'm usually the one he sends to close all his ... deals."

Kat blinked once, registering what George said. "I see..."

"So, the reason I'm here is to show you something."

Kat angled her head. "What?"

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George dug through her bag and withdrew a Manila envelope. She handed it to Kat. "Go on, open it."

Kat reached for the envelope. She opened the metal clasp on the back and looked inside.

George sighed with impatience. "Here," she said snidely. "Give me that!" She wrenched the envelope from Kat's hands and dumped its contents on the counter in front of them.

Kat gazed down at the five by seven photographs.

"Aren't these nice?" George queried.

Kat's hand shook as she picked up the first photograph—it was a picture of April and Bill outside in the back of KISS.

The others were equally shocking. Pictures of all her friends, of the women she helped. Each one dressed in the outfits she had designed for them—the outfits designed to bring the spark of life back in their souls. Souls that had been devastated by illness and disease. Kat held each photo up to her scrutiny ... the last ones being the lingerie party. All her friends, and the three young women who had come to her for help, were photographed in Kat's stunning lingerie creations.

She felt sick inside.

"How did you get these pictures?" her voice vibrated with anger.

George shrugged. She folded her arms under her breasts and leaned against the counter. "I have my ways."

"These mean ... nothing." Kat said, and flipped the picture she had been viewing right back at George.

"Oh no?" George lifted a brow. "I'd say they mean quite a bit."

"Get out of here," Kat told her, her voice low. "Get out now."

"No, I don't think I will," George admonished. "Because you see, there's this little thing called the Internet. Have you heard about it?"

"Of course," Kat snapped at her.

"Well then, I believe that these pictures would be of great interest to, oh ... let's say ... the media? Wouldn't they like to see them?"

Kat folded her arms under her breasts. "And just what would the media want with them?"

"How about this? How about I tell the newspapers and the television stations what really goes on at KISS."

Kat paled. "What do you mean?"

"How about I tell them that Ms. Kaitlyn Sullivan is running a little side business here. A side business of prostitution."

Kat's eyes bugged out. "Why you bitch!"

George laughed, unfazed. "Yes that would make a great story. And these photos," George swept her hand in front of her, aiming at the pictures on the counter. "These photos tell the story beautifully, particularly this one. It's the one of you accepting a large wad of cash from this man here."

Kat looked down at the picture of her and Bill, April's husband.

"And this one ... where all these ladies are coming out of the back of KISS, dressed ... well, you know ... and these men here, greeting them at the back door."

"Those men are those women's husbands a-and boyfriends."

"Right. Sure."

Kat slumped against the counter.

George sighed, gathering up the pictures. "Digital photos are just great, aren't they? You can send them anywhere, to anyone ... and to think I've made several copies."

Kat paled.

"Now, Jared gives me full authority to close theses deals." Her pale blue eyes locked with Kat's. "And that's because ... well, we've known each other for quite some time, now."

Kat moved away from the counter. She got closer to George and stared right back at her. The blonde! The blonde she had seen Jared with in 'People Magazine!'

The blonde was ... George.

Kat's hands grew clammy.

"So, how about it, Kat?"

She bristled at George's flippant use of her first name.

"What will I do with these pictures? Pass them along to my ... media friends?"

"No!" Kat shouted. "No," she said again, her voice ... defeated. "Don't, please, I-I'll do anything, just don't..."

"Hmmm ... a very telling statement."

"Huh?"

"I'll do anything."

Kat's stomach roiled.

"So, here's what you're going to do in exchange for me *not* going to the media with these pictures."

Kat's legs wobbled. She grasped the counter for support.

"The first thing you're going to do is stand up at that Civic Association Meeting and back MegaMart one hundred percent."

Kat smiled snidely, her bravado returning. "I was going to do that already."

"Wonderful!" George clapped her hands. "Now, here's number two. You're going to also stand up at that Civic Association Meeting on Thursday and tell everyone that you're declining the position Mr. Martin offered you with MegaMart."

Kat's heart sank. All that money ... it would have helped so many women!

"I can't do that, Jared would only ask me why..."

George cut her off. "Tell him what you want, Ms. Sullivan. Give him any excuse under the sun. Just make sure you announce at that meeting that you're declining the position. If you don't I'll take those pictures and..."

"All right." Kat held up a hand, palm out. "I will."

"Wonderful!" George crowed again. She packed up the pictures and slung her bag over her shoulder.

"Just a minute," Kat came from around the counter. "What's number three?"

"Hmmm?"

Kat fumed. "I said ... what's *number three*?"

"Oh! Of course, point number three."

"Spit it out!" Kat snapped.

"Oh, my, my, *my* ... you are a nasty one. I'll just have to send those pictures out tonight..."

"Just ... tell me," Kat implored. "P-please."

"Well now, that's better." George batted her eyes at Kat.  
"Point Three. I've saved the best for last."

Kat wanted to kill her. If she had a gun in her hand, she would have shot Ms. Snotnose right there on the spot.

"You stay away from Jared, Ms. Sullivan."

Kat's mouth hung open. "I'll do no such thing."

George lifted a brow.

Kat felt nauseous. Her hand went to her belly to calm the queasiness inside. She should have told Jared about the real reason for the lingerie party ... about her mother and sister dying and how she had to help other women so they wouldn't have to go through the same thing her mother and sister went through. "A-alright. I-I'll do it. I will ... stay away from him." Her voice broke.

George laughed, her pale blue eyes grew icy. Kat recoiled looking at them, they reminded her of Jerome Waters' eyes. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Ms. Sullivan. A real ... pleasure."

She turned on her elegant high-heels and marched out of KISS, leaving Kat to wonder why she never listened to that little voice in her head...

*Everything changes.*

It always did ... and never for the better.

\* \* \* \*

That Tuesday, Kat sat in her office in the back of KISS, trying hard to concentrate on the inventory numbers in front of her. The figures danced and swam before her eyes. No

matter how hard she focused, she just couldn't keep her mind on the task.

*Everything changes.*

She wished she had a switch to shut off the noise in her head, particularly that particular message.

*Jared gives me full authority to close these deals ... that's because we've known each other for quite some time, now.*

Kat cradled her aching head in her hands as she thought about Georgia O'Reilly. What a fool Kat had been to be sucked in by the likes of Jared Martin ... a corporate snake. A lowdown, no-good...

She shook her head to clear it. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't reconcile the two Jareds—the one who loved his family, the one who loved MegaMart ... the one who said he loved *her*.

No, this man was worse than Jerome Waters, worse than Arthur, worse because she had given her heart ... and KISS ... to him.

Fool! She had been such a fool. And now, she had duped her town, too. Summerville. The place she loved—she would sell out everyone in Summerville to the giant, corporate beast ... MegaMart ... and Jared Martin.

The bell above the door to KISS jangled. Kat didn't move. Melissa had been in the last couple of days, working full-time hours. Kat had given her strict instructions that she was not to be disturbed. Kat hadn't even gone into KISS that Sunday, claiming she had been ill...

She *had* been ill. Sick with worry and sick of her thoughts of Jared—of his magic hands and mouth, her wild passionate panther.

Kat heard raised voices outside. Melissa's and ... a man's. Kat rose from her seat. As she did, Jared opened her office door and swept inside. She sucked in a breath as he walked in and shut the door, his tall frame crowding the small space of her office.

"I told Melissa I didn't want to see anybody."

Jared reached out and grabbed Kat's chin in his fingers. "Why are you so pale?" he asked, worry lacing his voice.

She jerked her chin back, he dropped his hand to his side. "I wasn't ... feeling good."

"So I heard," came his curt reply. Softening his tone, he said, "You didn't come into KISS on Sunday and you haven't returned my calls."

"That's because ... I was ... sick."

She wished he would leave. If George found out they were together ... oh, fuck George, her brain screamed. And fuck Jared Martin! Then Kat thought about the pictures George had. Her body shook.

Jared narrowed his eyes. "Kat, sit down," he eased her into a chair. "Here," he reached for a bottle of water in the small fridge near her desk. Opening it, he brought it to her lips and said. "Take a sip."

She did, the cold water reviving her.

Jared pulled a chair over and took the seat next to her. "Kat, sweetheart, what's wrong?"

She lifted her eyes and met his beautiful, dark, golden orbs. "N-nothing."

He leaned back in the chair, studying her. "All right. Out with it."

She paled even more.

He grabbed her hand. "Are you pregnant?"

She blinked once, registering what he had just asked her.

"I said..."

Kat held up a hand. "I heard what you said, damn it."

He grinned. "Well?"

She looked up at him. He had such a happy, goofy, grin on his face.

"No, I'm not ... pregnant," she replied petulantly.

His face fell. "I just thought, well, we've been together so much and perhaps you didn't use anything, I mean," he ran a hand through his hair. "I mean, I know *I* certainly didn't."

"I use something and, like I said, I am *not* pregnant."

Jared rose to his feet and paced the small confines of her office. Kat suddenly felt very warm.

"Let's spend the rest of the day together, Kat. And tomorrow ... take some time tomorrow and come with me ... I'm going to see my father."

"No!" she shouted.

He turned, eyes narrowed. "Why not?"

She held up a hand. "It's just that ... I'm still not feeling a hundred percent better."

"It would do you good to get out ... you work too hard."

Kat rose to her feet, too, barely. "Stop it," she snapped. "Just stop telling me I work too hard. This is *my* life, KISS is *my* store. At least until ... MegaMart comes in."

Jared cocked his head in her direction. "Is that what this is about? You don't want MegaMart here in Summerville? Have you changed your mind?"

"Oh God, Jared, no, please ... just go," she shooed him away. "I've got to finish these inventory figures."

"We'll have dinner then."

She stood her ground. "No."

"Kat..."

"Just ... go. I'll see you Thursday at the Civic Association meeting."

Jared grabbed her around the waist and tugged her forward. "I can't wait that long, my she-cat," he purred in her ear. "I can't. I ... I miss you. I miss ... us." He moved to kiss her, but Kat turned her face away. His lips collided with nothing but air. Kat could feel the anger and tension emanating from him.

"Damn you, Kat, what's wrong?" he growled low in his throat.

She felt his arousal brush across her thigh. Her response to it bothered her—she grew hot and damp, her breasts felt heavy. Would Jared always have this effect on her, she wondered—no matter what she thought of him?

"Nothing's wrong." She pushed him away again and moved on wobbly legs to the door. Kat opened it and swept her hand out in front of her.

"I said I'll see you at the meeting and ... I will."

"Kat..." he intoned.

"Goodbye, Jared."

He gave her one; long last look then strode out the door. Kat closed it, then walked over to the desk and sat down.

She laid her arms on the desk and pillowed her head on top of them.

Kat didn't cry, she couldn't.

She just felt numb.

\* \* \* \*

His she-cat was hurting.

That single thought swirled through Jared's mind that afternoon as he drove his car back to the Pink Lily. Kat wasn't right. Hadn't been for days.

And she didn't want or trust him enough to tell him.

He still wasn't convinced that she *wasn't* pregnant. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking on his part. A child. He'd be ecstatic if she said she was carrying his baby.

The twenty-minute drive ended soon enough. Jared pulled his car into the parking lot of the Pink Lily. The familiar odor of trumpet lilies hit him as he strode up the walkway.

When he entered the lobby, it was to see George sitting there.

The day, Jared thought, was turning out worse than he could have ever imagined.

George smiled brightly and waved in his direction. Damn, but the last person he needed to talk to now was George.

He walked up to her and barked, "What are you doing here? I thought you weren't due in until tomorrow."

She pouted. "Is that any way to treat your assistant?"

Jared shook his head, running a hand around the back of his neck. "No, I, uh ... I'm sorry, George."

She stood up, bag in hand. "I was just waiting for them to get my room ready. They are slow as shit here, Jared, I swear..."

In one swift movement, he reached out and grabbed George by the shoulders. He gave her a little shake and said, "Don't ever ... ever ... let me here you say something like that again, do you hear me?"

"Hey! You're hurting me."

Jared released her. She rubbed the top of her arms and scowled. "God, what's got you in such a crappy mood?"

Kat. That was it briefly.

Kat.

"Nothing. Look, I'm going upstairs to lie down..."

George smiled slyly. "I could join you."

He whirled to face her. "Knock it off, George, I'm warning you."

"All right, all right ... jeez. You're so ... testy lately."

Jared turned on his heel and bounded up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

George watched Jared as he strode up the stairs of the Pink Lily. She sighed, admiring the perfect animal grace in which he moved, his long legs eating up each tread on the stairs.

"Ms. O'Reilly?"

She turned to see Betty standing there. "Your room is ready."

"It's about time," George snapped. "You people are slow as..." She glanced up the stairs and saw Jared standing there, looking at her.

She turned back to Betty and smiled thinly. "Thanks," is how she finished. George followed Betty to her room. Betty made sure the key worked and asked, "Is there anything you'd like Ms. O'Reilly?"

*Yeah, I would ... Jared. In my bed. Now.*

"No, nothing."

She watched Betty walk away. Then she turned and stuck her tongue out at Betty's retreating back.

"No one tells Georgia O'Reilly what to do," she muttered as she opened the door to her room and sailed in.

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## **Chapter Nineteen**

Thursday evening couldn't come quick enough for Jared. As he sat in the meeting room of the Summerville Town Hall, he glanced at his watch. Eight p.m. and no sign of Lilith ... or Kat. Lilith had said Kat would be coming with her. At least he had Lilith on his side. She too, felt that Kat just hadn't been right these last few days, and she had no idea why.

Damn, Kat! Why wouldn't she talk to him?

He ran a finger around the collar of his dress shirt. The meeting room was packed to the rafters—everyone in Summerville had come to hear about MegaMart. He watched as Fred grabbed the microphone in front of him. "We'll begin in just a few minutes," he told the assembled crowd. "Everyone, please find a seat," he finished saying as the people milling around took the available chairs.

Jared turned in time to see Lilith walk in with Kat. Kat took the vacant seat on the end. Lilith stared at her then bent her head to whisper something in Kat's ear. He saw Kat shake her head negatively. Lilith walked over and took the seat next to Jared.

"I have no idea," she whispered to him. "Why she won't sit next to you."

He turned slightly and slipped his arm around the back of Lilith's chair, leaning back in his own. He tried to catch Kat's eye from where he sat, but she hadn't looked at him since she walked in. "Has she said anything to you, Lilith?"

"Nothing. She's clammed up so tight; I can't get a word out of her."

"All right. Now that everyone's here, we'll begin," Fred told the assembly. "Welcome to the monthly meeting of the Summerville Civic Association. Tonight, our guest is Mr. Jared Martin, the president and CEO of MegaMart Corporation."

Jared stood to a round of applause.

"Mr. Martin, in accordance with the bylaws of the Summerville Civic Association, you have twenty minutes in which to give your presentation, followed by a twenty-minute question and answer period. You may begin your presentation now."

Fred took a seat. Jared walked over to the podium and began to speak. When he glanced in Kat's direction, she turned away, but not before he noticed her eyes.

Jared would have sworn he saw tears shimmering in her beautiful sea-green eyes.

\* \* \* \*

George's cold, pale, icy-blue eyes bored into Kat. It chilled her, though the meeting room felt hot as hell. Kat's skin grew clammy.

Jared started to speak. Kat took a deep breath, letting his deep voice wash over her. How she missed hearing that voice!

"I love Summerville," he began. He glanced back for a few seconds to look at Kat.

Kat appeared uninterested, but was all ears as she idly scribbled on a piece of paper. When she looked up it was to see Jared staring at *her*.

Many in the audience murmured among each other. Kat heard comments like, "Who's he kidding? He doesn't love Summerville!"

Jared looked out onto the crowded room. "Many of you, I'm sure, don't believe what I just said. You're saying to yourself right now, 'He's just a visitor. He has no idea what this town is like.'" For just a second, Jared's eyes met hers from across the room.

"But I do love Summerville."

Kat looked away.

"And I'll tell you why. It's the people. The wonderful people that form this town of Summerville. Oh, you hear things like, 'Summerville is great. It never rains in Summerville,' or 'Summerville's a great stop on your way to the Hamptons,' but it's none of that. It's you." He pointed at everyone in the audience. "All of you, the people who live here, whether it be for a lifetime or ... a short span of time. It's all of *you* that make Summerville the great town it is."

He got another round of applause.

"I know many of you are thrilled about what I'm about to propose—the new 'Shops at Summerville Inn.' And I also know that some of you are ... opposed. All I ask is that you allow me to make my presentation, then I will answer any questions you have."

The lights dimmed. Kat barely heard him. All she could think about was KISS, and the photographs George O'Reilly

had. If George showed those pictures to anyone, and told that story, she'd be out of business. All her years of hard work would go up in smoke. And her friends. Kat looked at the dear faces of Lilith and Fred ... Doris and Harvey ... Evelyn ... Annabelle. They'd all be ruined, too.

Her dream of ever helping anyone again would be gone, too. Her mother and sister's pain and suffering would all be for nothing.

Soon after the presentation ended, the questions began.

One man stood up and asked. "Why should we trust you? An outsider. You say now that nothing will change, but I know your kind, you come into a town like ours and take it over with all your fancy ideas and ways."

Jared grabbed the microphone and walked out into the crowd. "I know how you feel, but please believe me when I say ... the pictures you just saw are what I'm proposing. Nothing will change unless the citizens of Summerville say it will. Right now, every single detail of the Shops at Summerville Inn is keeping within the lines and structures of existing properties on Main Street."

"You'll bring more jobs?" One woman stood up and asked.

"Yes. More jobs. You'll have more business, so they'll be a need for more skilled help."

"Cashiers. Waitresses, waiters ... menial workers!" Someone shouted. "Who needs more menial workers?"

Jared's face grew hard. "My father and his father before him started out as you say—'menial workers.' They took jobs for fifteen cents an hour. They struggled, they didn't make much at those jobs, but they were proud to have them. No

job is menial, sir." Jared eyeballed the man. "There are only menial people."

That brought Jared a round of applause.

"Who's going to oversee all this?" Someone asked.

Kat froze in her seat.

Jared smiled at the woman asking the question. "Why, that's a very good question, ma'am. I'll let the person who's going to help us oversee this project tell you about it herself." He walked back over to the dais. "Ms. Kat Sullivan has agreed to oversee this project with me, and MegaMart is proud to have her, as I am."

From the corner of her eye, she could see George glaring at her. Kat's hand shook as she grabbed hold of her microphone, rising to her feet on wobbly legs.

"Good evening everyone," she murmured. She heard someone in the back shout, 'Louder!'"

"I'm sorry. I-is that better?" Kat raised her voice a fraction. "Mr. Martin has given us a wonderful presentation this evening and I want to tell you all that ... I wholeheartedly endorse this project." There were murmurs coming from the audience. "It will be good for Summerville."

Kat stopped, her heart galloping. She looked at Jared when she could will herself to talk again. The room spun for a few seconds. Kat grasped the edge of the table and spoke in a rush. "And while I do think this project is r-right for Summerville, I just want to say, I cannot accept the job that MegaMart has offered me. The job to help oversee this project."

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Kat saw Jared's eyes widen, then narrow, his face a mask of anger and ... confusion.

"I-I thank you all."

She dropped the microphone and ran out of the meeting room, feeling Jared's dark, golden eyes on her back the entire time.

Kat didn't stop running until she got to KISS.

\* \* \* \*

KISS' dark interior greeted Kat as she unlocked the door and stepped inside, her feet gliding across the pink and white tiles on the floor. She didn't bother to put on any lights, preferring the security the dark interior provided. Her haven. Her refuge from a world that kept changing ... and which she no longer understood.

She didn't understand herself, either. How could she still have feelings for a man who only sought to ruin her? Oh, he played a good, corporate game. Jared Martin knew how to appear innocent while letting his underlings do all the dirty work for him.

Bastard!

Kat balled her hands in fists at her sides. In the dim light that shown through the windows, Kat could make out the lingerie form that held her beautiful turquoise-colored, ruffle-lined chemise and thong. It had been one of Jared's favorites—he had stroked and caressed the sheer fabric, fingering the ruffles at the hemline and neck.

It was the day he had come to KISS and made her see the truth about Nancy ... about herself. It was the day he had

made sweet, wild love to her near the back counter. His hands and lips had worked their magic, bringing her back to that great sensual abyss.

Kat walked over to the form. In one swift movement, she knocked it to the floor. Anger swirled inside her, rising into a great mushroom cloud of animal hate. Her face contorted, her upper lip curling, her teeth grinding together as she dropped to her knees and ripped the chemise from the form. Her hands worked furiously as she tore the see-through material in two. Tears of anger and frustration streamed from her eyes as she continued to tear the material into tiny, ragged pieces. Kat flung them through the air, rising on her knees to hurl the material in a dozen different directions.

Soon, her ragged emotions matched the shredded outfit. Kat lost steam, her energy lagging, the day's stress taking its toll. Her movements stopped, her breathing came in short, shallow pants, her body dripping with perspiration. She shoved some strands of damp hair from her face and tried to stand, but her legs gave out.

A mournful animal cry borne of despair and betrayal escaped her. It's sad sound echoed through KISS as Kat dropped to her knees again, burying her face in her hands. She slid her feet out from beneath her thighs and slumped back against a counter. A calm, eerie quiet settled over KISS. Kat heard her own breathing as she peered out into the darkened interior of her shop. All around her were pieces of the shredded chemise, the lingerie form sprawled across the floor. A piece of the form had cracked off. When Kat could get her eyes to focus, she could see the form's right breast had

been damaged, the jagged crack ran across it diagonally, a piece of the plastic lay nearby. Only half of the breast remained. She cried out again and raised shaking hands to her nose and mouth, slumping back against the counter once more.

Kat didn't know how long she stayed like that. It could have been hours for all she knew. The clock on the wall above her head continued to tick. She could hear the sound of a lone car as it made it's way down Main Street. Kat thought she heard voices outside on the sidewalk, but she couldn't be sure.

*Everything changes.*

It always did, she thought. It always did...

She just wanted to know why.

\* \* \* \*

Jared took the steps leading up to KISS' pink and white Victorian façade two at a time. He peered through the window, but all he could see was the darkened interior. There was no sign of Kat.

She always came back to KISS, he thought. Always. He had called her cell phone several times, but all he got was her voice mail. Worry filled him. She hadn't been right for days and her performance tonight at the Civic Association meeting only cemented in his mind that he had to find the underlying cause of what made Kat so upset ... and so distant from him.

"Open the door, Kat!" he shouted as he pounded on the frame. He rattled the knob and looked inside again.

Nothing.

His worry increased tenfold. Jared took the cell phone from his pocket and dialed Lilith. She answered on the second ring.

"Is she home?" he barked.

"No, Jared. She's not."

Sweat beaded on his forehead. He swiped it away with the back of one hand.

"She's got to be there at KISS, Jared. Did you try the back?"

The back! The back...

Jared flew to the back of KISS and pounded on the deliveries only entrance. He pulled on the latch and pounded the metal door until his hand was numb.

Damn her!

He didn't know what he'd do first when he found her ... kiss her until she didn't know her own name or paddle her ass until it was raw.

"Well?" he heard Lilith's voice.

He put the cell phone back to his ear. "I tried the back. It's locked up tighter than a drum."

"She's there. I know she's there, Jared."

He strode to the front of KISS one more time, cold, hard determination stamped his features. Again, he peered through the window, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness as he gazed inside. He scanned the walls laden with racks of outfits. He scanned the counters and forms...

Ah! One was missing. The turquoise-colored chemise. He had liked that one, had wanted to see his she-cat dressed in that...

Maybe she had changed it. Put a different outfit on the form.

No ... Kat hadn't done that. She had left it up there purposely to taunt and tease him each time he came into the store.

He surveyed the counters, his eyes darting from one to the other.

Then he saw her.

His eyes widened when he saw Kat slumped against the counter at the far end.

Jared beat the door with his fist and shouted her name until he was hoarse.

\* \* \* \*

Kat heard Jared's ragged voice.

"Goddamn it, Kat, open this door!"

It rattled in its frame. When she could focus, she saw the door move on the hinges, bulging against the jamb as Jared pushed on it.

She pushed away from the counter and rose to her knees, crying out when she attempted to stand. Her legs were numb. Gripping the top of the counter with one hand, Kat managed to stand upright.

"Kat! Kat!"

His voice sounded hoarse, tired. *She* felt tired. So tired...

Kat walked over to the door, stepping over the form. At one point, she almost slipped on one of the tiny shreds of material that littered the floor.

"Go away," she shouted. "Leave me alone. If you don't, I-I'll call the police."

She gazed out the window at his face, the streetlight providing the only light on the darkened road outside. His face appeared strained, the skin stretched taut across his cheekbones.

"Go ahead," he replied. "Call them. Your chief of police and his two deputies are enjoying a nice meal at the Sunshine Café courtesy of MegaMart."

His flippant answer had her blood pressure skyrocketing.

Kat unlocked the deadbolt and wrenched open the door, making sure to keep the chain in place. She looked through the small space between the door and the jamb and pinned Jared with cold eyes.

"Let me in, Kat. I'm not budging until you do."

"Go away. I don't want to see you."

He folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not leaving. If I have to, I'll camp out here on the steps and tell everyone that KISS is closed indefinitely until you agree to see me."

"Screw you," she said through clenched teeth.

He straightened to his full height and dropped his hands to his sides. "All right. Fine. Have it your way."

She watched him walk away from the door and plunk his tall frame down on the steps, settling himself against the wrought-iron banister.

"You're trespassing," she told him.

"So sue me."

"Fuck you."

He leaned back further into the banister, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "You know, you just signed a contract with MegaMart, sweetheart. You must not have read the clause that said 'all employees will conduct themselves in a manner of courtesy and respect to all.'"

Damn him! Kat growled low in her throat. He had the gall, the unmitigated nerve to throw that contract in her face.

"I'll do as I please."

"Apparently, you do. Just like tonight. Your stupid, childish actions at tonight's meeting only make it clear to me that you need a good beating on a daily basis."

Her eyes widened. She heard something that sounded like a snarl and realized it came from her. Slipping the chain from its holder she flung the door open. Kat took her first step outside when she realized her fatal error.

Jared sprung to his feet with cat-like swiftness. He bounded up the steps, heading straight for her. Kat shut the door and tried to set the deadbolt but her fingers shook. In the next instant, the door pushed against her, throwing her backwards. She landed against a counter, her back digging painfully into the edge.

Jared strode in. He kicked the door closed with the back of his heel and locked it. He flipped on the lights, flooding the interior of KISS with the soft, warm glow of Kat's power-track lighting. His eyes strayed to the fallen lingerie form, and the shreds of turquoise-colored material scattered across the floor.

"Kat," his eyes flew to hers. She blinked as hers adjusted to the light. "What happened here?" his voice grew steely.

Jared walked over to the lingerie form and turned it upright, gazing at the jagged crack across the bust line. He picked up one of the torn pieces of material and held it out in front of him.

Kat couldn't look at it ... or him. From the corner of her eye, she saw the broken lingerie form and mentally winced.

"Did you do this?" his voice floated toward her. When she looked at him, his face had paled.

She didn't answer. Couldn't answer. Kat stood there, motionless, as a great tide of despair washed over her. Tears clogged her throat, but she pushed them back.

"Why," he asked on a sigh, as the piece of material left his hand. It floated to the floor. "Why?" He pinned her with dark, golden eyes.

"I hate you," she replied. "I hate you and your money."

He walked toward her, stopping just inches away. Kat's eyes took in his tall, erect form. Power—money and power personified. The great corporate beast. He'd eat her alive.

"For your information," he said, his voice even. Kat caught the note of barely concealed anger. "You signed a contract with me. With MegaMart."

"Fuck the contract," she spat at him.

He smiled. Barely. "That's the second time you've used that word tonight, my lovely opponent. It makes me think you're cornered."

God, he knew her so well! She *was* cornered. By him. By MegaMart...

By those pictures.

"You think your money can buy me?" she asked, her voice dripped acid. "I ripped up that check."

He shrugged. "I can write another. It doesn't matter."

She released a small, shrill laugh. "Of course it doesn't. Money never mattered to you."

He cocked his head. "Gee," he said snidely. "That's odd. Your eyes certainly lit up when you accepted that one hundred thousand dollar check."

They had, she thought. They had ... that money would have helped so many women.

"Get out." Cornered. He kept pushing her into that corner. God, if anyone saw them ... told that blonde bitch who worked for him...

"I'm not leaving here until you tell me why, tell me the real reason you won't work for me ... tell me the reason you won't see me, won't answer my calls."

A sob tore through her, she stifled it, but not before it escaped her throat. She covered her mouth with her hand and swallowed convulsively. Her body shook.

"Kat," he implored. "Kat ... tell me what's wrong, please."

She shook her head, no. She couldn't stop.

"Kat, for God sake, please." Jared moved forward and grabbed her upper arms. "Tell me, sweetheart, tell me. Tell me and I'll make it better. I swear I will."

She managed to shrug out of his hold and stepped back, bumping into the counter as she did.

Cornered.

No where to go.

Kat then said the one thing she knew would make him leave ... forever.

She squared her shoulders and aimed her chin at him in defiance of the male animal, her breathing short and labored. In a voice laced with revulsion she said, "I don't want a man whose father is a nutcase."

Kat thought if she had slapped him, it would have been the same effect. His face grew taut and white beneath the tan of his skin. She continued, her nails digging into her palms. It mirrored the pain she felt inside ... it mirrored the pain on his face.

"I don't want to be involved with the likes of you. Your father's crazier than a loon and I just keep thinking ... that'll be you someday."

Jared's tall, muscular body sagged for just an instant. He backed away from her.

"Get out of here, Jared. Don't come back. You're a fool if you think I *ever* wanted you. You were a nice lay ... a great fuck, but no way in *hell* do I want someone who's father's as nutty as yours."

His face contorted. He lunged for her then. Kat feared for her life in that instant. He grabbed her by the shoulders, lifting her from her feet. His hot breath blew across her skin, his voice a low snarl. "If you were a man, I'd..."

She didn't know where her bravado came from. It rose up from the very depths of her innermost core in time for her to say, "You'd what? Beat me? For telling you the truth? *You* told me the truth once, I'm just returning the favor. Get out of

KISS. Get out now. If you don't I'll tell the whole world what a Looney-tune your father really is."

He dropped her. Kat's feet met the floor in a painful rush, jarring her body. "I don't want you here. I don't want MegaMart here. I never did. I told you it would get dirty and ... it has."

Jared's shoulders slumped. He walked toward the door. He had his hand on the knob when he turned and said, "I don't understand you. I just don't. You told everyone there tonight that you believed in MegaMart, that it would be good for Summerville."

Kat looked him right in the eyes. "Everything changes, Jared."

He shook his head, his face full of disbelief and anger. "Bitch," he growled low. His voice shook.

She had to look away for a few seconds. The sight of his shiny, dark magnificent, golden-flecked eyes made her heart thud painfully against her rib cage. His eyes held that same look the evening of the concert, when he had watched Allie walk away. She had seen that same look in his eyes then and ... now. She steeled herself for what she had to say next.

"Bastard," she returned, her voice shaking.

She watched him walk out of KISS and knew in that moment, he had just taken her heart with him.

The last thing she did before she slumped to the floor was rip the necklace from her throat and toss the jeweled cat against the door. She saw it bounce, leaving a jagged crack in the pane of glass. The cat lay on its side, the diamonds and

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pink sapphires winking in the pale light coming in through the entrance.

Kat stared at it, but all she saw was one of the eyes, the other had fallen out, leaving a huge hole in its face.

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## Chapter Twenty

The following morning Lilith walked into the coffee shop. She placed her order for her favorite breakfast—a chocolate chip muffin and a vanilla-hazelnut coffee. Gazing at the young woman behind the counter, Lilith blurted out, "Make that *two* muffins and two coffees."

Kat. She would go and see Kat this morning and find out what had happened. Jared was holed up in his room at the Pink Lily. Evelyn had told Annabelle, who told Betty what Jared had told *Lilith* about what had happened at KISS the previous evening, but Jared hadn't said much except for what she already knew...

Kat had refused the MegaMart job—and him.

As she waited for her order, Lilith surveyed the interior of Summerville's one and only coffee shop. Familiar faces greeted her. She glanced toward the back to see the top of a blonde head in one of the booths. Upon further inspection, it appeared to be a familiar blonde head, highlighted with a dozen different shades of blonde. The person's hand reached up to flick several strands of that blonde hair over a pointy, narrow shoulder. Long red nails adorned that hand.

Georgia O'Reilly.

Lilith blew out a breath, mustering every ounce of nerve she had. Grabbing the two brown bags the girl passed her over the counter, Lilith paid for the order and marched to the back of the coffee shop, sliding into the seat across from Georgia.

"Good morning," Lilith said brightly.

Georgia looked up. She pinned Lilith with her pale blue eyes. On reflex, Lilith leaned back in her seat. A small trickle of fear snaked down her spine.

"What do you want?" Georgia snapped.

Lilith continued to smile, despite her fear. "I saw you when I came in ... I just thought I'd drop by and say 'hello.' I didn't get a chance to speak with you at all yesterday evening at the meeting."

George shrugged and took a sip of her coffee. Lilith gazed at the woman's full, pouty lips. Did *anyone* have natural lips that puffed out like that? Lilith wondered what she used ... oh! Stupid. Stop staring, she told herself, and get some information.

"It was Jared's night, not mine," Georgia replied, her tone clipped. "I was there to support Jared."

"Yes, and I think he did a fine job, don't you?"

"He always does." She eyed Lilith from over the rim of her mug. She batted her eyes, her long lashes touching her cheek.

Lilith caught the look of desire in Georgia's pale blue eyes and wondered just how good a job Jared Martin really did ... with *Georgia*. In bed.

Yikes! No wonder Kat was so angry.

"Where is Jared this morning?" Lilith asked, keeping a light tone in her voice.

"*Mr. Martin*, as I think *you* should call him, is at the Pink Lily. He's got a lot of paperwork to do. He also has to find a replacement for that Kat Sullivan. She's caused him no end of

grief over this. She signed that contract, she said she'd work for him and now, now look what she's done. Ms. Upstart has caused nothing but trouble for MegaMart since the beginning of this project."

Lilith's mouth hung open. "'Ms. Upstart?' Is that what you call her?"

Georgia smiled thinly. "That's not my name for her. Jared nicknamed her that."

Lilith flopped back on the seat.

"Look, if there's nothing else you want, I'm busy. You can send any comments or questions you might have about MegaMart to our corporate office." Georgia rose from her seat.

Lilith couldn't believe it. Ms. Upstart. How dare Jared call Kat that!

"Just a minute," Lilith's voice grew steely.

Georgia glanced at her. "What?" She grabbed her bag.

"Jared doesn't strike me as a man who would call someone names behind their backs. And Kat's no 'upstart.' She cares about this town. She cares about..." Lilith stopped. She was about to say Jared, but thought better of it. Lilith's gut instincts kicked in, taking over. This woman, this 'George' couldn't be trusted for a second.

"Mr. Martin doesn't have time for all this nonsense. He wants to close this deal. Like I said, if you need further assistance, contact our corporate office."

"You were at KISS the other day, weren't you?"

Georgia whirled to face her. Lilith slid from the booth and rose to her feet. She felt her legs tremble, from anger or fear,

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she didn't know, but this was certain, she *had* to get to the bottom of all this. Kat wasn't herself, Jared was ... miserable ... and she didn't believe for one second that Jared would speak so bad about Kat behind her back. Behind all their backs. It would be like betraying all of Summerville if he did.

George flicked some hair over her shoulder. "I don't know what you're talking about. And I don't know you."

Lilith stuck her nose in the air. "Why not? Jared does. He made a point of getting to know everyone, even..."

"Well, I don't and I don't wish to discuss this any further."

"You were there!" Lilith shouted. "I saw you at KISS."

Georgia pursed her lips. In a low voice, she replied. "No. I wasn't. You must be mistaken."

"I am *not* mistaken," Lilith huffed. "I saw you. Come to think of it, ever since I did see you there, nothing's been right—either with Kat or Jared or..."

Georgia adjusted her bag on her shoulder and started to walk away. Her hasty departure caused her to crash headlong with a waitress. The tray slipped from the waitress' hands, spilling its contents to the floor. At the same time, Georgia's bag slipped from her shoulder spilling its contents.

Lilith sat back down in the booth and leaned over to watch the fracas unfold in the middle of the coffee shop. She saw Georgia berate the waitress for spilling juice all over her expensive, designer suit. All around them, broken dishes, cups, saucers, silverware and ... papers lay scattered on the floor. Georgia bent to pick up the contents of her bag, including the scattered papers. At one point, she slapped an

innocent bystander's hands aside when the man bent to help her retrieve the items from her bag.

Georgia stood and slung her bag over her shoulder, stalking out of the coffee shop. Lilith watched her departure and said under her breath, "Good riddance." Then her eyes lit upon some papers lying on the floor.

She slid out of her booth, keeping her eyes trained on the three papers that stuck out from under another booth. Lilith grabbed her bags and scurried over to them, reaching down to retrieve the papers.

"Oh my," she said, all innocence. "That woman dropped these. I'll bet she doesn't even realize it."

"Hmph!" The woman sitting in the booth replied around a mouthful of eggs. "She was so nasty when my husband tried to help her. I'd just toss them if I were you, it would serve her right."

"I'm sure it would," Lilith murmured.

Lilith shoved the papers in her handbag and noticed that they weren't just papers, they were photographs!

Her heart pounded. She could have sworn she saw herself in one of those pictures.

Lilith hurried out of the coffee shop and flew down Summerville's main drag. She didn't stop until she got inside the Yarn Barn. There, she grabbed the photographs from her hand bag and looked at them.

It was she. Dressed in that slinky gown from the other night. Kat had called it her 'floral silk burnout gown.'

"Oh!" Lilith raised shaking fingers to her lips.

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The other two were pictures of Evelyn and Annabelle and the three young women they had all gathered to help that evening. The last one was the worst ... where they all piled out of the back door. She stood there, holding open the back door of KISS as the ladies all snuck out ... into the waiting arms of a bunch of men.

Their husbands, their boyfriends.

But, oh my! It sure didn't *appear* that way...

There had been no time to change, no time ... they had all left after cleaning up in Kat's absence, and hadn't bothered to change!

Lilith plopped down on a stool behind a counter, her face cradled in her palms. She couldn't stop staring at the pictures. What had George O'Reilly been doing with these, she wondered.

Worse ... what was she planning?

Now she knew why Kat had been upset. This had to be it! These pictures. A horrible thought entered her mind ... were there more?

If Kat was in trouble, then they were *all* in trouble.

Kat had been right all along ... Summerville was at stake. MegaMart was its enemy!

Lilith grabbed the pictures and stuffed them in her bag. She locked up the Yarn Barn and hung the 'Closed' sign on the door. Then she ran next door to enlist the help of the one person she knew she could count on...

Fred.

He'd know what to do.

He always did.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

\* \* \* \*

That same morning, Jared strode down the walkway of the Pink Lily, the heavy odor of the trumpet lilies mirroring the heaviness he felt in his heart. George chatted away at his side, as though she didn't have a care in the world, but he did. For Summerville. Leaving it this morning, knowing that his MegaMart dream and his dream of having Kat in his life had nearly vanished.

"It will be soooooooo nice to wash the dust from this hick town off us, won't it?" George asked him, grinning.

They arrived by his Jaguar. He opened the trunk and placed George's bag inside alongside his. "Summerville is *not* a hick town," he told her, slamming the hood of the trunk closed.

He unset the locks, sliding into the driver's side. He didn't bother to open George's door.

"I don't know why I can't drive back with you," she huffed while adjusting her seat belt. She flicked back some of her long, blonde hair over one shoulder, then reached for the vanity mirror and pulled it down. "It would be so much easier," she finished saying as she admired her reflection in the mirror. She touched the tip of her pinky finger to the corner of her mouth to wipe away a drop of shiny gloss.

Jared backed the Jag up, then put it in 'drive.' He drove out of the lot, down the side street and headed for Route Twenty-Five West.

"It's not fair that you drive and I have to fly back." George flopped back in the seat and folded her arms.

Jared gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white. "I told you ... you have a round-trip ticket back. There's no sense in wasting MegaMart's money by having you drive back with me."

"*You* wasted plenty of it," she grumbled, flicking a piece of lint from her skirt. "I told you, forget all this 'Inn at Summerville Shops' nonsense. You should have insisted on a MegaMart store here like we always build. We only have seven thousand stores in one hundred and eighty countries and they all do just fine. I don't know why you had to change this, Jared. What was the point?"

*Everything changes...*

He shook his head to clear it. Those had been some of Kat's last words to him. Kat ... Kat...

He had to get her out of his head! He had to forget her...

What a fool he had been to trust her, to think she'd support anything he proposed. But, why did she have to be so underhanded? *Why?* She didn't care about Summerville, she didn't. All she cared about was what she wanted. She led them all on a merry chase, led *him* on a merry one, too. By publicly agreeing with him, she could easily implement the blackmail she had intended all along ... his father.

George put on the radio. She flipped through the channels until she found an all-Beatles station...

*In the town, where I was born, lived a man who sailed to sea...*

Jared hit a button, shutting off the radio.

"Well, why on earth did you do that for?"

"I don't feel like listening to music. Not now."

George heaved a long, disgruntled sigh. "Maybe it is better I'm flying home." She shifted in her seat. "You know, you never did say that you at least liked the Power Point presentation."

"It was fine."

Again she sighed. She picked another piece of lint from her skirt, her eyes downcast. "And how about ... us?"

Jared's eyes widened. He hit the brakes before he went through the red traffic light. The Jag lurched forward. George clutched the dashboard, the seat belt tightening across her chest.

"God, Jared, be careful, will you?"

"Listen," he turned to face her. "There is no *us* George. There never was."

She pouted. "There could be, if you'd only let it, Jared. My father..."

"Is an old family friend. That's it. You got the job you have with MegaMart because *he* asked."

"Well! You don't have to be so..."

The light turned green. Jared sailed through it, the hum of the Jag's powerful motor vibrated beneath his hands.

...just like Kat. She had come to life in his hands, had brought *him* back to life. And for a few wild, crazy days, brought his father's dream and his dream back.

"You've done a good job, George, but I'm only going to tell you this once. Don't push me. You get away with murder at MegaMart. If I have to make an example of you, I will."

She narrowed her eyes. "And just what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"It means," he said, while making a left turn onto William Floyd Highway, "You take advantage. I can't very well take the other employees to task if I let you get away with things."

"You just said I do a good job."

"Yes, I did. When you focus. So now, do me a favor, focus on being quiet."

George sighed again.

"And quit sighing."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. When Jared dropped her at the airport, George got out.

"I'll see you back at corporate?" she asked, giving her bags to a porter.

"Yes."

Jared reached into his pocket and withdrew a ten-dollar bill. He tipped the porter then turned to face George.

She threw her arms around his neck and whispered. "Don't say there's not an us. That time we were at that charity ball I had the best time. You remember don't you?"

He peeled her arms from around his neck. "And I lived to regret it. They snapped our picture..."

She grinned. "Yeah. Wasn't that great? We were in *People* magazine."

He sighed. George would never grow up ... never.

"Goodbye George. Have a safe trip."

Jared got back in the Jag and took off for the open road again, grateful for the time alone.

He had a feeling he would have plenty of it from now on.

\* \* \* \*

Lilith entered the Sweet Shoppe. When she didn't see Fred immediately she went up to the counter.

"Billy, is Fred here?"

Billy turned and looked at her from his position by the sink. "Hi, Miss Gentry."

"Hi, Billy. Is Fred here?" she repeated.

"Sure he is," he wiped the counter in front of him. He motioned with his head toward the back of the shop. "Mr. Meyer is back there."

"Oh," her shoulders slumped. "Is he ... busy?"

Billy smiled. "I don't think he's too busy to see you Miss Gentry."

"Thanks."

She hurried to the back, slowing her steps when she saw Fred sitting at a table, his dark head bent in concentration. His left elbow was propped up on the tabletop, his chin cupped in his large palm. Glasses perched on his nose, he was intent on reading something. A mug sat untouched next to him.

"Fred," was all she managed.

He looked up. When he saw Lilith, he took off his glasses. Her heart did a funny little dance in her chest—it always did at the sight of his cool, gray eyes. Their color matched the slight gray that appeared in the hair at his temples. Where had the time gone? Was it that long ago when the tall, lanky high school boy she knew came to her defense when those two boys were teasing her?

She shook her head to clear it. This was no time for reminiscing. Kat was in trouble.

Lilith hurried to the table. Fred began to stand but she shoed him back down. "Sit, sit," she told him. "Please don't get up."

He smiled at her. Oh, that smile! The years had been kind to Fred. Better than kind. He worked out now, his tall, lanky, six-foot three-inch frame had filled out over the last several years. She always found she sucked in a breath when she took in the width of his shoulders.

*Yikes...*

"How are you, Lilith?"

She sighed. It was no use. The sound of his deep voice washed over her, making her insides feel ... funny. Oh, stop, she admonished. You're not a silly, high school girl anymore. You're an adult. Act like one.

Lilith shifted in the seat. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. Finally, Fred asked her. "What's wrong, Lilith?"

Everything. Nothing...

"Kat's in trouble," she blurted.

He narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean Kat's in trouble. How?"

"Oh Fred..." her eyes filled.

His widened. "Lilith, for God sakes ... what's the matter? Is Kat ill?"

*No, I am!*

"If I show you something, will you promise not to—" she stopped, blushing from the tip of her chin to the roots of her hair.

"Will I promise not to what, Lilith?" he leaned back in his chair, hands on the table.

She looked down at his hands. Those same hands had punched Mark Lowman in the face the day he said Lilith had 'pretty titties.' He and his friend had been drinking beer in the bleachers of the high school one afternoon after football practice. They followed Lilith on her walk home and taunted her, calling her names, making lewd gestures. Fred appeared from seemingly nowhere and had taken care of Mark and his friend.

She never forgot it.

She wondered if *he* did.

Lilith pulled the pictures from her bag. "If I show you these, you must swear not to ... oh, here!" She tossed the photographs face up on the table in front of Fred.

He reached for them and examined each one. Lilith died a little inside when he saw the one of her dressed in that 'burn out' gown.

"Lilith, this looks like the back of KISS."

"It is. And that's me."

"I can see that," his tone was clipped.

*Yikes!*

"Who took these?"

She swallowed. "That's just it Fred, I don't know. All I know is, they fell out of the bag that assistant of Jared's carried."

"Huh?" he shook his head, frowning. "I'm not following you."

Lilith took a deep breath and recited the entire story of what happened in the coffee shop between her and George.

Fred listened, his face growing taut with each passing second.

"...so I thought, if anyone could help, y-you could." She held her breath. He hadn't said a word about her dressed in that ... gown.

Always the gentleman. Always polite.

But within Lilith, a tiny little part of her wished he wasn't.

\* \* \* \*

Fred continued to stare at the pictures as Lilith spoke.

"...it was the night we had a-a 'lingerie party' at KISS."

His head snapped up. "What's a lingerie party?"

Whoa, down boy. Fred shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The sight of his Lilith, the woman he'd dreamed about since high school, dressed in that sexy, purple gown nearly sent him over the edge. He glanced down at the picture again and looked at Lilith's beautiful bosom, outlined by the top of the gown. When he looked up again, Lilith's cheeks were almost the same color as the gown. Two, bright splotches of color appeared on them.

Damn, he had embarrassed her with his animal lust. Fool!

"Lilith," he reached for her hand, running his thumb over the soft skin he felt there. "It's okay. It'll be all right. We'll find out who took these."

"Jared."

He narrowed his eyes. "What about Jared?"

"He was there that night, Fred. And ... I got the feeling he was angry with Kat that night. They had a fight or ... something."

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

He sighed, wanting to kick himself in the behind for ignoring what he had seen. A man sitting in a Ford Taurus. He had seen him twice in the back parking lot by KISS. He had thought he had seen a camera in the man's hands, thought he had seen him take a picture of something. Fred never gave it more than a passing thought...

Until now. And now, he wasn't about to frighten Lilith.

"Just tell me something, Lilith. What was going on at that party?" The pictures were so damning, he thought. Lilith had every right to be worried, and so did Kat.

"We did it for the three young women that Annabelle and Evelyn knew. When they do their volunteer time at the hospital, they heard about three young women ... women who were sick. We did it to lift their spirits. A sort of lingerie and makeup party."

God bless Kat, he thought, Lilith, and all the rest of Summerville's women. This time, their good works were going to get them in big trouble.

He looked at Lilith's pale face and thought...

Over his dead body!

\* \* \* \*

Lilith looked at Fred, her eyes wide. "So, what can we do?"

He thought for a few minutes. "What *I'm* going to do is speak with Len Avery."

Lilith bit her lower lip. "You think he can help us?"

"Len has a few friends in the FBI and the state police. If anyone can help, Len can." Fred gave her a small smile. "I

could always tell Len I won't vote for him for chief of police next year if he doesn't help me."

Lilith tried to smile back, but her throat felt tight.

"Are you going to show him the p-pictures?"

Fred hadn't released her hand. He squeezed her fingers. "I have to Lilith."

She squared her shoulders. "I trust you Fred."

His face became serious. "I'm glad." He stood up and grabbed the pictures. "You go and wait at the Yarn Barn. I'll speak with you later, just as soon as I find out something." He pushed in his chair and walked away.

"Fred, wait!" Lilith leaped up from her chair and followed him.

He stopped when he heard her call his name.

"Listen, I'll go with you. I can't just stay at The Yarn Barn and wait. What if ... what if it's something really bad? What if ... I mean, what if Kat..." she didn't get a chance to finish. Fred reached for her waist, spanning it with the fingers of both hands. He lifted her up until they were nose-to-nose.

She let out a startled squeak and clutched his broad shoulders. *Yikes!* She was in Fred's arms. Well, not exactly. Fred had a hold on her waist. Lilith melted. The feel of his fingers ... his hands ... as he lifted her. Gentle. Sweet...

"Listen to me, Lilith," his face was in hers. "You are not, do you hear me? *Not* to come with me. If, as you say, something really bad is happening, I don't want you to be a part of it."

"But I am a part of it, Fred," she gripped the back of his neck, clinging with both hands. "I *am* involved."

He slid her down the front of his body. Heat pooled deep down inside her. Desire hit her swift and hard.

"No."

"Well! Why I..."

He leaned his head down to hers, covering her mouth with his.

Lilith swayed against him, clutching the front of his shirt where it said, 'Sixty-Two Flavors.'

"Fred," she breathed. "Fred, Fred ... *Fred*." She kissed him back.

"Mind me, Lilith," he told her. "Please," he implored, kissing her deeper. "I promise, I'll see you later and tell you what I found and—"

She opened her eyes wide and looked up at him.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do."

Fred left her there, to stand and stare. That's all Lilith could manage in that moment. She couldn't seem to get her feet to move.

Fred walked away, then turned and came back. He drew her to the side, and pointed to the picture of her. "And wear this, Lilith," he grinned. "Please."

She should be angry ... furious.

But inside, she was absolutely delighted.

Fred Meyer wasn't such a gentleman after all.

She had KISS ... and Kat ... to thank for that.

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## **Chapter Twenty One**

Jared sat in his office a few days later. He tried to concentrate on his task, which was to write a speech for the Fiftieth Annual World Food Summit. Addressing the world's leading retailers about business in the twenty-first century should have been a snap. Jared knew exactly what he wanted to say about the bottom line, profits, and technology. He also knew how he would address the issues facing retailers in the twenty-first century, those being environmental. Already, his experimental, 'environment-friendly' store in Kansas had taken off. The store contained many of the best conservation and design technologies available to reduce the amount of energy needed to run the store. The stockholders were thrilled, the employees of the Kansas-based experimental MegaMart were thrilled, Jared's associates were thrilled...

It's just too bad he wasn't.

He threw down the pencil. Jared always worked better when he had pencil and paper in hand, but not this time. Glancing out the window, he saw the sun, a big, bright burning ball of fire in the early evening sky. It dipped low on the horizon on its way to sunset, reminding him of Kat's fiery auburn hair.

Kat.

Kat ... Kat ... Kat.

Even his father sensed his loss. He had said simply, 'girl,' the last time Jared visited him. He knew what Sam meant. Kat. Where was Jared's girl ... Kat.

KISS  
*by Catherine Chernow*

Her betrayal still tore through Jared, an open, festering wound of utter despair. Jared's body ached with need. He tried going on a date with one other woman and found he kept studying her all evening ... what she wore, how she ate, how she moved ... the color of her hair...

The smell of her perfume.

Was nothing like Kat.

Fool! Stop, just stop.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. Work came first ... it always did. If he could only remember that, he'd be much better off. He wouldn't think of Kat and how she made him feel. He wouldn't think of Summerville and how he felt at peace there.

Jared gazed down at his forearms. The faint lines of the scratches she marked him with remained, just like the mark on his heart. He had not only been marked with Kat's fiery passion, but with her passion for Summerville, as well.

In the fuzzy thoughts that made up his mind, a dim sound came through. Voices ... the sound of loud, angry voices. It started out low then grew, reaching a crescendo of noise that he thought was right outside his office door.

When he looked over at the door to his office, it burst open. Jeanine, his secretary, stood there, looking pale and upset. "Mr. Martin, there's a crowd of people outside to see you. I have no idea who they are, but they *insist* on seeing you."

Jared rose from his chair and walked over to her. Jeanine struggled with the door to keep it closed, pushing on it. He

moved her aside and opened it to find a sea of faces staring back at him. *Familiar* faces. Summerville faces.

He felt his heart skip several beats as he scanned the crowd for Kat.

She wasn't there.

Jared sighed, happy yet ... sad, knowing she had not joined them. They had come to tell him the good news—that despite Kat, Summerville would move forward and allow MegaMart to be a part of the fabric of the town. Jared knew it would be good for them, and they apparently knew it, too. It was just too bad that Kat didn't. And just too bad she had to use such underhanded means to try to get her way.

The odd thing was, so far, no one, not one reporter or media hound had bothered him about Sam Martin. It hung over Jared's head like a brick waiting to fall. Maybe that's what Kat had wanted all along—to keep him off balance, to keep him at bay. She wanted to restrain the winds of change, but they blew across Summerville anyway.

"Hello," he smiled at all of them.

"Mr. Martin, do you want me to call the police?" his secretary asked.

"No Jeanine ... I know these people. There's no need. In fact, why don't you order in some lunch for all of us, okay?"

She left to do his bidding.

"So, this is a welcome surprise." Jared found that for once, he really meant it. The people standing before him, Summerville's own, were the people of his heart.

Fred came forward. "I've been elected spokesperson," he told Jared.

This was it, Jared thought. At least he could come away with one dream intact, his father's dream of a different MegaMart—a MegaMart that served the needs of an entire town without breaking its spirit or its people.

"I've come to say..." Fred stopped, thoughtful. He ran a hand through his hair.

Fred. Good old Fred. He always took his time. Never rushed. Gave of himself and his store. They were one in the same.

"We took a vote," Fred continued. "All of us. Everyone in Summerville turned out."

"That's great, Fred." Jared told him.

"And we just want to tell you," he shifted from one foot to the other. "That we wouldn't allow your MegaMart store into Summerville for all the tea in China!"

A chorus of angry voices joined in. Jared noticed lots of nodding.

Kat had gotten to them, he thought sadly. She had won. The battle for Summerville was over.

"After what you did to Kat," Fred moved forward until he stood right in front of Jared. "Lilith told me I couldn't, but if I hadn't promised her, I'd knock you from here to Montauk."

"Now, wait just one minute."

"Someone should string you up by your ... thumbs and hang you." Lilith burst out.

Jared stuck his hand, palm out. "I didn't do anything. I have no idea what you're talking about. Kat—"

"Only tries to help everyone!" someone shouted in the back.

Jared didn't want them to see what he felt deep inside. They didn't just want MegaMart—they didn't want *him*. He moved to the window and shielded his eyes against the sun's setting rays as he watched it dip. Turning back to face them, he asked. "Just tell me why, Fred ... all of you. Just tell me *why*."

Fred glanced at Lilith. Jared saw him take an envelope from her outstretched hands. "Here," he threw it atop Jared's desk. "That's why." He pointed at the envelope.

Curious, Jared walked over and retrieved it. He opened it and removed a pile of photographs. Gazing at them, his eyes grew wide. There was Lilith, and Evelyn and Annabelle, and ... he looked over and scanned the crowd quickly. Yup. It sure was ... Doris. There were other familiar faces, too, faces he had seen...

The night he had stormed into KISS in search of Kat. The night she admitted she knew about his father's mental condition.

He scrutinized each one. Finally, he said to Fred, "I-I don't understand." He flipped through the pictures again, confused. "Who took these pictures?"

Fred rounded the desk and stood by him. "Typical corporate slime," he sneered. "Now, you're going to deny any knowledge of taking those pictures, aren't you?"

Jared heard angry murmurs. He shook his head. Maybe Jeanine's idea of calling the police had been a sound one.

He looked Fred right in the eyes. "I didn't take these pictures."

"But you were there that night. At KISS. We," Lilith looked back into the crowd gathered in his office. "We saw you there. And you saw us."

Jared sighed and ran a hand across the back of his neck. "Look, I admit I was there."

"That's a start," Fred snorted.

"I was there, yes. Kat and I had a, well, we had an argument."

"So you got mad ... and tried to get even." Fred folded his arms across his chest, his stance angry.

"Of course not. And even if I did, why would I take these pictures? For what purpose?"

"Blackmail," Lilith intoned.

Jared shook his head. "No, I ... blackmail? Who? Who would I want to blackmail?"

Lilith stuck out her chin. "Kat."

"No, no..." Jared swept the pictures aside. "This is crazy. I have no reason to blackmail Kat." But, she tried to blackmail, me, went unsaid. He gazed out at the crowd. Never in a million years would they believe that one of their own, their dear, sweet, 'Kat' would try to use blackmail to get her way.

"Mr. Martin." Doris moved forward then, making her way through the crowd to stand in front of his desk. "I've known Kat all her life. Her mother and I ... we were friends. Good friends. I consider Kat a daughter."

Jared moved away from Fred's angry stance to plunk his tall frame into his chair. "I'm sure you do," he murmured. "You told me all that."

"Did you know that her mother died of breast cancer?"

An image tore through his mind. The lingerie form, the one Kat had destroyed at KISS that night he went to confront her about not accepting his job offer. It had an ugly gash across the right breast.

He looked up at Doris. "No, he said quietly. I didn't know that."

"Kat doesn't say much about it, but we know it hit her hard."

He knew all too well what it was like to have and take care of an ill parent.

"It hit her really hard, considering she lost her sister to breast cancer, too."

His head snapped up. "I had no idea."

Lilith spoke next. "She came back to Summerville after her divorce to start over. That's when her sister got sick, then her mother soon after. Kat had her hands full, nursing them through their last days ... starting up KISS. I'm surprised she survived the stress."

So was he!

When he looked over at the crowd next, it was to see Nancy Noone come forward. "Here," she told him, placing a check on his desk. "I don't want your money. If my Bill knew I had taken money from the likes of you, he'd be rolling over in his grave right now. I won't sully his memory by accepting this. I'd rather starve first." She picked up the check and ripped it in two.

Jared's heart pounded as he stared at the shreds of paper before him. It reminded him of how Kat had destroyed that beautiful chemise she had created.

"Look, I swear to you," he said. "I swear I didn't take those pictures or try to use blackmail."

No one said a word.

"Recognize me?" A tall woman pushed her way through the crowd. "I'm Lilith's friend, April Chapman."

Jared looked up at her. "Should I know you?"

"My picture graces the front covers of a lot of the magazines you sell in your MegaMarts."

Jared cocked his head. "Go on," he told her.

"I'm a model. I get paid big bucks for what I do."

Jared shook his head. "Just ... get to the point."

"The point is," she leaned her hands on his desk, her palms flat. "Is that I hadn't worked for months. Couldn't. I was ill. Very ill. I had cancer."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I truly am."

"After my surgery, they gave me chemo. That, I can tell you, is probably worse than the damn cancer."

He heard low laughter coming from some of the women in the crowd.

"This, is what it did to me," she pushed up from the desk and in one swift, clean movement, removed the wig from her head.

Jared almost jumped back in his chair.

A bald head outlined April's beautiful, fine facial features, her model's trademark. "This wig," she laid it down gently in front of him. "Was donated by Kat. It's her hair in that wig. Dyed, of course, but her hair."

He looked down and stared at it, then fingered the short, silky strands.

One by one, they came forward. Four women stood next to April. Slowly, tentatively, they removed their wigs to reveal starkly naked heads.

He sucked in a breath. Doris Henderson is who got to him. The elderly woman stood there, silent, standing proud and defiant in the wake of illness and despair.

"Kat saved my Doris." Harvey, her husband, pushed through the crowd. He placed his arm around his wife's shoulders. "She gave us back our lives, Martin, our *lives*. We were married forty years when that goddamn disease struck my Doris. We don't know what we would have done without Kat. We just don't."

Three younger women looked over at him, their bald heads reflecting the light that shone down on them. He recognized their faces. They had been at KISS that night he had stormed in there. *The virgin nymphs...*

"That night you saw us there," one of them said softly. "At KISS, when Kat gave us that lingerie party, she gave us such pretty things—beautiful things. She promised to fit us, that th-at we could still feel feminine and pretty and..." her voice broke. Evelyn Rogers moved forward and placed an arm around the girl's shoulders.

"No one knew about the lingerie parties," Lilith spoke up. "No one. And now, now you want to tell everyone that, that—"

He frowned. "What, Lilith?"

"That Kat's running a house of, of ... oh! Prostitution!"

He sprang from the chair. "I never said any such thing!"

Fred grabbed his arm, but Jared shook him off. "You," Fred aimed his finger at him. "Hired a private investigator to take those pictures."

"You're crazy. I hired no one."

"Don't lie," Fred snarled. "Whatever you do, don't lie to us."

Angry voices were raised. Jared looked at them, his body vibrating with his own anger. How dare they!

"Look, I would never do that. No one here at MegaMart does business this way. Trust me."

"Our police chief did some digging, Martin. You hired a guy to take these pictures. He brought the guy in for some questioning. The guy said MegaMart hired him."

Lilith crossed her arms over her breasts and glared at Jared. "How about the blonde?"

Jared shook his head. "The blonde? What blonde?"

"Your assistant, that blonde snooty ... oh! She was at KISS before the Civic Association Meeting. I saw her. And the next time I saw her was in the coffee shop the next day. She dropped her bag. Those," she unfolded her arms and pointed at the pictures. "Fell out of her hand bag."

Jared glanced at the pictures. It was suddenly starting to make sense...

George!

"Come with me," he told them all, his voice hard and steely.

He strode out of his office, past his secretary and the reception area, rounding a corner. As he strode down the

hallway, he was acutely aware of the avenging army of Summervillians behind him.

Jared stopped in front of George's office door. He burst in to see her lounging back in her chair, chatting on the phone, feet up in the air. She twirled the ends of her long, blonde hair and wrapped it around the long, red nail of her index finger.

"And then I told him, he couldn't..."

She never got the chance to finish. Jared swung her chair around to face him. "Jared, I'm on the phone," she said petulantly. He ripped it from her hands and tossed it on the desk. Reaching under her arms, he pulled her straight up from the chair. George looked over at the sea of angry faces. She paled.

Jared shook her. "I want to know what you did, you little bitch!"

"Stop it!" she shouted. He dropped her back in the chair, caging her in by placing his hands on the arms. "Why did you go to KISS before the Civic Association meeting?"

"I..." Her body shook. "I..."

"Spit it out, George. Tell me what you said to Kat Sullivan before the Civic Association meeting. Tell me what you were doing at KISS, or by God, I'll..."

She held up both hands. "All right! I'll tell you!"

It got very quiet. Jared could swear he could hear a pin drop.

Finally, George spoke. "I told her," she glanced at the crowd, then back at Jared. "I told her you were sick and tired

of her causing trouble for MegaMart. I told her that if she didn't stop..."

He stood up straight, folding his arms across his chest, legs apart. "Go on," he said through clenched teeth.

"I told her if it didn't stop, I-I..."

"What?" he roared.

"I told her I had these pictures of all these women dressed in her lingerie. They came out of KISS at all hours, Jared. It was ... it was creepy. And, and men were meeting them out back. She even accepted money from one of those men."

"My husband!" April shouted. "My husband gave Kat money so she could use it to help some very sick women."

Jared glanced at April then at George. "I-I hired a private investigator, Jared. He took the pictures. I-I did it for MegaMart. I did it for you."

His hand lashed out, but he dropped it. From the corner of his eye, Jared saw Fred place an arm around Lilith's shoulders.

Damn George! Goddamn fucking George.

"You're not worth it," he told George, his tone flat.

Once more, Jared bent his tall frame, caging George in her chair as he placed his hands on the arms. "Listen to me, *Ms.* O'Reilly. You're going to gather up every picture, every piece of film every..."

"He used a digital," she replied, her tone mulish.

"Every disk, every CD..." Jared ground out. "Do it now."

He stood upright. When he looked over, he saw Jeanine standing there, a smirk on her face.

"I guess now would be a good time to call the police, huh?" she asked.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Jared, Fred, Lilith, Doris and Harvey, Annabelle and Evelyn all sat in Jared's office. Lilith sat with Fred on one of the couches, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Everyone else had taken the seats Jared requested be brought in for them.

It was the least he could do. The police spent hours questioning him, George and some other MegaMart executives. She told them the same story she had told everyone else. Soon after that, she was led away in handcuffs, tears pouring from her eyes.

He had ordered in food, the containers and wrappers littered his office, but he didn't much care. He glanced at Doris. The older woman seemed tired. So did Annabelle and Evelyn. They would have a long drive back to Summerville.

"We won't press charges," Fred's voice echoed in the confines of Jared's office. "We decided we don't want to."

Jared stood by the windows, sipping a cup of lukewarm coffee. The caffeine didn't do much to revive him—he didn't think anything could at this point.

"We're okay knowing you took care of it, Jared," Fred's voice echoed throughout the office again.

Jared walked over to him, tossing his empty Styrofoam coffee cup in the trash. "You have every right to press charges." He glanced at the assembled group. "All of you. What George did was reprehensible."

"Like we said, you took care of it."

"She'll go to jail."

"That's fine by us!" Annabelle and Evelyn said in unison.

Jared gave them a thin smile. "I know. But still..."

"Look," Fred stood, stretching his tall frame. He walked over to Jared. "I once told you it was my store to give away, remember? That very first time you ever came into the Sweet Shoppe."

"I remember," Jared replied, his voice soft.

"So, *this*," Fred swept his hand in front of him. "Is yours to do with as you please."

Jared laughed. "It's not that simple."

"Yes, it is. Business is business, Jared. It's all in how you treat people that gets you more business. That little blonde lady, that assistant of yours, just didn't know how to treat people. It's as simple as that."

Jared sighed. "I don't know anymore, Fred. I really don't."

"I think it is. So, like I said, we won't do anything. Once we tell Kat, I'm sure she'll agree."

"Oh, I don't think Kat will agree to much of anything I do."

Fred laughed. "She'll come around, you'll see." Fred glanced at Lilith and the assembled group. "Well, I think we better head back to Summerville. We've got a good long drive ahead of us. Harvey, you okay to drive?"

"I'm fine," he answered. "I got the ladies here," he motioned with his head toward Doris, Annabelle and Evelyn. "You just take care of yours."

Jared watched them gather their things. His throat felt tight.

"You could come with us," Lilith told him. "You're more than welcome, you know that, don't you?"

"Thanks, but no, Lilith. I've got some work to finish up here."

She walked over to him. "Don't let what happened get between you and Kat. Talk to her."

"She wouldn't listen to me, Lilith."

"Then I'll talk to her for you. I'll..."

He held up a hand. "Thanks, but no."

"Sometimes, you really don't know what's in a person's heart, Jared." She looked at Fred and smiled. "And you can overcome anything. Trust me. We know." Again she smiled at Fred.

Jared stuck out his hand. "Goodbye, Lilith."

She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "Goodbye, Jared. Come back to Summerville and visit us."

He felt like crying then. Just laying his head down on the desk and bawling like a baby.

He shook Fred and Harvey's hand, said goodbye to Annabelle and Evelyn ... and Doris.

When they left, he flopped into his chair by his desk and shut his eyes. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he went over the day's events in his mind. He hoped George rotted away in jail.

*It's how you treat people.*

No truer words could ever be said, he thought. He gave a small laugh. Maybe he'd let Fred Meyers write his speech for the Annual World Food Summit. If anyone knew the secret of good business, Fred Meyers did.

He got up and paced, thinking of Kat. Kat..Kat.

The look on her face, the utter devastation. What she must have felt when she thought he betrayed her and her beloved KISS! He loved that store, he loved everything about it. He could have never, ever have done anything to harm KISS or her.

No wonder she went back at him.

*Everything changes.*

Yes, everything did. He missed Summerville. He missed her. He wanted her back, no matter what. Jared wanted the haven her arms provided, the promise of sensual fulfillment and life that KISS provided. He wanted that constant affirmation in *his* life.

He wanted Kat in his life.

He shut his eyes, imagining the smell of her perfume, seeing her long, trim body stretched out on the bed before him. His she-cat. He could hear her purr.

Jared grabbed his jacket and flew out the door. He ran past the darkened offices of the secretarial pool, down the long hallway and into the lobby. Skidding to a halt by the front door, he asked a porter, "Did you just see a group of people leave here? Two men and some ladies..."

"Sure did. They're just getting into their cars now."

Jared flew out the door and into the parking lot. "Wait!" Jared called out. "Wait, please!"

They all turned at the sound of his voice, their faces lit with smiles—their dear, sweet, friendly faces—faces he had grown to love. They beamed at him, like the welcoming lights of Summerville, the ones he always saw at night down Main

Street. The arms of the town opened wide ... beckoning him in...

The chirp of his cell phone stopped him in his tracks. He looked down at the caller ID.

Dawn.

"Jared?" His breath caught. Held. He squeezed his eyes shut at the sound of her pain-filled voice. "Jared, oh my ... Jared."

He saw them all move toward him, Fred and Lilith, Doris and Harvey, Annabelle and Evelyn, their smiles transformed to looks of concern and worry.

*Everything changes.*

"Jared, Dad passed away. He died ... just a few minutes ago. I turned my back just for a few seconds, to give him his meds and ... he was gone."

Jared didn't realize he was crying in Fred Meyer's arms until he felt Lilith pat his shoulder, her beautiful violet eyes filled with tears.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

The funeral for Samuel Thomas Martin took place on a bright, sunny Monday morning. People from all across the United States, people from all over the world, came to bid a last farewell to the founder of MegaMart, the man who invented the phrase, 'quality merchandise at discount prices,' a man who changed the face of America's retail industry, and that of the world.

As Jared sat in the front row under the tent that had been set up to shade the mourners, he gazed out onto the crowd of people who stood across the way on the other side, nearest the minister. Two faces stood out from the rest—those of Fred and Lilith. Jared's eyes blurred for just a second. Behind Lilith, he could make out two silvery-blue heads of hair ... Annabelle and Evelyn.

He'd bet his last bottom dollar that Doris and Harvey were there, too.

"Sam Martin was a man of vision," the minister intoned. "A man, I'm told, who realized what people needed and what their idea of the new 'general store' was going to be."

Jared swallowed hard. He grabbed Dawn's hand and squeezed it.

"I tell you this, so that you, too, will go out and be ... people of vision ... who will soar to great heights."

Jared handed Dawn a tissue. From the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of red, reminding him of Kat's fiery auburn hair.

"You must live by the rules that Sam lived by ... that his family still holds dear—those of fairness, honesty and good moral standing."

Jared shifted in his seat. The sound of his mother and sister's sobs tore through him, just as the flash of red disappeared from his view.

"May his memory be served by all who stand here today..."

Jared caught Lilith's beautiful violet eyes. They shimmered with tears.

"...and all who will go forth to live life as he did."

Jared helped his mother and sister as they walked by Sam's casket, the flowers they held floated down over the simple, brown wooden coffin. Soon, others followed. Jared watched as Sam's grave filled with blooms. They smelled ... like Kat. Their perfume wafted up, tickling his nose ... his senses.

She was here. He could feel it.

Jared scanned the crowd for just a second, but he didn't see her—just a flash of red again, the same fiery glints like the ones in her mass of long auburn hair. His mind played tricks on him. Maybe he was losing it, maybe it was just like Kat said, that he'd be just like his father one day.

People walked by, murmuring words of comfort.

"Your father would be proud, Mr. Martin."

"He was a good man, you take after him."

"Sam always said his boy had vision—you do—those new stores are super. It's nice to see someone who cares about the environment—about people."

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Jared paused, realizing that he was just like his father—in all the ways that mattered.

\* \* \* \*

Weeks later, Kat walked up the familiar steps to KISS' pink Victorian façade. She unlocked the door, balancing her bag with her bagel and coffee in one hand, while she pushed the door open with the other. In a routine that had now gone beyond the familiar, she placed her leather satchel on the counter. She flipped on the lights, letting the soft glow of the power track lighting highlight the lingerie gracing the forms standing on the pink and white tiled floor.

Everything had changed yet, nothing really had.

She glanced at one of the ensembles draped on the form across the room. A bold, tangerine colored shelf bra embellished with bright blue ruffles and tiny bows outlined the bust line of the form. The shelf bra was designed to support, yet it just covered the tip of the breast. The rounded curves of the bust line were highlighted, leaving the promise of passion in its wake. The matching panty and garter belt were made of the same, bright tangerine-colored satin. The garter belt had a sexy, sassy, hook and eye closure in the back and was embellished with the same shiny ruffle and bows.

A feast for the eyes, and the imagination—meant to taunt and tease, and wake the sleeping tiger of love and sensual pleasure in the male. Wearing one of Kat's sensual outfits, a woman could feel like she could conquer the world ... and her man. She could arouse in the male animal his need to mate

with the female—a ritual that went on since the beginning of time, and would go on long after Kat and KISS were gone.

She glanced out the windows. The day proved to be cloudy and overcast. Unusually hazy, the weatherman had said that morning, and partly cloudy for most of the day. It had been like that, Kat thought, since Jared had left Summerville. The sun would peek out, expecting to find him, like she thought she would. She missed his magic hands, his magic mouth and the magic that was only Jared. Kat wanted to hate him. He had betrayed her and KISS, made a mockery of everything small town life stood for, but in her heart of hearts, she knew, deep down, she would have done the same.

Anything to save Summerville.

The day wore on—the hazy sunshine remained. Every so often a passing cloud blocked out the sun's golden rays. Kat tried to block Jared from her thoughts, like she tried a hundred times each day, but it didn't work. It never did.

"I'm going to go now, okay?"

Kat looked up to see Melissa standing in front of her. She glanced at the clock. "You should have left half an hour ago," Kat told her. "You'll be late for your own party." She gave the young girl a small smile.

Melissa returned it, grinning from ear-to-ear. Suddenly, it faded. "Kat ... do you think I'm doing the right thing?"

Kat angled her head. "You mean, about going to F.I.T.?"

Melissa swallowed, nervous. Kat felt her trepidation—it reminded her of how she felt before she left Summerville for the big city to attend college there. She came around the counter and hugged Melissa. "You're doing the right thing.

F.I.T is a wonderful school. You'll come back to visit. Everything will be okay."

Melissa nodded and smiled again. "It's just that, I get real scared, you know?"

"Change does that to you," Kat said softly.

Melissa frowned. "You seem real tired today. Maybe I'll stay just a little longer."

Kat shooed her out. "Absolutely not! Now go, shoosh. Enjoy yourself."

Melissa grabbed her bag. "Will you stop by later?"

Kat shook her head, yes. "Of course. I wouldn't miss your party."

At the door, Melissa stopped and said. "I just want to say—"

"What?"

"That, I'll bet you're real glad this MegaMart thing is over."

*Happy as a clam ... that's me!*

"And, it took guts to do what you did. You're a real smart person, Kat. You're not like everyone else here in this town, it must be because you spent that time in the city, right?"

Kat walked over to her and took Melissa's hand in her own. "Just remember something—never, ever forget where you came from. Never forget your small town roots, you may need them some day, Melissa. You may need them very much."

"Okay, I'll remember."

Kat squeezed her hand then let it drop. "Now, go. I'll see you later."

Yes, Kat had won. MegaMart had been voted down unanimously by the citizens of Summerville. She had breathed a sigh of relief when that happened, telling herself that they didn't need MegaMart. Summerville didn't need Jared.

The only problem was, *she* needed Jared.

The bell above the door to KISS jangled. She looked up to see a tall man walk in. Her heart skipped several beats as she watched him finger the delicate white lace that adorned a flirty demi-skirt and matching top. He smoothed the lace over the skirt, using his long fingers to make it lay just so on the lingerie form. His hands held a wealth of sensual promise—of the wonderful, glorious, life-affirming things he would share with the female of the jungle.

"I'm looking for the owner," his deep voice echoed through the confines of KISS. He removed his sunglasses and gazed at her, holding her captive in his sight. Kat didn't move.

He walked toward her, moving with that lithe animal grace she loved. Lowering his head to hers, he breathed deep of her scent, shutting his eyes and reveling in the heady aroma of her arousal. His blood was up—his senses sharp and keen. This was no ordinary beast—he was king of jungle ... of her heart and soul.

"I've missed you," he whispered, his voice ragged. "Please let me talk to you ... let me explain."

She knew what he was planning to say, had read it in the newspapers. The blurb appeared in a small section of the Summerville Times. 'MegaMart mogul makes amends to citizens of Summerville. MegaMart employee Georgia O'Reilly

arrested for attempted blackmail and coercion. Civic Association voted to reject MegaMart's proposal to build an Inn at Summerville Shops in downtown retail district.'

She should have been relieved when she read it, she should have been overjoyed. Instead, all she felt was a dull, hollow ache in her breast, where her heart had once been.

Kat raised her sea-green eyes to his dark, golden ones. "You've found the owner," she told him. "I'm Kaitlyn Sullivan, but everyone calls me ... Kat."

"I take full responsibility for what Georgia did to you and KISS. For what she did to this town," he blurted. His long, lithe body trembled.

She swallowed, her throat constricting, feeling his pain, *his* betrayal by one of his own. "Lilith told me what happened when she and Fred went to see you. And I've been reading the papers."

"I understand why you said what you did about my father. You were cornered. You lashed out in the only way you knew how."

Her eyes filled. "I was afraid for those women I promised to help, I was afraid to lose KISS, I was just ... afraid."

"Ah, Kat, I wish you had told me," his voice was filled with regret.

"Would you have believed me?"

He shook his head, 'no.' "More fool I, isn't that how it goes?"

"You're not a fool. Far from it."

She watched him prowl around KISS, touching each of her exquisite creations, marveling at their design. Every so often,

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he'd cast a look her way, a look of longing and pure, hot animal desire.

She sensed his arousal just as sure as she could sense her own.

*Everything changes.*

Only if you let it.

"Were you there?" he whispered.

She just looked at him and nodded, yes.

"I thought so. Though I didn't see you, I felt your presence, just as sure as I'm looking at you now."

Kat moved closer to him. "Your father's death had nothing to do with ... us. It would have been wrong if I hadn't gone to his funeral."

Jared walked over to her and took her face between his hands, trailing his thumbs across her lips. He fused his mouth with hers, filling her with sweet, fiery sensations. They coursed through her, touching each nerve ending in her body until she could stand the sweet torture of his mouth no more. She opened her eyes to see they were standing under the sign that read, 'KISS.'

"Welcome to Kat's Incredibly Special Store," she whispered.

"Here," he said, handing her a black velvet jeweler's box.

Kat's hands trembled; her throat felt tight. "I don't want anything..."

He placed a finger over her lips. "Just open it."

She did. It was the tiger. It sparkled against the black satin of the box; both of its sea-green eyes winked at her.

"I miss my she-cat," his voice was ragged, strained. "I had the jeweler design another one."

"You shouldn't have, Jared." But deep down, Kat felt elated. She missed the tiger necklace.

"I need my she-cat back."

She moved to the shelter of his arms. Holding her, he withdrew another black satin box from his jacket pocket. "And now, this one."

Kat blew out a breath and opened it. She gasped when she saw its contents—a wide diamond bracelet. Imbedded in the rows of diamonds was a design made of pink sapphires—the twisted ribbon of women's breast cancer awareness, the symbol of hope worldwide for women everywhere.

Her eyes filled with tears.

Jared brushed them away. "I don't know what to say, Kat. I have no more words. I'm here to stay."

She blinked back her tears.

"I gave the reins of MegaMart over to Charles Lyncroft yesterday. He's been on the Board of Directors for years. He'll do a fine job, I know it."

Her eyes grew wide. "Why?" She shook her head. "*Why?*"

He smiled, and brushed some fiery strands of red hair from her cheek. "Because I can't very well run MegaMart and teach now, can I?"

She threw her arms around his neck. Jared lifted her off her feet and swung her around in a wide arc.

"Oh," she gasped. "I'm dizzy."

He frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Well, let's just put it this way. I'm going to have to take some time off from GISS."

Jared beetled his brows. "Now it's my turn to ask—why?"

She shrugged, appearing nonchalant. "I can't very well work here twenty-four seven if I'm going to have a baby, now, can I?"

It got very quiet in GISS. Jared didn't move. Kat waited for him to speak, her heart pounding.

Finally, he cocked his head, a grin lifting the corner of his lips. "Did you say ... baby?"

She nodded, smiling back. "Yes, I did."

He let out a proud, happy roar and picked her up again, this time, with infinite care. Jared held her close, murmuring her name repeatedly.

When she looked outside, the sun shined bright, its rays peeked inside GISS, highlighting a gold bra, skirt and matching thong, detailed with a sultry, cutout design.

"Oh my, Jared, the sun's out again," she breathed as he trailed his lips down her neck. He cupped her bottom in his hands.

"Mmmm..." he said, nuzzling her neck. "You know what they say ... it never rains in Summerville."

*Everything changes.*

The sound of their laughter echoed through GISS, it floated like a feather on the wind down Main Street and beyond ... an affirmation of their love, and all that is good in life.

The End

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### **About the Author**

Catherine Chernow writes sensual, fast-paced, contemporary romance—the kind of books that make your body sizzle and your heart soar.

She was born in Fairbanks, Alaska, an "army brat", and at the age of three her family and she moved to Long Island, New York, where she still resides.

Check out her website at [www.CatherineChernow.com](http://www.CatherineChernow.com) for reviews and excerpts.

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Kylie Dobson is a romance author with a problem. As a seat-of-the-pants writer, she depends on the strength of the characters to drive her plot. But when her hero, Milo, Lord Gafton refuses to chase after the prescribed heroine, everything goes wonky. Kylie is inexplicably sucked into her work of fiction, transported from a contemporary venue to a fictional Regency setting. What's worse is, nothing she does is affecting the plot and she can't get out.

Set into motion by her own creative process is a winter storm which seals the Regency party goes in on a country estate. If that wasn't bad enough, a murderer is on the loose and he's picking off one guest at a time. The more time she spends with Milo the more she comes to depend on him. She's convinced that his character sketch will kick in at any moment and he'll fall for her heroine. But will it happen before she loses her heart to him? And what happens when the plot draws to the end? Will the killer have his way and will Kylie solve the case only to be returned to her reality without the man she's fallen for?

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Project Manager: Georgina Coleman, VP at Pacific Bank, 28 years old. Brilliant and determined, but lacking in social skills.

Project background: Transfer from London to San Diego allows Georgina to shed her dowdy image and get a life.

Project objective: Seduce a man and lose her virginity.

Timeline: Seven weeks, starting from the completion of Project Flowchart.

Target: Georgina's downstairs neighbor, a surly cop named Rick Matisse.

Complication: Rick's 12-year-old daughter Angelina, who thinks Georgina would be the perfect girlfriend to keep Dad on his toes.

Distraction: Money laundering investigation which requires Georgina to mingle with a bunch of Colombian thugs who believe that every woman should be owned by a man.

Project evaluation: A project can go wrong despite successful completion, if Project Manager fails to plan for how to deal with the Target after project closure.

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## **Secrets of the Heart by Jannifer Hoffman**

Nicole Anderson owns a successful costume design business, has a wealth of small town friends and sleeps in a lonely bed haunted by demons from the past. She's convinced herself her life is exactly the way she wants it and has shot down every marriageable man within a fifty-mile radius.

When Hunter Douglas is assigned the task of delivering a deceased friend's children to their aunt, he must first convince the belligerent Nicole Anderson that she actually had a sister. Though forced to take his two charges to Minnesota, Hunter fully intends to persuade Ms. Anderson to allow the children to return to New York with him—without sharing his own little secret. The last thing he wants to do is fall in love with a woman who lives in a small Midwest town with neighbors who seem to know every move he makes.

As the heat index between Nicole and Hunter rises, a bizarre puzzle begins to unfold involving false birth certificates, a stolen suitcase, odd pictures, an elusive stalker, and a grandfather's legacy that could turn deadly.

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