

# UNCOVERED

## *CHAPTER ONE*

**BECAUSE IT WAS DRIZZLING** out, Harris Black pulled on a windbreaker before he headed outside to jog. Streetlamps left long slithery ribbons of light across the wet blacktop drive. After the heat of the mid-August day, the light rain had a sauna effect, making the air downright steamy.

He preferred jogging at night for two reasons: less human and automotive traffic, and Clair Caldwell.

Clair lived in the apartment building across the lot and always joined Harris in his evening run. For a dozen different reasons, Harris liked her a lot.

Unlike most women, Clair enjoyed the same things he enjoyed—televised sports, running, and junk food. Not once had she ever forced him to sit through a romantic comedy, thank God. But once, on a lazy Saturday afternoon, they'd watched the entire *Alien* series, back to back, without budging from the couch.

Clair's job fascinated him. When two well-respected private investigators relocated their offices close to Chester, Ohio, the town they lived in, Clair had jumped at the chance to work for them as a receptionist. She was an adventurous sort and enjoyed the excitement of the job. But her duties went beyond secretarial. She was a computer guru, helping with online investigations, and an all around know-it-all. She always had entertaining stories to share.

By the same token, she liked to hear about his work and his friends. Being a firefighter left him open to a lot of bawdy jokes, and Clair seemed to know them all. She teased him about the fires he put out, the length of his hose, and his specialized gear. But when he was serious, she was too, automatically picking up on his moods in a way no one else ever had. Even with his best friends, Buck, Ethan and Riley, he had to put on the occasional front. No one wanted a morose or moody friend, even if he'd just spent hours fighting a fire that sometimes didn't have the best conclusion. They always wanted to joke him into a better mood.

Not Clair. Once, after a really grueling car fire that resulted in two deaths, Clair had just sat beside him on the couch and held his hand. They'd stared at the television, but Harris knew neither of them was really paying any attention to the movie.

What mattered most about Clair, though, was the no-pressure tone of their relationship. He saw her when he wanted to, yet he never felt he had to call. Oddly enough, because of that, he called and hooked up with her often.

They hung out without any implied intimacy to muddy the waters. She didn't care if he shaved or if he ate Twinkies for lunch or if he stayed out all night with the guys. At first, her disinterest had bugged him, but after Ethan and Riley had up and married, Harris became leery of smiling women—and with good reason. The females had detected a nonexistent pattern of matrimony, and they pushed him constantly, to the point that he'd about given up dating.

Which meant he was celibate and that sucked, but it beat dodging topics of "happily ever after." Nothing messed up good sex like a woman grasping too far into the future.

With Clair, sex was never an issue. It just didn't come up. They were friends, totally at ease with each other, but neither of them ever crossed the line. It was such a relaxing relationship that he spent more time with Clair than with his buddies. Of course, Ethan and Riley now preferred the company of their wives, anyway.

As Harris stepped out from beneath the building's overhang, a fat raindrop landed on his nose. Given the heavy static in the air, he knew it'd be storming before they finished their run. He sprinted across the lot at the same time that Clair's doors opened and she strolled outside. Harris stared toward her with a smile.

Her personality put her somewhere between an egghead and a jock; she loved sports of all kinds, and was almost too smart for her own good. But no matter what the situation, and despite a lack of feminine flair, Clair always looked stylish. Granted, it was her own unique style, but her appearance was always deliberate, not one created out of lack of taste or time.

A few weeks ago she'd cut her glossy, dark brown hair shorter, and now she wore it in a stubby ponytail that looked real cute. She'd attached an elasticized band to her black-framed, oval glasses to hold them on her head while she ran. Somehow, on Clair, the look of an athletic librarian worked.

With her hair pulled back that way, Harris noticed for the first time that she didn't have pierced ears. In fact, he realized he'd never seen Clair with jewelry of any kind. Odd. In this day and age, he thought every grown woman had her ears, if not other body parts, adorned. But then he'd always known Clair was different from other women.

At five feet five inches tall, she would be considered medium height except that she was all legs. Very long, sexy legs that even in clunky running shoes looked great. Tonight she had those gams displayed in comfortably loose, short shorts. Like Harris, she'd made a concession to the rain and wore a nylon pullover.

Harris looked up at the black sky. There was no moon, no stars to be seen through the thick clouds. Branches on the trees bent beneath an angry wind. Debris scuttled across the road. "Looks like we'll get one hell of a storm tonight."

“Backing out on me, sugar? Afraid you’ll melt in the rain?” She swatted him on the ass. Hard. Then took off.

Grinning, Harris followed. “Paybacks are hell, sweetheart.”

To tease him, she put a little extra sway in her backside for a few steps, then she got serious again. They ran side by side, silent except for the slapping of their sneakers on the damp ground and the sougning of their steady breaths. Within fifteen minutes, the drizzle changed into a light rain. Clair said nothing, so Harris didn’t either. He could take it if she could.

After about a mile, Harris glanced toward her. She wore a concentrated expression, and her short ponytail, now darker with rain, bounced in time to her long stride. “Anything interesting happen at work today?” he asked.

She scrunched up her brow. “Dane caught a guy screwing around on his wife.” Disgust dripped from her tone. “Dane was pissed when he came in to file it. Said the wife was real sweet and better off without the guy, but that she was bawling her eyes out.”

“Shame.” Harris didn’t want to marry, but if he ever did, he knew he’d be a faithful hound. He thought spouses who cheated were lower than slugs. If you wanted to screw around still—as he did—then you shouldn’t say the vows.

Clair pushed a little harder, her feet eating up the ground with a rhythmic slap, slap, slap. “I wouldn’t cry.” Her hands balled into fists and she picked up her pace even more until they were running instead of jogging.

“What would you do?”

The seconds ticked by and she slowed, gradually going loose and limber once again. With an evil, anticipatory grin, she said, “I’d take a ball bat to him. *Then* I’d leave him.”

“Effective.” Harris laughed. “But I think that’s illegal.”

“Yeah. Well, I’d find some way to make him pay—”

A slash of white lightning illuminated the entire area, followed by a crack of thunder that seemed to rip the night. They both pulled to a startled halt.

“Wow.” Clair propped her hands on her knees, breathing hard, wide-eyed in awe of Mother Nature’s display.

“This is nuts. Come on.” Harris grabbed her arm and hauled her toward the main street. “Time to head back.” Normally they’d take the long route to extend their jogging time, but now Harris just wanted to have Clair safely out of the storm.

She didn't protest, but then that was another of Clair's assets—sound common sense. He'd found it rare for people to have both book smarts and everyday logic. But Clair had both, which was another reason he liked her so much.

They were within minutes of their apartments when the rain turned into a deluge, soaking them through to the skin in a matter of seconds, making visibility nil. The sewers couldn't handle the flow and the streets filled like creek beds, washing icy water up past their ankles. With the help of the wind, the rain stung like tiny needles, making Harris curse. Trying to protect Clair with his body, he steered them toward a closed clothing shop and into a dark, recessed doorway. The opening was narrow, forcing them close together. Clair didn't seem to notice the intimate proximity.

Her hair was plastered to her skull, her entire body dripping. She shivered, but she didn't complain. "You think it'll let up soon?"

Another fat finger of lightning snaked across the ominous sky. The accompanying thunder shook the ground beneath them. "No. But we'll wait here a few minutes to see."

With a sigh, Clair pulled off her glasses, now beaded with rain. Lifting her pullover, she located a dry patch on her T-shirt beneath, and wiped them off. In the process, Harris got a peek at her belly. Not much of a peek, considering it was dark as Hades and she stood so close her elbows kept prodding him. He narrowed his eyes, straining to see her better.

She noticed him peeking—and flashed him, yanking both her pullover and tee above her breasts for a single split second. Startled, Harris shot his gaze up to her face.

She grinned. "There, did that take care of your curiosity?"

He almost strangled on his tongue. "No." It took his brain a moment to assimilate what he'd seen, and then he asked, "Is that a sports bra?"

Laughing, Clair elbowed him, harder this time so that he grunted in discomfort. He crowded closer still, stealing some of her warmth and hindering her more violent tendencies.

"Yeah, as concealing as a bathing suit top, so put your eyeballs away. You didn't think I'd actually show you anything important, did you?" She tsked. "The rain must have made your brain soggy."

"I saw a flash of white," Harris argued, "and didn't know if it was boobs or cloth. Can't blame a guy for wanting clarification."

"I don't have enough boob to go around showing them off."

In the crowded confines, with icy rain blowing in against his back, there was no way to get comfortable. Harris flattened one hand on the wall behind her and leaned in a bit,

inching farther away from the storm—and closer to Clair. With his gaze zeroed in on her chest, he murmured, “You have enough,” and he meant it.

“Spoken like a loyal friend. Thanks.” And before Harris could say more on that topic, she went on tiptoe to look over his shoulder. “Hey, the rain’s letting up a little. Looks like the worst of the storm is moving away from us. Let’s get home before we freeze.”

The rain *was* cold, and with it, the temperature had dropped by at least ten degrees. Not that Harris was especially chilled. Discussing a woman’s upper works with her, even a woman he wasn’t intimate with, had a decisive effect on his libido. Given that the woman was also pressed up against him—well, he was having some surprisingly lascivious thoughts. But then, he’d been on a month-long, self-imposed dry spell. Under those circumstances, just about anything could turn him on.

Maybe on his next day off he’d have to break down and take his chances with a little one-on-one comfort of the female kind.

Together, he and Clair continued on their way, not jogging now, but not exactly taking their time either. Since Clair stayed silent, Harris had too much time to think. About her boobs.

He gave her body a surreptitious look without turning his head. The cold had tightened her nipples, and with her clothes wet and clinging, there was no way to miss it. His pulse sped up a bit, doing more to warm him than their jaunt.

The snug sports bra didn’t allow for much jiggling, but he judged her to be a B cup. Plenty enough there to fill his hands. Well, not *his* hands, but some other guy’s...No, he didn’t like that thought either. Not that he had any claim on Clair other than friendship. But the idea of her snuggled up and intimate with some faceless, nameless bozo didn’t sit right. Harris shoved the disturbing image away and concentrated on her comment.

Why did women assume men were only drawn to pinup models? A woman was a woman was a woman. Each different, each sweet and soft in her own way.

“Hurry up, slowpoke. I swear, my granny could move faster than you.”

Maybe not so sweet, Harris admitted to himself with a grin. But definitely soft. He fell behind another step and took in the sight of Clair’s full bottom. No lack of curves there. Yep, even egghead jocks were soft when you looked in the right place.

Clair turned to face him, walking backward. “Want a cup of hot chocolate? I’m going to make me some.”

Her glasses were beginning to fog over, her ponytail was more out of its band than in, and water dripped from her ears.

Harris shook his head. “Can’t. I’m on first shift this week. I need to get home, shower, and hit the sack.” As a firefighter, Harris had a rotating schedule. The good part was that every third week he got extra days off, and the third week was rolling around.

“Okay.” They were only feet away from his apartment building. Clair turned back around to head across the street. “I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Harris took swift advantage. The moment she presented him with the opportunity, he landed a stinging swat on her behind. Given that her shorts were wet, it had a little more impact than he’d intended.

Her hands slapped over her butt in shock. Before her gasp of outrage had a chance to fade away, Harris darted to his side of the street, barely muffling his chuckles. “Good night, Clair!”

He bounded up the steps to his apartment, but waited at the door, watching as he always did until Clair had time to get inside. She rubbed her bottom as she climbed her own steps, muttering and casting him dirty looks. Moments later, a light came on in her living room, then Clair was at the window, waving to him. Harris waved back.

At first, Clair had objected to his protectiveness. But he’d worn her down until now she did the routine by rote. While he waited, she went in and checked out her place, then waved to let him know she was safely inside. Alone.

One of these days she’d have a boyfriend to look after her. But until then, Harris didn’t mind keeping watch. In fact, he insisted on it.

Within half an hour he was showered and stretched out in bed, his hands folded behind his head. He should have been relaxed, but instead his naked body hummed with tension. He listened to the drubbing of rain on the windows, the continual rumble of thunder, and he watched the strobe effect of the lightning on his ceiling.

Storms always made him horny.

Touching women’s butts made him horny.

Was Clair making him...No. He scoffed at himself, even laughed out loud in the silence of his dark room. That was just nuts. He wouldn’t think about her that way.

Determined to get to sleep, he closed his eyes, metered his breathing—and saw again that flash peek of Clair’s belly and sports bra. He groaned, and gave up the fight, allowing himself to ease into a very vivid dream where he stripped Clair naked, kissed her from head to toe, and loved every minute of it. The dream was both disturbing in its intensity and comforting in the rightness of it.

Sometime during the night, the storm knocked out the electricity. His internal clock woke him to a dark house and street, and the continuation of the storm. Without being able to make coffee or catch the morning news, he headed into work early. And good thing, too, because not five minutes after he dashed through the pouring rain into the station, the fire alarm went off. Lightning had struck the back of an abandoned building and someone saw smoke.

When Harris caught the address of the building, his heart shot into his throat. It was his block—*right next door to Clair*. Not since his first year as a firefighter had he suffered the debilitating effects of fear, but damn it, he felt them now. Even with the drizzling rain, the high wind could spread a fire quickly. Without electricity, Clair might sleep late, unaware of the danger. Worry plagued Harris all the way to the location.

But the moment the fire engine blared onto the street, Harris saw the crowd. Umbrellas formed a large canopy around the area, as if everyone had crawled from their beds and braved the weather for a show. Clair still looked sleep-rumpled under her cheery red umbrella, but she was fully dressed and in charge of things. In typical Clair mode, she urged curious onlookers farther away from possible harm. Harris was so relieved to see her he nearly fell off the truck. But knowing she was safe, he put her from his mind to do the job he'd been trained to do.

The storm was a real bother. Even through his Bunker Gear of fire-retardant jacket and trousers, helmet, and pull-on boots, he got soaked. The fire hadn't done too much damage yet, mostly to the exterior rear wall where the lightning had hit.

The abandoned structure had been up for lease for over six weeks and wasn't in the best of shape anyway. There were already broken windows in back and debris everywhere. In the process of putting out the blaze, a forgotten metal Dumpster in the back alley got knocked over. It was packed full, but luckily, not with the type of trash that got more disgusting with time. Mostly papers, probably from the previous businessman. In less than an hour, they had everything taken care of. The rain had let up and the sun even struggled to shine through the gray clouds.

Harris pulled off his helmet, wiping soot and rain and sweat off his face. He was contemplating all the mess, both from the spilled trash and the damage of the fire, when Ethan, a fellow firefighter and one of his best friends, let out a whistle. Harris turned, saw Ethan riffling through a shoebox from the Dumpster, and raised a brow. Usually that absorbed expression on Ethan's face was reserved for his wife, Rosie. Harris went to investigate.

"Whatcha got?"

Without looking up, Ethan said, "Pictures of a naked woman."

"No shit?" Harris forgot his fatigue for the moment and muscled his way next to Ethan. Yep, sure enough, that was an unclothed female. A very sexy, naked female. "Wow."

Harris picked up one photo of her reclining facedown on a twin bed. Her mussed hair was long enough to hide her face, but who cared when she had a beautifully bare backside on display? Harris tried, but he couldn't look away.

"Check out this one." Ethan handed him another.

The same woman, judging by the shape of her body, was stepping into the tub. Again, she had her face averted as she moved the shower curtain aside, but this shot showed her entire body in profile. Breasts, belly, long sleek thighs. Harris let out a slow breath. "*Hello sweetheart.*"

"Wonder if she lives around here," Ethan commented. "Or maybe she was the last one to lease the building."

"The last person here was a guy. I never met him, but I saw him occasionally." Harris peered toward the shoebox Ethan held. "Any more pictures in there?"

"One more—of her pulling on her panties." Ethan laughed. "You still can't see her face, but it's a damn fine rear shot."

Feeling strangely territorial, though he didn't know why, Harris snatched the photo away from Ethan. "Let me have that."

"Hey, I was going to keep it."

"No way. You'd just show it to Buck and Riley."

Ethan raised both brows. "So? How come you get to look and we don't?"

"You must've forgotten, but you and Riley are married now."

"I'm still swimming in marital bliss, so how could I forget?" He grinned as he said that.

"Then think what Rosie will do," Harris murmured while studying the photo with rising heat, "if she catches you ogling some strange naked woman."

Looking much struck, Ethan said, "She'd probably kill me. Here." He shoved the entire shoebox into Harris's arms. "There are notes and such, too. Maybe an address, since you're so interested. And so single."

Wincing, Harris said, "Don't tell me you've taken up the campaign to get me hitched, too?"

"No, I like women too much for that."

"Ha ha."



“But Rosie wants you and Buck both married so I can’t be around any of your single female friends.” With a lot of satisfaction, Ethan added, “She’s a jealous little thing.”

“She trusts you.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t trust the women you two date.” Ethan strode away, giving orders as he went.

Harris didn’t bother to reply to that jab. Buck might still be going strong, but Harris hadn’t dated *anyone* lately. Rosie could rest easy on that score.

Now the woman in the picture...If he could look her up he just might be interested. Strolling over to lounge against the back wall of the alley, Harris held his helmet under his arm and rummaged through the shoebox. Unfortunately, he didn’t find any addresses, but he pulled out one folded sheet of paper. Confusion reigned around him, but he gave all his attention to the feminine script on the note.

I’m sorry for just leaving a note. I know you wanted me to call, but there’s no point. You’d just try to convince me to go with you, but it’s over. It’s not you, so please don’t think of this as an insult. You knew how I felt all along.

I’m hung up on Harris.

Harris’s eyes widened. Talk about coincidences. How many guys could there be with that name? It wasn’t like a Tom, Dick or Harry.

It’d be tough for any other guy to measure up to him. If being a firefighter isn’t heroic enough...

Harris nearly dropped the shoebox. Coincidence, hell! She was talking about *him*. Suddenly feeling on display, he glanced around the surrounding area, but no one paid him any attention. The crowd had dispersed. Those who’d stopped to watch the firefighters work were now scuffling back into their homes. The other firefighters were chatting, bitching about the weather, generally just hanging around.

Harris swallowed hard and went back to reading.

...he’s also funny. He makes me laugh all the time. And he’s so generous. You don’t notice it at first, because Harris likes to clown around, but he’s really very sensitive to other people.

No shit? Harris blinked in disbelief. She thought he was sensitive?

He works hard and he’s proud and I love him.

Again, I’m sorry.

She loved him. Wow. Harris looked, but there was no signature, damn it. He turned the note over, but no, it was blank. Who had written it? The idea of a secret admirer tantalized him, made him feel warm and full and anxious. He lifted another photo, the one of her stepping into her panties, and smiled. Sweet. Very sweet.

“Slug. Shouldn’t you be helping out instead of snooping through the garbage?”

Startled by the verbal intrusion, Harris glanced up and got snared in Clair’s disapproving green gaze. Her hair was loose, parted on the side and hanging in blunt lines to just skim the tops of her shoulders. She had her head tipped forward a bit to look at him over the rim of her glasses. Her eyes were twinkling at the pleasure of insulting him. Obviously, *she* didn’t consider him sensitive.

“It’s not garbage,” he grumbled.

“No?” She went on tiptoe to peer over his shoulder.

Harris held the photo out of reach. “You don’t want to see this, Clair.”

“I do too.”

“I doubt that.” He grinned, imagining her reaction if he showed her. “They’re photos.”

“That’s private. You shouldn’t be looking either.”

“Someone threw them away.” He shrugged. “Free for the pickings.”

Hands on her hips, she demanded, “Let me see, Harris.”

Prodded by the devil in him, Harris decided *why not?* With a flourish, he handed her the photo.

Her face went beet-red and she gasped so hard she nearly strangled. “Harris!”

“Hey, I’m not the photographer.” He winked. “I just found it.”

“That’s...that’s obscene.”

“You really think so?” He took it back from her and stared some more before murmuring with great sincerity, “Nice ass.”

“Pig.”

Laughing, Harris searched through the box. “Here’s another.” He handed her the one of the woman getting into the shower. In that pose, she had one shapely leg bent, one arm raised. Gorgeous.

Clair narrowed her eyes and accepted the photo. After several moments scrutinizing it, a small frown pulled down her brows. But at least this time she didn't choke.

"And one more." Harris gave her his favorite, the one of the woman reclined in bed. He thought she might be sleeping, she looked so boneless and relaxed. Her back was smooth and graceful, rising up to a plump rump, then tapering down again to long thighs and shapely calves.

Clair stared so long that Harris cleared his throat. "Anytime you're done with it..."

"Oh, sorry." She looked bothered about something, then glared. "I can dispose of those for you if you want."

"Not on your life." Harris held the photos protectively out of her reach. "I'm keeping them."

Clair's mouth fell open. "Keeping them? But that's...lecherous! You don't even know that woman." And then in a smaller voice: "Do you?"

"Nope. But I know she has a major case for me." He tapped the letter. "Says so right here."

Clair went white. She tried to grab the note. "You just said you don't know her."

"I don't. Yet. But she obviously knows me." Harris opened the paper and pointed out his name. "Harris the firefighter. Gotta be me, right?" He folded it and put it back in the shoebox for safekeeping. "So actually, this pertains to me. I have a right to this stuff."

"You're sick."

"I'm in lust." Harris touched her nose. "But then, you wouldn't know about that, would you, Clair?"

Her back snapped straight. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying that you don't date much. Now if you'll excuse me, I gotta get to work."

Smiling sweetly, Clair said, "Want me to hold that shoebox for you?"

"No." Harris laughed at her fallen expression. "I'm going to run it over to my place and lock it inside, safe and sound."

The way her jaw worked, Harris thought she might be grinding her teeth. "So you can stare at the photos and fantasize tonight?"

“Don’t sneer, Clair. It makes you look like a prude.” As he walked away, Harris heard Clair call him a choice name. He glanced around in time to witness her stomping toward her apartment. Too bad Clair didn’t understand about lust. If she ever turned all that emotion loose in the sack, she just might be magnificent.

Harris caught his train of thought and growled. He’d better find his mystery lady soon, because lack of nookie was making him crazed.

He needed a woman—his mystery woman. Sexy. Provocative. And she thought he was sensitive. What more could a guy ask for?

## *CHAPTER TWO*

**THANKS TO THE DUAL** effects of worry and mortification, Clair suffered through an endlessly long, sleepless night and was dragging as she headed into work the next day.

Thank God Harris hadn’t recognized her.

Just thinking about his expression as he’d stared at her—Clair shuddered in agonizing horror. This was too unbelievable. If she ever found Kyle, the jerk she’d dated, the jerk who’d taken those pictures without her knowing, she’d strangle him.

During the darkest hours of the night, memories had flooded back on Clair, memories of Kyle begging her to let him photograph her, and the distinct recollection of her saying a firm, unequivocal *no*.

But she also recalled him showing off a teeny tiny camera, one he used to take photos without anyone knowing. At the time, he’d claimed it was to get candid, rather than posed shots of people for his gallery. And he had taken some, but to her knowledge, he’d never shown one without a signed permission slip and financial compensation.

At least he hadn’t put hers in the gallery. But to throw them away behind the building...had the idiot never heard of a paper shredder? And to include her notes with them! Clair pulled into the lot where she worked and took a moment to cover her face with her hands. The only saving grace was that she hadn’t signed any of the notes. If Harris had seen her signature at the end...Well, she honestly didn’t know what he’d do.

It had taken Clair a moment to realize she was the subject of the photos. Her hair had been longer then, and her face hidden. But she had recognized herself. Harris, however, had been utterly oblivious to that fact. He plain and simply didn’t see her as a sexual woman, which emphasized how little attention he paid to her femaleness.

That had been really frustrating over the past few months, but now she was more than a little grateful. She only hoped he never showed the photos to anyone. Even if no one ever guessed her identity, she couldn't bear the thought of people seeing her in the raw.

Because moping wasn't something she enjoyed, she shoved her car door open and stepped out into the blistering day. If the humidity had been bad before the storm, it was ten times worse now. Immediately her shirt stuck to her back, and even through her dressy, flat-heeled sandals, she could feel the scorching heat of the blacktop. As a concession to the weather, she wore a sleeveless cotton shirt and loose, flowing skirt. She slung a canvas bag over her arm and started in.

She'd use the day at work as a distraction to get her mind off nude photos, thickheaded men, and her jackass ex-boyfriend. At the moment, there wasn't anything she could do about any of them, so it was best not to dwell on it.

Cool air-conditioning rolled over her the moment she entered the building. Though she was early, Dane and Alec, the P.I.s she worked for, already had a client in the inner office with them. They'd relocated from the city so they'd have more free time for their wives and kids. But it seemed their small town was rife with drama, and they often stayed busy. At least here, though, the cases were seldom all that threatening.

Clair could hear their quiet conversation, see the movement of male bodies through opaque glass. She put her purse away and turned her computer on, then went straight to the coffeepot.

She already had things underway when Dane stuck his head out the door. "Clair, would you mind bringing in some coffee?"

"Not at all. It'll be done in two more minutes."

"Thanks." He ducked back inside.

Making coffee wasn't in her job description, but small requests never offended Clair. It helped that Dane and Alec were consummate gentlemen and didn't take her, or her talents, for granted. As often as not, they carried coffee to her.

A few minutes later, with sugar, powdered creamer and three mugs of steaming coffee on a tray, Clair used her foot to tap at the door. Alec opened it. He looked darker and more intense than usual, but then Alec could be a poster model for tall, dark and dangerous.

He gave her a nod. "Nothing like caffeine to kick off the day."

Clair smiled. "Tough case?"

"Different, that's for sure." He took the tray from her and she started to exit the office.

“Hey, Clair.”

At the sound of Harris’s voice, Clair froze in midstep. *Oh no. Please, no.* Slowly, wincing with dread, she pivoted stiffly to face him.

He was at Dane’s workstation—the cursed photos spread out on the surface.

*Oh. Dear. God.*

Heat rolled from her chest right up to her hairline, making her dizzy with the shock of it. For a single moment, Clair thought she might faint, especially when Dane picked up the shower shot for a closer look.

Alec rejoined the men, staring at *her* naked body with a frown. “Do you see any distinguishing marks? Moles or scars or anything?”

Clair’s knees trembled, threatening to buckle.

“No. No jewelry either.”

*Did she have time to run out and get her ears pierced?*

Dane shook his head. “Just lots of smooth skin. Maybe we should have these photos blown up.”

Clair staggered back against the door. Blow them up? *Blow them up!* As in, make them...bigger? Her throat closed and she couldn’t draw breath, couldn’t say a single word. She tried to get out a denial, to dissuade them from that horrendous plan, but all that emerged was an appalled squeak.

Harris glanced her way, did a double take, then rushed toward her. “Damn, Clair, you okay?” He caught her arms and physically forced her into a chair. Good thing too, because she was about ready to sink to the floor. Maybe *through* the floor if she got lucky.

Over his shoulder, Harris said to Alec, “I think she’s been in the heat too long this morning. You got a cold cloth or something?”

Alec was a man of action. Within seconds, he had a pad of paper towels, dripping with icy water from the rest room.

All three big men loomed around her, Harris trying to slap the wet towels against her face, Dane fanning her with a stack of papers, and Alec taking her pulse.

They’d seen her naked.

It wasn't to be borne. Never in her life had she known such bone-deep humiliation, and it numbed her.

Harris reached for the top button of her blouse. "I'm going to loosen her clothes. She still looks too pale."

That brought Clair around. She shot to her feet, staggered, got steadied by six big hands, and shoved away from them all. She waved a fist with credible intent. "Touch my clothes and I'll brain you."

Harris straightened. He still looked concerned. "You're all right now?"

She wanted to die. "I, uh...you were right. It was just the heat. I'm fine."

Dane cocked a brow. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

Clair stared at him, aghast that he'd come to such a conclusion.

Alec nodded. "Celia stayed light-headed when she was pregnant. Especially when she got too warm."

Laughing, Harris said, "Clair's not even dating, so unless you can get pregnant from a toilet seat, I don't think that's the problem." He again tried to reach for her top button.

Clair swatted at him. "I'm not preg—"

"She dates," Dane argued. "Okay, not much, but I know a few months back she was seeing some guy."

Harris scowled. "She was?" He turned to Clair. "When were you dating? Who was he?"

Ohmigod. No way in hell was Clair going to talk about Kyle. Not with his photographic efforts spread out in all their lack of glory on Dane's desk. She swallowed, found her voice, and rasped, "Enough. From all of you."

They stared at her. Three pairs of discriminating, curious eyes. Eyes that had just been looking at her in the most revealing poses.

"My personal business is none of your concern." And before Harris could object, Clair added, "We *jog* together, Harris. In no way does that entitle you to pry." *Even if you have seen me in the nude.*

Harris's eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms over his chest. "Keeping secrets?" His hot stare threatened to bring on a swoon. "I'll find out, you know."

Over her dead body! She tucked in her chin and summoned her most serious, meanest voice. “You’ll leave me alone.”

Dane cleared his throat. “So you two are good friends? I thought you were just neighbors.”

Harris kept his gaze trained on Clair. “I told Dane and Alec that I learned about them through you.”

Alec gave her a fierce, speculative glance. “You make me sound fearsome, Clair. I’m not sure if I should thank you or not.”

She rolled her eyes. Alec Sharpe lived up to his reputation and he knew it. Marriage and kids hadn’t softened him. He was still dark as the devil and so strong and imposing that even in his mid-forties, he intimidated men with a mere glance. Dane wasn’t much better. Both men were walking icons of masculinity. Not that Harris seemed intimidated. No, if anything, he’d bonded. But then, in her opinion, Harris fit right in.

Dane put an arm around her. “Harris is right, Clair. You still look a little shaky. You want to take the day off?”

So they could get back to perusing her photos? Not a chance. “Of course not.” Inspiration struck and she said, “You want me to take something to the developers for you? You mentioned enlarging some photos.”

“I can do it on the scanner,” Alec said, ruining her chances to steal the photos. “You just rest up and regain your breath. You sound wheezy.”

Dane steered her toward her desk. “If you really want to help, you can do a search and find out who leased the building where the pictures and notes were found.”

Alec picked up the photo of her putting on her panties, making her go pale, then red-hot again. “Assuming the last guy who lived there took them, we can hunt him up and ask him about the...model.”

All three men grinned, and their humor in light of her disgrace rubbed Clair the wrong way.

“You know damn good and well that woman wasn’t modeling.”

“Probably not,” Dane agreed. “But neither was she objecting.”

Ready to blast him for his misassumption, Clair opened her mouth, but snapped it shut again. How could she explain without giving herself away? No, she hadn’t objected because she hadn’t even known the pervert was looking at her, much less that he had a camera. She’d only slept with Kyle twice, and both times were disastrous.



She hadn't realized how disastrous until she saw the sneaky photos.

Clair closed her eyes. "All right. Sure." She'd hunt from now till the end of time without giving them Kyle's name. If they had a name, Alec and Dane would find Kyle. And then the jig would be up.

In fact, if she forced herself to face reality, she knew they'd eventually find him even without her help. They were good. Better than good, they were the best. They were, as she'd often bragged to Harris, awesome. If enough opportunities arose for her to sabotage their efforts, she maybe had a month. Less, if they did some of the computer work themselves, as they occasionally did.

Harris paced to a window overlooking the back lot. "I hope you can find him. It's driving me nuts not knowing who she is."

If Dane and Alec hadn't been in the room, Clair would have kicked Harris in his sexy backside for that remark.

"We'll find him," Alec assured Harris. "Even if we don't, we'll figure out who she is. She had to be local, someone you come into contact with, maybe on a daily basis. Eventually someone will recognize her."

Spots danced in front of Clair's eyes. She gasped, drawing a lot of male attention. In a raw whisper, she pleaded, "Don't tell me you intend to show those photos to people?"

"No." Dane's statement allowed her heart to slow to a more normal pace, until he added, "At least not yet. We'll try other routes first."

"What other routes?"

He shrugged. "We'll hunt for the owner."

And with any luck, she'd find Kyle before they did and rip his heart out—or at least his tongue, so he couldn't tell them about her.

"We'll talk to photography shops to see if anyone remembers developing any photos like those."

A dead end for sure, since Kyle did his own developing. Not that it mattered, because by then her photos would have made the rounds of the neighborhood.

"But eventually it might come down to going door-to-door and asking about him or her or both."

"That's an invasion of her privacy," Alec explained, "so a last resort. But if all else fails..."

Clair knew that if she didn't get out of there right then, she was going to be sick. She plastered on a very false smile. "Well then, by all means, let me do my best to find him on the computer first." She went to her desk.

Unfortunately, Harris followed on her heels. "You feeling better?"

No, never. "I keep telling you, I'm fine."

"You're sure?"

She stared at him, adjusted her glasses, and said with succinct finality, "I'm. Fine."

Harris held up both hands. "All right, all right. Don't get in a temper. I have to get to work and I wanted to make sure you're up to jogging tonight, that's all. If you're not, then I don't want you to push it."

She didn't want to. She wanted to hide. But any variance in their routine right now might tip him off. She forced another fake smile. "I wouldn't miss it."

He nodded, still watching her curiously. "Great." He started backing toward the door. "I'll see you then."

Once the door closed behind him, Clair started to relax, but Alec didn't give her time. He came out of the office with the pictures in hand.

Straightening in her chair, Clair said, "He left them with you?" Maybe she could swipe them after all. Or spill coffee on them. Or...

"Not a chance. These are copies we ran off when he first got here. Your friend Harris is carrying the originals in his front pocket like a lovesick swain." Alec smiled. "Funny guy."

"He's an idiot."

"He has a secret admirer and he's hooked. It's understandable. Not only is the woman attractive and sexy as hell—"

"Being naked does not necessarily make her sexy."

Alec's slow smile looked positively wicked. "Yeah, it does."

Well, hell. Clair slumped under another wave of embarrassment. So all it took was a little nudity for a guy to find a woman sexy? How stupid was that? What about her personality? What about her interests?

Alec seemed to read her mind. “She said some pretty profound things about him in her notes, too. Any guy would be intrigued.”

Profound? She’d only spoken the truth.

“I’m going to enlarge and enhance these,” Alec said, tapping the copies against his thigh, “to see if I can pick up any details.”

Details—like her identity? He disappeared into the backroom. Heart in her throat, her stomach in knots, Clair kept her eyes on that door for a full five minutes until Alec returned—carrying a stack of 8 x 10 photos.

The one on top was of her right shoulder, boob, and ribs.

Clair gulped. He’d taken each photo and divided it into fours, then enlarged each piece. When put together, her buck-naked body would be poster size.

Worse and worse and worse. But Alec didn’t so much as glance at her on his way back to talk to Dane, so he still hadn’t recognized her.

It took her a few more minutes of slowly dying inside before she realized Dane must not have recognized her either. No one budged from the office. There were no outbursts of hilarity, no accusing stares. They were probably too engrossed with ogling the oversize photos.

And here she’d always considered Dane and Alec astute. What was she, invisible? Clair pulled off her tortoiseshell glasses and looked at them. Like Clark Kent’s specs, were her glasses an ingenious disguise that instantly afforded her anonymity?

The door opened and Clair hastened to shove her glasses back on, almost poking herself in the eye. Her face burned. Much more blushing and she’d be permanently scalded.

Both men looked at her with expectant expressions. Clair shriveled inside, until Dane prompted, “Make any headway?”

She hadn’t even started. “Oh. Um, no. Not yet. I’ll keep looking.”

“Thanks.” Dane and Alec headed for the door.

“Where are you two going?” In a panic, Clair left her seat and rushed after them. Surely, they weren’t going to show those pictures around *now*.

Alec barely slowed. “I have to appear in court, remember?”

“Oh yeah.”

Dane paused. "I'm working on a missing person." He stopped and faced her with concern. "Are you sure you're okay, Clair?"

Did they have to keep asking her that? "Of course. I just forgot, that's all." Reluctantly, she asked, "What about the photos?"

"Harris is impatient, but we'll spend a week or two exploring alternatives before we show them to anyone."

*Thank you, thank you, thank you.* "I think that's best." She couldn't help adding, "Can you imagine how embarrassed she'll be if she finds out that you showed them?"

On his way out the door, Dane laughed and pointed at her. "A good reason to never pose nude, huh?"

Or date photographers with sneaky streaks and lack of moral fiber. Clair groaned. With everyone gone, she ran into Dane's office—and stumbled to a horrified halt. She pressed a fist to her mouth. They had the photos up on a pegboard. Pieced together.

Adrenaline carried her to the board in a flash. It took Clair all of thirty seconds to snatch them down and hide them under a stack of files, but she didn't dare destroy them. That'd look too suspicious, and what was the point? They'd only make more.

She dragged herself back to her desk and collapsed in her chair, her face in her hands, her stomach roiling. Sooner or later, they'd know it was her—and then she'd have to quit and move to Outer Mongolia.

Unless...She swallowed hard and tried to think beyond her embarrassment. It wasn't easy, but she tried to take an objective view of the situation.

First, Alec claimed Harris was smitten. And Harris had acted obsessed with the "mystery woman." Heaven knew she'd been obsessed with him forever. But he hadn't shown any sexual interest, and she was too proud to throw herself at him. So they were friends. Clair knew he liked her as a person, but she'd assumed he didn't find her attractive in "that" way.

But judging by his rapt expression when he'd looked at the photos, he definitely liked what he saw.

So, secondly, what did she have to lose now? Not her modesty. After today, she had no modesty to protect.

And as to her pride...well, pride didn't help much when you saw your own behind in an 8 x 10 glossy, held on a presentation board with a thumbtack.

Maybe, just maybe, if she worked this right, she could use her newfound knowledge of Harris's interest to make him fall in love with her—before he found out she was his secret admirer.

It was either that or tell him straight up that he'd seen her naked and that she'd written those notes. He'd know all of her secrets then, leaving her soul as bare as her body. But if he felt the same, it wouldn't be nearly as embarrassing.

She'd probably have to seduce him, and that wouldn't be easy because she couldn't take off her glasses and she definitely couldn't take off her clothes. If she did, he might make the connection too soon. It'd be a tricky bit of business, but she'd figure something out. Maybe she'd just ensure they only got romantic in the dark. That might work.

Given Alec and Dane's expertise, there wouldn't be any time to waste. She'd jump-start Harris on their new relationship tonight. If she was good enough, maybe he'd even give up on the mystery woman and she'd never have to tell him anything at all.

**HARRIS WAITED IMPATIENTLY** for Clair to present herself. The storms had left the night air fresh and clean. It felt good, but it was warm. Deciding against a shirt, he wore only black jogging shorts with socks and running shoes. The shorts had a single back pocket to hold his apartment key—and the photo of his secret admirer reclining on the bed. He hadn't wanted to leave her behind.

Not that he intended to show it to anyone. He appreciated Dane and Alec's efforts to uncover the woman's identity, but already he felt protective and possessive of her. He didn't want anyone else, especially anyone male, to see her.

Something about her, some vague intangible thing, seemed familiar to Harris. He wished he could pin it down. Maybe she reminded him of someone. But who? While he stretched, preparing to run, his mind churned.

Work had been uneventful, which was a relief after the fire the day before. Unfortunately, that had given Harris too much time to think—about the notes, the sexy photos. And about Clair's old boyfriend.

Neither Dane nor Alec would give him any details on the guy. They claimed not to have any. They said they knew Clair had dated, because she'd gotten a few calls at work. Period. Nothing more. They didn't understand why he cared. Hell, he didn't understand either.

But why hadn't she told him? They were friends. Close friends. Didn't friends share that kind of info?

Harris's internal grumbling got interrupted when the entrance door to Clair's building pushed open and she stepped out. The streetlight reflected off the lenses of her glasses. She, too, had trimmed down to the barest covering. Dressed in snowy white cotton shorts and a tank top, she looked...good. Real good.

She smiled at him, adjusted the white band holding her glasses in place and joined him at the street. "Ready?"

Harris studied her. He figured it was the combined effects of sleeping alone, his mystery woman, and hearing about Clair's boyfriend that had him seeing her with a new perspective. "How come you've never gotten contacts?"

Bending this way and that, stretching her arms high, Clair asked, "Why? You don't like my glasses?"

"I didn't say that." Watching her flex was getting to Harris. She was a supple little thing. Funny how he'd never noticed that before.

Clair straightened, then stared up at him with her big green eyes, magnified behind the lenses of her glasses. "I tried contacts once, but they bugged me. I think my eyes are just too sensitive. Besides, I like wearing different frames."

"I noticed that." Tonight her frames were red, a stark contrast to the white shorts and tank. What she lacked in jewelry she made up for in eyewear.

"I have as many pairs of glasses as I do bras."

Harris did a double take. Bras? Why the hell did she have to mention her unmentionables? His besieged brain launched into a series of visuals: Clair in something white and lacy. Clair in something black and slinky. Clair in something barely there.

Clair in his bed.

She said again, "Ready?"

Oh yeah, he was ready all right. For all kinds of things. His gaze dipped to her breasts, but he didn't see any telltale signs of lace through her tee. "How many bras do you have?"

Laughing, Clair shook her head and started walking at a pre-run clip, leaving him two paces behind her. "What is this? Twenty questions?"

"It just occurs to me that I don't know you that well." He tried, but he couldn't seem to get his gaze off her ass. Was she sashaying just a bit? Putting a little extra swing in the swing and sway?

Turning to walk backward, depriving him of his preoccupation with her behind, Clair frowned. “You know me better than most people.”

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend.” Harris took satisfaction in pointing that out.

She turned her back again and started moving a little faster. “What’d you think, Harris? That I was a virgin? A nun? A misanthrope?”

“A misan-what?” Harris trotted to keep up.

“Misanthrope. You know, a hater of men.”

“No.” He was sure of one thing. “You like me and I’m a man.”

Over her shoulder, she smiled at him, a smile unlike any he’d ever seen from Clair before. “That you are.”

Harris’s eyes widened. Was she flirting? Did Clair even know how to flirt? But her voice was different, too, sort of soft and playful. He caught up to her. “So who was the boyfriend?”

“No one important.” They began jogging in earnest, gliding along smoothly. “Just a guy I knew who seemed nice enough and interesting enough to pass the time.”

“You weren’t serious about him?”

She snorted, giving Harris all the answer he needed—though why he needed an answer, he couldn’t say.

They loped on in silence, past the dark, quiet park, along deserted streets where older homes sat back in majestic splendor, along the levy where a concrete path had been poured.

Their movements were fluid, well timed to match. They had a great rhythm together. Harris groaned. He could just imagine setting the pace in bed, and how easily Clair could keep up.

“So how many bras do you have?”

Her laugh got carried away on the evening wind. “At least one for every day of the week.”

He thought about that. “A special one for each day?”

“No, just variety. Different colors, different fabrics.”

Like French lace or slinky nylon or maybe... “What are you wearing tonight?”

“We’re jogging, sweating. So it’s plain old comfortable white cotton.”

Somehow, when he pictured it on Clair, cotton didn’t seem the least plain. He was wondering about her panties, whether they matched the bra or not, when Clair slowed, veered off the pavement to mosey into the grass, then leaned her shoulders against a thick maple tree.

That far from the street, the light of lampposts barely penetrated.

Immediately, Harris was beside her. “Hey, you okay?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She tipped her head back and closed her eyes. “Just a little tired today.”

She’d been pale earlier, unsteady on her feet, and now she was tired? Clair never got tired. Hell, usually he was the first to get winded when they ran, and he knew he was in extremely good shape. All firefighters were.

Come to that, so was Clair, and he didn’t mean healthwise, although that applied too. Her white shirt and shorts reflected the scant moonlight, emphasizing certain swells and hollows, making her body look more feminine than ever.

She bent one knee, stuck the other leg out straight. The pose showed off the length of her long legs, causing Harris’s mouth to go dry. Her dark brown hair, hanging loose tonight, lifted a bit with a gentle breeze. His fingers twitched with the need to smooth it back into place. He resisted.

Still with her eyes closed, Clair smiled.

“Why,” Harris asked, full of suspicion now, “are you smiling like that?”

Her eyes opened, her head tilted. “Like what?”

“Like you have a secret.”

For a single moment there, Harris thought he saw alarm flicker in her gaze. Then she straightened away from the tree. “Don’t be absurd. Can’t a woman smile?”

“Sure.” He propped his hands on his hips. “When she’s got a reason.”

“I’m happy,” Clair snapped, in a very unhappy tone. “I feel good. The air’s fresh, your company, before just now, wasn’t too heinous, and so I smiled.” She shoved past him. “I won’t make that mistake again.”



Harris caught her arm and pulled her around. She slammed into his chest, but quickly back-stepped. "You get mad too easy, too fast."

She relented just a bit, tugging free of his hold and folding her arms around her middle. Sounding mulish, she said, "I'm not mad."

"No? Then what?"

She stared up at him, one expression after another crossing her features before she stalked in a circle around him. Harris turned, keeping her in his sights.

"You told me I wouldn't understand about lust."

Oh hell. First bras and now this. Except for the racing of his heart and a twitch of male interest, Harris went very still. "Yeah." *Shut up, Harris. Let it go....* "And?"

"You were wrong."

He shouldn't have pushed for an explanation. "I am, huh?"

She nodded. "I'm...antsy. The guy you were asking about? We broke up two months ago." She peeked up at Harris, all innocent temptation. "I haven't been out with a guy since."

No way could he have this conversation. Not with a platonic girlfriend. Not without a bed around. He took a step back. "Right. Gotcha. Maybe a, uh, run will help."

"No. I need to find a new guy." As if she hadn't just dropped a verbal bombshell, Clair turned away and headed back to the sidewalk. "In the meantime, running just exhausts me so I can sleep at night instead of fantasizing."

Fantasizing! Well, yeah, so all women probably fantasized, same as men. But Clair? Harris stomped after her. "What the hell does that mean, you have to find a new guy? You make it sound like shoe shopping."

She ignored his furious blustering to say, "Come on. Let's finish our run." Rather than wait for him, she took off, forcing Harris to catch up.

Because he was annoyed now, it took him only two long strides to reach her side. "So where do you intend to look for this new guy?"

"I dunno." She glanced at him over her glasses. "You got any suggestions?"

Of all the nerve. "You can't tell me you're horny, then expect me to help you find a guy."

She whipped around so fast he nearly plowed over her. They bumped. Hard. Harris had to catch her arms to keep them both on their feet.

Giving her a small shake, he grouched, “What the hell is the matter with you?”

“Me!” She pushed him away, almost landing him on his butt. “I didn’t say anything about being *horny*—how crass is that?”

“You think antsy sounds prettier? It means the same thing.”

Clair gasped. “It does not.”

Disgusted, Harris stared into her sexy green eyes and taunted, “Then I was right. You don’t know anything about lust.”

Her pupils flared. The seconds passed with the impact of a ticking bomb. He could feel the tension building, stretching almost to the breaking point—and she attacked.

One second Harris was standing there, smirking at her, and then he was flat on his back in the cold dank grass, little rocks prodding his spine, mosquitoes buzzing with delight at the feast thrown to them.

And Clair, well, Clair had an unshakable grip on his skull and her mouth was plastered to his, hot and wet and demanding. Somehow, with the prodding of her tongue, he opened and she plundered, licking and tasting, stealing his objections and melting them with her heat.

Astounded, instantly aroused, Harris cupped her head, felt the silkiness of her hair, the warmth of her skin. He tipped his head for a better angle and let her deepen the kiss more. *Clair*, he thought. This was Clair straddling him, Clair kissing him with so much passion. Her breasts flattened on his chest, her thighs shifted against his, wrenching a deep groan from him.

Then she was gone.

Moon and stars filled Harris’s vision. His lungs labored to draw in more cool night air. His body burned. Confused, he pushed up to his elbows. Clair stood over him, hands on her hips, her glasses askew, her white shorts now dirty.

“That,” she said, “is lust.”

Harris nodded in complete and total agreement. “I’ll say.”

She offered him a hand, and when he took it, she helped haul him to his feet. Looking down into her earnest face, Harris scrambled for something to say, some way to get back

into that full-body contact. But before a single idea could form, Clair touched his chin, his jaw, gently, softly.

Harris went mute with anticipation.

She stepped up against him, cuddling into him, wrapping her arms around him. After a long, meaningful stare into his eyes that scorched him clean through to his bones, she went on tiptoe and kissed him again. This kiss was as different as night and day from the first. It was purposeful, sweet, and it consumed him.

Like a slow burn, she involved his entire body, her small hands touching up and down his bare back, over his shoulders, as if in awe of his muscles and strength. Her feet moved between his, which aligned her soft belly with his groin. She pressed, proving she was aware of his erection.

Her breasts brushed against him, teasing, taunting, until he felt her stiffened nipples and growled.

She made small sounds of pleasure and hunger too, her tongue now shy, loving.

*Loving?*

With a pat to his rear, Clair pulled away. He watched as she slowly licked her lips. “And that,” she whispered, “is antsy.”

Breathless, hot, more than a little ready, Harris reached for her. “I don’t think I quite understand yet. You better do a little more explaining.”

## ***CHAPTER THREE***

**CLAIR’S QUICK BACK STEP** kept her out of reach. “If that explanation didn’t suffice, then nothing will. You’re hopeless.” She turned away.

Did women always have to be so confusing?

Neither of them jogged this time. Hell, just walking was tough for Harris. He had a major Jones and she just didn’t seem all that affected. Except for the wobbly way she walked. And the way she breathed too deeply.

He couldn’t just let it go, so after half a dozen steps, he cleared his throat and ventured into murky water. “So...that was just a lesson, huh?”

“Think what you will.”

She sounded all prickly again. Clair never got prickly with him. He wasn't used to it and didn't have a clue how to deal with her in this mood. "How about you just explain it?"

One shoulder lifted in a halfhearted shrug. "Men get horny and want to get laid. Women get antsy and want to touch and be touched, to cuddle and be affectionate." She cast him a quick look. "And then make love."

He raised his hand. "I'll take either one."

"I wasn't offering."

"Yeah, you were." When she turned to face him, Harris chastised her with a look. "I'm a little slow on the uptake sometimes, but I'm not a complete dolt. You're coming on to me."

She didn't reply to that one way or the other.

He needed verification, damn it. "I'm willing, Clair."

The incredulous look she gave him didn't bode well. "Willing? Oh great, bring out the band. Harris is *willing*." Her laugh reeked with sarcasm. "How did I get so lucky?"

Figuring her out wasn't going to be easy. "Bad word choice? Should I have said happy to oblige? Anxious? Maybe desperate?"

Her eyes narrowed behind the lenses of her glasses. "Are you?"

"After those killer kisses, what do you think?"

She reached around him to pat his ass again—right over the pocket that held the photo and his key. The woman sure had a thing for his rear.

"I think you're desperate to find your stupid mystery woman and I'd just be a way to pass the time." She crossed her arms over her chest, going all stiff and angry.

Uh-oh.

He took too long trying to figure out what to say, because she demanded, "Isn't that right?"

Harris held out his hands. "C'mon, Clair. I can't just forget about her. But hell, I don't even know her."

"You told me you didn't know me that well either."

They were a good mile from home, which ensured no matter what he said she couldn't just stalk off in a temper. That gave Harris small comfort, though, when he didn't know what the hell to say. "Up until a few minutes ago, I didn't know you were interested in...that."

"That?" she asked meanly, curling her lip, being deliberately derisive.

"Sex. Me."

"The two combined?"

"Exactly." He wrapped his fingers around her upper arm, slowing her furious stomp to a more sedate pace. When she didn't object, he decided to just hang on to her. Touching her was nice. At least now it was. Before she'd kissed him, he hadn't really noticed how it felt to touch her. Realizing that, he said, "I need a few minutes to adjust, that's all. Neither of us has thought that much about sleeping together."

"Speak for yourself."

Was that a confession? His interest sharpened to an ache. "You've thought about me?"

"You're not an ogre, Harris. Most of the time, you're not too moronic. I'm not with anyone else. Do the math."

Harris chewed over those critical and questionable compliments, and didn't like the conclusion he came to. "So like your ex-boyfriend, I'd be filler until something better came along?"

She laughed. "Harris, honey, do try to remember your own credos, okay?"

*Honey?*

"You don't want to be anything more than filler. You don't want a woman getting ideas of forever after. You're totally against marriage." She waited two heartbeats, then prodded him. "Right?"

"Uh, yeah." But somehow that didn't seem to be the point right now. "So you thought about, what? A quick fling?" He could start with that, maybe work up to more....

"You weren't listening to my instructions a minute ago, were you?" Typically Clair, she turned to walk backward so she could see his face. "I thought I was more than clear that men want it quick. I want it slow and easy. I want to—"

He swallowed hard.

“—take my time.” She continued pacing backward. “But there’s that mystery lady occupying you right now.” Her sigh was absurdly long. “So we can just go on being sexless buds. No problem.”

No problem? What about his boner? That was a definite problem. And his curiosity, which was so keen he suddenly felt obsessed with knowing Clair intimately. And there was a strange excitement he’d never felt with any other woman, too. Maybe it was the way she insulted him so energetically. “I may never meet that woman, Clair. I mean, I know Alec and Dane are good, but that doesn’t guarantee they’ll find her.”

“And if they did?”

How should he answer that? The mystery alone made him want to approach the woman, to talk to her, to find out how she knew him and why she hadn’t ever told him how she felt. There was her sex appeal, and the notes, her sincerity and admiration...

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Clair reached out and clasped his hand, lacing her fingers with his. “Come on. No more lagging. Time to run.”

“I don’t think I can.” He’d never run with a hard-on before. It didn’t seem all that comfortable.

“You can,” Clair assured him, “or you’ll be heading home alone, because I’m not walking. I’m tired and I want to get to bed.”

“So you can *fantasize*,” Harris accused. Possibly about him. The way her hand tightened shored up that belief.

“Maybe.”

He did not need to hear this. She dragged him along, never once releasing her hold on him, and in a few minutes, they were jogging again. At the pace she set, it didn’t take them long before they were on their own street. This close to the burned building, the lingering scent of smoke still hung in the air. It reminded Harris of his reaction when he’d feared Clair might be involved in the fire. His reaction had been extreme, and that was before she’d been flirting with him.

He also thought of the shoebox he’d found, and the tantalizing prospects it had presented. Harris was strangely aware of the photo in his back pocket, and Clair’s hand in his.

Two women, both of them making him nuts.

What the hell was a guy supposed to do?

**CLAIR STOPPED** in front of her steps. So far, Harris seemed more than a little interested in sex, but she wanted more than that. She wanted him to want her, in and out of bed. She felt manipulative, teasing him and then pulling back. Making comments that she knew would get him thinking about sex. But she didn't know what else to do.

And already it was working with Harris. He wanted her now—but he still wanted her alter ego, the Naked Lady, too. Somehow, she had to get him to give up the fantasy prompted by those stupid photos.

Feeling awkward, Clair said, "It's early yet."

A light sheen of sweat dampened Harris's bare shoulders and chest. He had his hands on his hips, breathing deeply, watching her. "You pulled our run short."

Clair shrugged, adjusted her glasses nervously. "Want to come up?"

His gaze sharpened. Like a blue laser, his gaze pinned her in place. Slowly his hands dropped from his hips and he took a step closer. "Are you playing with me again?"

Man, he was still primed, ready to jump the gun—apparently ready to jump her. "I've had you up to my place a dozen times, Harris. For drinks, a snack."

His hands came to settle on her waist. "For more?"

Despite her urge to say *yes*, Clair laughed. "We're both sweaty and you have to be up early."

"I'm never too tired for—"

"Will you send me in alone if I say I just want to talk?"

For a brief moment, his hands tightened, then the heat left his eyes and he released her with a sigh. "What the hell. I always enjoy talking to you." His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Lead the way."

Her apartment was dark when they first went in. Clair turned on lamps as she headed to the kitchen. "You want something to eat or drink?"

"Just some water." He trailed behind her, far too close, in Clair's opinion.

She filled two glasses with ice, then got the spring water from the fridge. "So tell me what the attraction is."

"To you?"

He looked perplexed enough that Clair wanted to hit him. “No, not to me. Far as I know, you’re *not* attracted to me.”

He cocked one brow, then looked pointedly at her body. “I’d be more than happy to prove you wrong on that.”

Clair groaned. “So then why do you want the woman in the photos so bad? She gets naked and that makes you so interested you can’t let it go?”

He immediately shook his head. “She does look hot, no way around that. I mean, any woman who’s comfortable being naked is okay in my book.”

“Really?”

He grinned. “Hell yeah. If it was up to me, all women would stay naked. At least when we were alone together.”

That had Clair blushing a bit, especially as Harris let his gaze roam over her, no doubt imagining her in such a state. Not that he had to imagine, if he only realized....

“But the woman in the photo also said some nice things in her notes.”

“So?”

Harris rubbed the back of his neck and paced away. He had a gorgeous back, strong and broad, sleek and hard with muscle. His shorts rode low on his hips, hugging a narrow behind and strong thighs. “This is kind of embarrassing.”

She knew all about embarrassing. “Why? We’re friends.”

He nodded, turned to face her. “She said I’m generous.” Harris looked uncomfortable. “And funny and heroic.”

Men could be such dolts. “Well, of course she did. Because you *are*.” Clair handed him his water. “You’re one of the greatest guys I know.”

The water never made it to his mouth. “You think so?”

“Absolutely.”

“But I didn’t know....”

“Harris,” she said with aggrieved sigh. “Do you think I’d hang out with a guy who was an idiot?”

His mouth tipped in a crooked grin. “You call me an idiot all the time.”



Too true. It had always been her way of making sure she kept her feelings to herself. A self-protection mechanism of sorts that reminded her she wasn't to get too romantic with Harris.

Clair moved back to the living room and dropped onto her overstuffed, oversize couch. She stretched out her legs, caught Harris staring at them, and smiled. "Yeah, well, I insult you with affection. I don't mean it." She sent him a quick grin, just to keep her comments from getting too dramatic. "If I didn't like, respect and admire you, I wouldn't want your company."

His brows came down, his expression arrested. Clair stared at him over her glasses. "Now what's wrong?"

With a small shake of his head, Harris muttered, "I need to think. You've sort of thrown a bunch of stuff at me all at once."

"Thinking is good." Clair waited while he, too, plopped onto the sofa. Because of their conversation, sitting so close to him felt different this time. "You should decide what you'll do once you find this woman. I mean, have you considered that?"

He propped his big feet on her coffee table and let his head fall back. "At least a hundred times."

Clair stared at his abdomen. It, too, was hard, lean and ridged with muscle. A dark, silky line of hair led from his navel to beneath the waistband of his shorts.

She held herself in check, when what she wanted to do was attack him again. "So," she said, sounding a little strained, "what if she's a witch? What if she has an ogre's personality? She could be like a fatal attraction or something. A nut. A slasher even."

Harris rolled his head toward her. "You made your point early on, hon. Now you're just stretching it."

Clair shrugged. "But the point is valid."

"Maybe." Harris stared at her, surveying her face as if trying to read her thoughts. "She didn't sound like a slasher in her notes. She sounded like a nice lady."

Here we go again. "You don't *want* a nice lady, Harris, remember? You want someone who's out for kicks. Nice women tend to get serious thoughts when they're having sex with a guy."

His blue eyes filled with speculative interest. Still lounging back lazily, he said, "You're nice."

Nervousness fluttered through her. Was there a point to that? Maybe something she was missing? She took a big gulp of her water, then agreed, "I'm very nice."

Harris warmed to his topic, leaning toward her a bit, resting his arm along the back of the sofa. His fingers just touched her nape, teasing her a bit. "So if we slept together," he asked in a slow drawl, "you'd want to settle down with me?"

*Lord yes. She wanted to claim him as her own, and have babies and make love every night....* "I dunno." Her feigned indifference was laudable. "See, even if we did sleep together..."

"Yes?"

"I have an advantage."

"Do tell. I'm on the edge of my seat here."

Smugly, Clair stated, "Unlike other women you know, I have no illusions. I've watched you revel in your bachelor ways."

"I don't revel." His mouth flattened in distaste. "You make it sound like I go around dancing and singing about it. I just enjoy my life, that's all."

"Thing is," Clair continued, ignoring his protests, "I'm not sure you really know what you want or feel."

"So I can't figure out you or me, huh? What a dope I must be."

"I didn't say that, Harris. Don't put words in my mouth." He grinned at her, seeming far from insulted. "Look at the way you're panting over a photo. That proves you're anxious for a serious relationship."

"You think so? I thought it just meant I was curious."

So curious, he'd hired two very expensive detectives to find the woman. Clair made a face at him. "What if," she said, determined to get her theory out in the open, "what you really want is to be loved?"

For a suspended moment in time, Harris froze. Then he jeered. "Do I look that needy to you?"

"No." Given the perfect opening, Clair spoke from her heart. "You look like a guy who's a great catch. Earnest when you need to be. Reliable. Dedicated." Melancholy got a stranglehold on her. Helplessly, she said, "You're a hero, Harris. A gorgeous, sexy, funny, bona fide hero."

He slowly straightened in his seat. “Don’t overdo it, Clair.”

“I’m serious.” She scooted closer to him on the couch. “You’re an incredible guy.”

His gaze zeroed in on her mouth. “Clair, you do realize you’re turning me on again, right?” His big warm hand came up to cup her cheek. “I hope that’s your intent and not part of this new sadistic streak you’ve developed.”

Clair chewed her lower lip. She did want to arouse him, but she didn’t want to push him too far. She wanted them to talk more before they took the plunge.

“Listen. I’ve told you what I really think of you.” She drew a deep breath for courage—and inhaled his scent. After their jog, he was a little sweaty, but he smelled delicious. The way a man should, the way Harris always did. “Now why don’t you tell me what you think of me?”

His thumb brushed her jaw. “Sure.” The left side of his mouth kicked up. “You’re cute, in a funky egghead, jock sort of way.”

The romantic haze cleared from around her. “Be still my heart.”

The teasing glimmer in his blue eyes clued her in. “Now Clair, what did you want me to say? You keep changing on me, so I don’t know your personality anymore.”

He knew her better than anyone, including her family. He just didn’t realize it yet.

“I can’t even tell what you’re thinking most of the time because you always hide behind your glasses.” The seductive way he caressed her neck mesmerized her. “Do you shower in them? Sleep in them?” His voice dropped. “Make love in them?”

Clair tried to rear back, but Harris kept her in place with the gentle hold on the back of her neck, and his compelling stare. “I’m not telling,” she whispered.

“Then I think I’ll find out on my own.” He reached for her frames.

Clair couldn’t let him take her glasses off! He might recognize her. She shoved him hard, but Harris being Harris—a big, sturdy, physically fit firefighter—he didn’t budge.

“You want to wrestle?” he said with a laugh, and he caught her flying hands while somehow managing to tickle her. The next thing Clair knew they were rolling off the couch and onto the floor. She landed on Harris with a grunt, but only had a split second to enjoy that position before he flipped her beneath him. The coffee table got shoved away, and Harris settled himself between her thighs.

Uh-oh. “Harris…”

He caught both her hands in one of his, pinning them in place, keeping her still. And then, with her squawking and protesting, he slid her glasses off and placed them gingerly on the table.

Clair went mute in fear, sure that he'd recognize her.

Instead, he leaned down until his mouth just touched hers. "Can I show you my ideas on the differences between horny and antsy?"

He wasn't wearing a shirt, and all that sleek bare skin was against her. He smelled like a man should, like something that could be bottled and sold to make a fortune. And she could feel his hard, hair-roughened thighs on the tender insides of her legs. "Yes." Her heart threatened to punch out of her chest. "You can show me."

"I love a good sport."

Her breath caught at the word *love*, and then Harris murmured, "Here's horny."

His mouth settled over hers, moving hotly, urging her lips to part so his tongue could sink inside. At the same time, he gently rocked his pelvis against hers, teased her nipples with the pressure of his chest. His breath was hot on her cheek, fast and low.

Wow. When he lifted away, Clair had to struggle to get her eyes open. "Lust," she whispered in complete agreement.

"Right. And here's antsy." He released her hands to cup her face, holding her still as he kissed her deeply again. Clair groaned. Kissing Harris was a revelation. She now realized that among his other accolades, she'd have to add "awesome kisser."

He eased away. "So what do you think?"

Her head was spinning, her heart beating too fast. "They were the same."

"Right, because there isn't a difference." He dropped a kiss on her nose. "It's just preference, Clair. Sometimes I like it hard and fast."

She groaned again.

"But sometimes," he said, drawing it out and searing her with a look, "I like to make it last all night."

Clair wasn't sure she could take an all-nighter. But then he kissed her temple, and when he spoke, his voice was a rough whisper.

"For you, I'd make it last."

Okay, so maybe she could take it. Clair started to wrap her arms around him, but Harris held her off. His smile looked pained, and his muscles were taut with restraint. He kissed her nose again—and sat up.

“But since you’re playing some strange game here and I can’t quite figure out the rules yet, I think I better call it a night.”

She didn’t want him to go now, darn it. She wanted...

Harris touched her cheek, smoothed her hair. “When we sleep together, Clair—and we will, so don’t deny it—I don’t want any miscommunication or regrets. We’ll both be in agreement, and we’ll both enjoy it. Okay?”

A little numb, Clair nodded.

When Harris pushed to his feet, she sat up and quickly located her glasses. She felt more self-assured with the visual barrier in place. “Harris?”

He smiled down at her, giving her a sense of déjà vu, but with her in the wrong position. In the park, she’d done this to him—led him on, then walked away.

He tipped his head toward her.

“Thank you.”

A smile warmed his expression. “For waiting?”

“And for understanding. I...I guess I’m not a hundred percent sure what I want yet.”

“Between us?”

“Yes.” She bit her lip. “I don’t think you are either.”

“Now there’s where you’re wrong. I know what I want—and I know I’ll get it. That’s the only reason I can be so patient now.”

Clair blinked hard. Had she finally made some serious progress?

“Good night, Clair,” Harris said, and his expression was warm, intimate. “Sweet dreams.”

## ***CHAPTER FOUR***

**EVEN WHILE HE HOVERED** next to Dane, waiting to see the results from the information he’d supplied, Harris kept listening for Clair to get to work. He was curious about the

mystery woman still, no two ways about that. When he'd seen a dark-haired woman flirting with him, all his senses had gone on alert. He'd made note of her license plates, and now he waited to see if she could be the one. He hoped so. The suspense was killing him.

But even while he waited in tense silence, more than half his attention was on the door, anticipating Clair's arrival. The way that girl kissed...Hell, she was so hot, he probably should stay in uniform when with her. He needed the fireproof protection.

She was the same Clair he enjoyed so much, but she acted different with him now. He liked the changes, the feminine layers to her personality. The teasing. Like refined foreplay, Clair's advance and retreat kept his excitement very close to the surface, ready to explode with little provocation.

"Her name is Melody Miles." Dane, with his hand over the receiver of the phone, glanced up at Harris. "*Miss* Melody Miles—so she's single."

Somehow, that didn't thrill Harris as much as he'd thought it might.

"Alec says up close, she doesn't look the same to him."

"None of the photos show her face."

"He didn't mention her face." Dane shrugged. "He was talking about her body. She's a little heavier than she seemed in the snapshots, but that could be due to a time difference between when the pictures were taken and now."

The door opened and Clair strolled in. She was smiling—until she saw Harris. Then she snapped to a standstill; her back slowly straightened.

Harris barely heard Dane still talking. Today Clair wore narrow, rectangular glasses that added an air of supreme intelligence to her appearance. Her dark glossy hair was a little windblown, proving she'd ridden to work with her car window down. Beneath the short hem of a navy-blue jumper, her long legs were bare. White sandals matched her white T-shirt. She looked adorable.

He was so glad to see her again. "Clair."

Her mouth flattened. "What are you doing here, Harris?"

Dane hung up and stepped out from behind her desk. "He thought he might have found the mystery lady."

Clair crossed her arms and thrust out a hip in an arrogant pose. "Do tell."

Clearing his throat, very unsure of her mood, Harris said, “Yeah, well. She was flirting with me at this coffee shop where I stopped this morning. I realized I stop there a lot, and that could be the connection. You know, where she knew me from and everything.”

“Have you ever met her?”

“No.” Clair sounded so...accusatory. “But she could have heard my name from someone. I’ve been in there with the guys a few times too. Occasionally in uniform, so she’d know I was a firefighter.”

“Assuming she hangs out there as well.”

“Yeah. Assuming that.” Harris wished Dane would offer a little help. He’d acted enthusiastic about the possibility of the woman being “the one,” yet now he just stood there and grinned, enjoying Harris’s plight.

“Ever notice her before?” Clair asked.

Feeling harassed, Harris said, “No. But that doesn’t mean she hasn’t noticed me.”

“Obviously she has if she’s flirting with you.” Her eyes narrowed in thought. “Did you ask her if she’s the one?”

“No, of course not.” Sheepishly, Harris admitted, “I followed her so I could get her license plate number.”

“Oh gawd.” Clair flounced the rest of the way into the room and dropped her purse on the desk. “A stalker, that’s what you’ve become.”

Dane laughed. “No one saw him, Clair, and the plates paid off.” Then he turned to Harris. “But as I said, Alec doesn’t think it’s her.”

At the moment, with Clair glaring at him, Harris didn’t really care. “All right.”

Though he hadn’t asked, Dane explained. “Body shape isn’t the same.” He pulled out the larger photos they’d created. He put the one of the woman’s derriere on top of the stack.

Clair made a choking sound, but when Harris glanced at her, she didn’t seem to be paying them any mind. In fact, she was busily arranging and rearranging things on her desk.

“Your woman—”

“*His* woman?” Clair repeated with mocking disbelief, her desk and its clutter forgotten.

“—has a heart-shaped behind.” Dane shrugged. “The woman you saw in the coffee shop is rounder. Or so Alec tells me.”

“Then it must not be her,” Harris agreed.

“He’s not positive,” Dane said, “so he’s going to check her out a little more. But he said not to get your hopes up.”

Clair started laughing. Loudly. When Harris frowned at her, she put her face on the desk and covered her head with her arms. She roared with hilarity until her shoulders were shaking.

“What,” he demanded over the awful noise she made, “is so damn funny?”

Gasping, wheezing with her humor, Clair straightened. She had tears of mirth rolling down her cheeks. “You three,” she gasped, apparently including Alec, though he wasn’t present. “Tracking a woman by...the shape of...*her ass*.” She burst out laughing again.

Dane cocked a brow. “I guess it does sound funny. Not that we have much else to go on.” And then louder, to make his point to Clair, he said, “Since *somebody* hasn’t found us the address of the previous owner yet.”

Her amusement dried up real quick. “Oh.” Her frown was fierce. “I’m working on that.”

“Work harder,” Dane suggested. “Or better yet, I can do it.”

“No! I mean, I’ve got it covered. I’ll have something for you in a few hours.” Disgruntled, she seemed to sink in her chair. “Will that be good enough?”

“That’d be great.” Dane picked up a file and headed for the door. “I’ll be staking out the Westbrook Motel today if anyone needs me.”

“A stakeout?” Dane and Alec handled a lot of mundane, annoying cases—like cheating spouses and stolen lawn ornaments. But they also got involved in some really cool situations that Harris loved hearing about.

“Yeah. The owners of a small motel suspect one of their employees of spying on guests in the pool changing rooms. I’m going to hang out back in the bushes and catch him in the act, then we can call in the cops.” Dane winked. “You kids be good. I’ll see ya later.”

Finally. The second Dane was out the door, Harris headed for Clair. Anticipation hummed inside him. He couldn’t wait to taste her again.

As he advanced, her eyes widened and she hastily pushed her chair back, but Harris didn’t give her time to retreat. He braced his hands on the arms of her chair, caging her in, and leaned down to take her mouth. She made a small sound of surprise—and then the sound got muffled.

Oh hell yeah, he’d missed her mouth.



Clair stayed stiff for about three seconds, then melted with a small moan. He liked that. He liked her. Maybe a lot more than he'd ever realized. When her lips parted, Harris accepted the invitation and slipped his tongue in for a deep, hot, wet kiss that lasted just long enough to get him semihard.

"I missed you," he growled against her mouth.

Speaking must have broken the spell, because she blinked and shoved him back. She was breathing fast and her lips were slightly swollen and very pink. She readjusted her crooked glasses, then scowled. "Yeah right. You missed me so much that you're following strange women around, desperate to meet your secret admirer."

"Not desperate." Harris wasn't all that steady on his feet at the moment. The idea of laying her out on the desk, pushing up her sensible jumper and indulging in a little office sex tempted him. But she didn't look too receptive to that idea. "Just curious. If some guy was in love with you, wouldn't you be curious?"

A myriad of expressions—anger, frustration, hopelessness—crossed her face before she sighed and flopped back in her seat. "Maybe." Her chin lifted. "But not if I was interested in someone else."

Harris propped his hip on the desk. He needed the support. "I'm more than interested, Clair."

Eyes flaring, she caught her bottom lip in her teeth. "Really?"

Was she in love with him? As to that, was he in love with her? Harris had always figured that when he fell in love, the realization would hit him over the head. He wouldn't have to wonder about it, he'd just know. But Clair was so different, he couldn't figure her out. And that meant he couldn't really figure himself out either.

Choosing his words carefully, Harris hoped to talk her around to his way of thinking, without looking too pushy or, God forbid, desperate. "I like being with you, Clair. Even before all this sexual teasing started between us." That brought another thought, and he asked, "You won't go changing on me if we get involved, will you?"

Clair was as still as a statue. "What do you mean?"

"You tell me what you think and what you feel. But you don't get hung up on little stuff. You're always honest with me."

She'd closed her eyes and Harris wasn't sure if she was listening. "Clair?"

Leaving her chair to pace, she said, "We're already involved. We just haven't slept together. If you like me how I am now, well, I can't see why sex should change anything."

“Sex changes *some* stuff.”

She turned to face him, one brow raised in an attitude of skepticism. “How?”

How? Harris shook his head and rethought his words. “I should say that sex between *us* will change things. If you were a different woman—”

“Your secret admirer?”

“Don’t sneer, Clair.” He liked her show of jealousy. It sort of tickled him, because he’d never thought of Clair as a jealous woman. “All I’m saying is that with another woman, I might not care. But if *we* do this, I’ll expect some rights.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “What rights?”

Somehow, this was backward, Harris thought, almost laughing at himself. Here he was, a man who avoided commitments, now trying to pin her down. But what had seemed so appealing just days before, now felt too open-ended. Clair never pressured him, never wanted to know where he was or when he’d be back or if he’d call. He was a firefighter, yet, to his knowledge, she never worried. And that had been cool—till now.

If she cared, shouldn’t she show a little concern every now and then? Shouldn’t she want to know if he was with another woman? Damn right, because if she didn’t demand that special consideration, how could he demand it of her? And he wanted to. All this talk about her past boyfriend had him feeling his own dose of jealousy. He didn’t want her with anyone else.

Harris pushed away from the desk. “I won’t want you to ever jog at night without me.” He warmed to his topic, moving closer to her. “Hell, I don’t want you to do that now. If I can’t make it, you’ll skip it.”

Her mouth fell open, then snapped shut and she declared with feeling, “I will not.”

“Now Clair.” He closed the space between them, forcing her to back up. “It’s dangerous.”

“You never cared before.”

He was a dumb ass before. “We didn’t have that kind of relationship. Now we will.”

“Ha. What if you find your mystery lady? Then I’ll be put on hold. So until you resolve your feelings for her, I’ll just continue to do as I damn well please.”

Harris loomed over her. The thought of her alone at night infuriated him. “Then I guess I’ll just have to make sure I jog every damn night until we’ve got this settled.”

Her back touched the wall and stopped her retreat. “You do anyway,” she grumbled. And then, a little defeated, she added, “Besides, I don’t enjoy jogging without you. Odds are, if you couldn’t go, I’d skip it too.”

Harris cupped her face. Logical, honest Clair. “Thank you.” He kissed her again, but kept it light because he was running late. “I’ll be over tonight as soon as I get off work.”

“Why?” Thanks to the kiss, her eyes looked soft behind her glasses. “We don’t run until it’s dark.”

“We’ve got a lot to talk about. Me, you, sex.” He grinned at her. “We’ll hash it all out, because I don’t think I can wait too much longer.”

He started to turn away, and she said, “Harris?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to wait either.”

Oh hell. A statement like that guaranteed he’d be semihard for most of the day. Not a comfortable circumstance while working with a group of men who lived to harass each other. And no doubt Ethan would be the worst, but then Ethan still prodded him about the shoebox. If he found out how much Harris cared about Clair, there’d never be an end to it. Without another word, Harris made his escape.

But just as he’d suspected, Clair stayed on his mind, distracting him, filling his thoughts and making him edgy. That is, until a truck driver swerved off the road, striking a gas line and sparking an apartment fire on the north side of the town.

The collision smashed a natural gas manifold, and intense, gas-fed flames shot up into the building’s roof, turning the four-unit apartment into a gigantic blaze. Harris temporarily plugged the gas lines so the fire was no longer fed, but flames were already licking a large portion of the building. Harris’s unit was forced to fight the flames on two fronts, one group using a fog stream to keep the fire contained in the rear, while Harris and several other men engaged in fire attack and an internal overhaul.

Not long after that, gas workers arrived to shut off underground pipes, diminishing the danger. It was still another two hours before the fire was completely out and only smoke remained. Cleanup would take awhile, but thank God, other than a few minor injuries, no one was seriously hurt. The renters, including several small children, all made it out safely. One older woman suffered smoke inhalation, but she’d be okay. A young man had some minor burns and the paramedics were already working on him.

Harris was exhausted, dirty, and reeking of smoke. Muscles in his neck and shoulders cramped. His eyes burned. He shoved aside a pile of embers, making sure they were cold

before moving on. Ethan stepped up beside him. He looked as bad as Harris felt, but he was smiling.

Harris said, "There has to be about fifty-thou worth of damage. Three of those apartments are no longer habitable, and a bunch of people are going to be hunting for a place to stay." He pulled off his helmet to swipe black soot from his face. "So why the grin?"

Ethan followed suit, removing his helmet and running one gloved hand through his sweat-soaked hair. "Rosie."

"What about her?"

"Whenever there's a fire, she dotes on me." Ethan elbowed him. "And I don't mean she brings me chicken soup, either."

Reminded of the love between Rosie and Ethan, Harris felt a little melancholy. He forced a smile. "I might be too young to hear this."

"You're definitely too young for details. Let's just say that I'm sorry for the damage, I hate it that people will be displaced, but I'm anxious to get home to my loving wife." Ethan winked, replaced his helmet, and sauntered away.

Harris grumbled to himself. It'd be nice to have a loving woman waiting for him...whoa. He stopped in his tracks, his gaze unseeing. A woman waiting? The same women, *every day*? That sounded a lot like...marriage. Was he ready for that? He knew he wanted Clair, definitely more than he'd ever wanted any other woman. And it wasn't just sexual.

Hell, he'd given up sex with other women, but not once had he considered giving up jogging with her. He felt more alive when he was around her.

As he worked, removing the burned remains of an old lawn chair, tearing down the precariously hanging door on one unit, Harris considered all the different things he felt for Clair. He wanted to be with her, damn near all the time. He never tired of her company. Clair seemed to read his moods, sitting quietly with him when that was what he wanted, or teasing him when he felt like clowning around. Her company never felt intrusive. Being with her just felt...good.

He knew her moods, too. But maybe that was because Clair didn't play games like most women did. If he said something that pissed her off, she told him so. Other than the sexual teasing of late, which he knew they both enjoyed, she was open and honest.

For sure, she didn't like his attention veering to the mystery woman. Harris didn't really like it either. Not anymore. Who needed a woman who left secretive notes and naked pictures rather than confronting him face-to-face? He'd much rather concentrate on Clair and all the new ways she bedeviled his libido and his dreams.

His mind made up, Harris decided that he'd thank Dane and Alec for their help, pay them what he owed them, and pull them off the case. Tomorrow.

Because tonight, he wanted Clair.

He shook off his distraction and got to work. The sooner they had the site cleared, the sooner his shift would end. And the sooner he could see Clair.

**CLAIR HEARD** about the fire on the news and she was so worried, she couldn't stop pacing. Loving a firefighter had never been easy, but now, as Harris had claimed, things were different. She didn't have to hide her feelings behind friendly camaraderie.

The second she saw Harris's car pull up, she grabbed her keys and dashed out the door. She didn't think about her shoes, or Harris's reaction, she only thought about reaching him, making sure he'd escaped once again without harm.

Harris was already inside the building, but only just opening his apartment door when Clair arrived. She stopped when she saw him, catching her breath, absorbing the sight of him. He looked...wonderful. Exhausted and red-eyed, but still strong and tall, still the man she adored with all her heart.

Seeing him now, with the evidence of his work weighing heavy on his shoulders, Clair didn't know what to say. Emotion closed her throat, love burned her eyes. She twisted her fingers together. "Harris."

He'd just shoved his door open and he turned to her with a smile. "Hey. I was going to change and come over in a few minutes."

Clair swallowed hard, fighting the urge to leap on him. "Change into what?" Duncie. What did it matter?

He turned his nose against his shoulder, sniffed, and made a face. "Something that doesn't still reek of smoke. I showered at the station, but the damn smell clings to my hair and my—"

Clair gave up. She couldn't stand it, couldn't wait a second more, couldn't patiently stand there while he went through cordial chitchat. Launching herself at Harris, she grabbed his neck, kissed his mouth, his chin, his throat, then rested her cheek on his chest and squeezed him tight.

Slowly, Harris brought his arms around her. "Hey? What's wrong?"

Almost too overwhelmed to speak, Clair shook her head, then confessed, "I was...worried."

“I’m sorry.” He smoothed her back, returned her bear hug, then caught her arm and urged her inside.

*He was sorry?* Agog, Clair tried to acclimate herself to Harris’s new persona, to his easy acceptance. What did it mean?

His voice low and somber, he said, “Let me shower again and change, then we’ll talk.”

Clair watched him walk away, and he was whistling. The exhaustion remained, in the set of his shoulders, the dark smudges beneath his eyes. But he seemed more lighthearted, as if she’d pleased him in some way.

Clair looked around herself with dawning realization. Harris was in a mellow, receptive mood. His apartment, other than a small kitchen light, was dark. She had the perfect setting and probably wouldn’t get another chance like this anytime soon.

Her heart in her throat, her pulse humming in anticipation, she trailed silently after him. She pushed open his bedroom door to see Harris standing in the middle of the floor, his shirt off, his shoes and socks gone, and his hands at the snap of his jeans.

*Almost there*, she thought.

Harris looked up, their gazes locked for long moments, and his expression heated. “Clair?”

Not giving herself a chance to back out, she flipped the wall switch, stealing the scant light and filling the room with obscure moon shadows.

Harris, now a vague shadowy blur, asked, “What’s this?”

Cautiously moving forward, Clair found his chest, firm and sleek and very hot. She moved her hands up to his broad shoulders, then to the back of his neck. She pulled his head down to hers. “I was afraid for you.”

His hands looped around her waist. “I’m good at what I do, honey. You don’t have to worry.”

“You said sex would change things.” Clair tunneled her fingers into the cool softness of his thick hair, such a dramatic contrast to his hard, hot body. “Well, get used to me being concerned. I know you don’t like it. God knows you bitch enough any time a woman starts to worry, but if we have sex—”

His hands widened, sliding down to her hips. “We are,” he murmured. “Right now in fact.”

Clair drew in a breath. “Great. Then I have rights.”

She could hear the smile in his voice when he asked, “The right to worry?”

“You betcha. And I also—” He kissed her, cutting off her demands in midsentence. “Harris?”

“I’m open to the new rules, honey. But let’s talk about them all in the morning.”

Morning? The sun would be out, light flooding through the windows. “Do you expect me to stay the night?”

“Damn right. Next to me. In my bed.”

“Oh.” Maybe by then it wouldn’t matter. Maybe by then he’d realize that he wanted her and only her. Or maybe he’d even figure out that she and the mystery woman were one and the same.

“You followed me into my bedroom, Clair. You’re claiming the right to worry. That gives me a few rights too. Like the right to make love to you all night long, whenever the mood strikes me.” His hands kept moving on her, caressing her back, her hips, her waist, stroking her, learning her in a way that had been forbidden before now. “In case you get antsy or horny,” he teased. He turned, took two steps and lowered them both to the bed, half covering her. In a near growl, he added, “Or if you just plain want me.”

“I always want you.” Clair closed her eyes as his fingers found her inner thighs. Her heart pounded. “Harris?”

“I smell like smoke,” he complained. With his mouth open and damp, he kissed her neck, her shoulder, leaving her skin tingling. “No matter how long I shower or how hard I scrub...”

“I don’t mind.” Clair pressed her nose to his throat and inhaled. She wondered if the fires affected him that way, made him feel like he couldn’t get away from the smoke, the damage. She nuzzled against him. “All I smell is you, Harris, and you smell delicious.”

“Yeah?” He chuckled, rising up to smooth her hair. With a smile barely perceptible in the dim room, he removed her glasses, stretching to put them on the nightstand. When he leaned back to her, he caught the hem of her shirt and tugged it up and over her head. His hand found her breast, gently shaped her, then he stilled. “Damn, Clair, I need a light.”

“No, not yet.” If he turned on the light, he might recognize her. She wanted the intimacy between them before she told him the truth. In the morning, she’d confess. But not yet, not before she had that special bond to cushion her admission.

Harris continued to caress her breast, toying with her nipple, making speech impossible. “Why not?”

*Why not? Why not?* She forced herself to concentrate, then murmured, “I’m shy?”

Slowly, with delicious precision, he tugged at her nipple. “You don’t sound certain, Clair.”

Oh Lord, how could he expect her to talk while he did that? “I just...I’d rather leave the lights off.”

Harris sat up beside her. “*I’d* rather see you. All of you.” Clair tried to protest, but before she’d even raised herself up on her elbows, a lamp came on, spilling light across the bed. Clair hurriedly turned her face away, her breath catching in dread.

The seconds ticked by in agonizing silence. Slowly, because she couldn’t bear it any longer, she turned back to Harris. He didn’t look the least bit exhausted now. His blue eyes were bright, his gaze piercing while he stared at her breasts. His dark hair fell across his brow; his muscles were tight, delineated. He got to his feet beside the mattress, his gaze still unwavering, and began stripping off his jeans. “Can you see me without your glasses?”

Clair bit her lip. “You’re a little fuzzy, but yes, I can see you.”

Slowly, he nodded. “Good.” His jeans got shoved down and off his hips, and he stepped out of them. Her eyes widened. She could see him, but she wished she still had her glasses on so she wouldn’t miss a single detail.

She started to sit up, to get closer to him, and he said, “Now you.”

Not yet! If he saw her tush, would he recognize her as the woman in the photo?

Clair tried to scuttle away, but that only amused Harris. He caught the hem of her shorts, and since they had a loose elastic waist, they came right off. Unfortunately, he took her panties with them, leaving her naked. “Harris!”

“Clair.” His voice was dark, intense. “You’re beautiful.”

He still didn’t recognize her? Clair couldn’t believe it. She should have been only relieved, but damn it, she was nettled too. The man had fawned all over those photos, studied them in detail, had them enhanced. But he didn’t see her as a sexy mystery woman, so he didn’t make the connection.

When Harris stretched out beside her, she flattened both hands against his chest, holding him away. He tried to kiss her, but Clair wasn’t having that. Not yet.

With dark menace, she demanded, “What about your mystery lady?”



# CHAPTER FIVE

**“WHAT MYSTERY LADY?”** Harris murmured with deliberate lack of concern. At this particular moment, he didn’t care about anyone else, not with Clair in his bed, ready for him, looking sweet and soft and as perfect as a woman could look. Ready to take the next step in binding their relationship, he pulled her hands away, leaned down and licked her tightened nipple.

Her back arched and her breath caught. “You know who I mean,” she panted. Her hands clenched on his shoulders, stinging in force. But still she persisted, saying hesitantly, “I, um, found the name of the guy who leased the place.”

With a long, exaggerated sigh, Harris dropped his forehead to her chest. “I don’t care, Clair.” He cupped her breast, thumbed her now wet nipple. “Can’t you see that I’m busy here?”

Clair tried to hold him back again. “You don’t care?”

She sounded so stunned, Harris grinned. “Honey, if you don’t shut up, how the hell can I make love to you?”

“But you said—” He sucked her nipple into his mouth, drawing on her, teasing with the tip of his tongue. *“Harris.”*

Her hips pressed up against his, seeking. He could feel the wild rapping of her heart. In a rough growl, Harris said, “I know I promised slow and easy, but honey, I’m not sure I can manage that this first time.”

“No.” She panted too, sounding every bit as affected. “I don’t want you to.”

Clair wasn’t a weak woman, and the way she gripped him now told Harris that she meant it, that she was as anxious as he felt. Unwilling to cheat her, to rush her too much, he switched to her other nipple at the same time his hand moved down her body, tickling her skin into a fever, over her ribs, her waist, her hip. She had a lush, full bottom, and her skin was silky soft, warm. He trailed his fingers over her sleek runner’s thighs, and smiled at the way she clenched them together.

Knowing how his words would affect her, he said, “Open your thighs for me, Clair. Let me touch you.”

Another moan bubbled up from deep in her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut, trembling from the anticipation, and slowly parted her legs.

Teasing her a bit, Harris traced around her pubic curls.

“Harris...”

He loved the way she said his name. Cupping her mound, he carefully stroked, opening her, then slid one finger in deep. She was hot, wet, and immediately her hips lifted, deepening his penetration.

Clair gasped—and opened her legs more.

Such an honest response, so typical of Clair. With his free arm, he pulled her closer to his chest, to his heart, while still stroking her, bringing her closer and closer to the edge.

“You’re the one who smells good, Clair,” he couldn’t help but tell her. “Sweet and soft. I love how you smell.” To emphasize that, he pressed his nose into her neck. He thought about what Ethan had said, about having a woman coddle him when he got home from a hard day fighting a fire. He wanted that woman to be Clair. He wanted her scent to cloak his body, instead of the scent of smoke. He wanted her to hold him, not any other woman. He wanted to come home to her every day and know that she was his, and only his.

The acknowledgment of his emotions pushed him over the edge. He needed to be inside her, soon. She was gasping, moving rhythmically against his hand, her skin radiating heat. But it wasn’t enough. Harris wanted her pleasure to be a foregone conclusion, because God knew once he got inside her, he wouldn’t last.

“You’ll like this,” he told her, and kissed her breasts again, sucking hard, nipping a little with his teeth.

She gasped, then gasped again when he kissed her ribs, gently bit her soft belly, and settled between her legs.

“Harris?”

“God, you smell good, Clair.” He pressed closer, inhaling the scent of her excitement, her femaleness. Using his thumbs, he parted her, sought her out with his tongue, and then closed his mouth hotly over her.

Her groan was long and satisfying, accompanied by a stiffening of her legs, the spontaneous lifting of her hips, a surge of new warmth. She whimpered, and in a breathless whisper, said, “Oh God.”

Harris pressed himself hard against the mattress, trying to curb the ache her pleasure created. He felt her straining, getting closer and closer, and he worked two fingers into her even as he continued to suckle her clitoris, working her with his tongue—and she came.

Her shout took him by surprise, and thrilled him. He locked one arm around her, holding her still as she shuddered and trembled and cried out. He could feel her squeezing his

fingers, feel the surge of wetness and heat. He loved eating Clair, and if he hadn't wanted her for so long, he could have started all over again.

But he had wanted her, whether he realized it or not. His feelings for her had made it easy to give up other women. Celibacy was much simpler when he wanted only Clair. But no more. He needed her. Now.

Harris realized his hands were shaking when he sat up and fumbled with the bedside drawer, seeking a condom. Clair didn't move. But he could hear her uneven, still-labored breathing, and he smiled.

He had the condom on in record time and then he turned, hooked her legs in his elbows, spread her wide—and surged into her.

She arched hard against him, crying out, sinking her nails into his shoulders. “Yeah,” Harris panted, blind with the lust and love, shaken with the fury of his feelings for her. “Come for me again, Clair.”

She did, almost too soon, because hearing her moan, feeling her inner muscles grip his cock, forced him to the finish line. She was wet and hot, open to him, letting him in deep, and he lost the battle. He closed his eyes and arched his neck and growled out his release, pumping hard, heaving.

Minutes later, when his heart slowed its frantic beat and he could think coherently again, Harris thought to tell her how he felt, to admit he loved her. He pushed back to see her face, smiled at the sight of her sound asleep, and carefully separated from her.

She mumbled, rolled to her side, and snuggled into his pillow. Harris looked her over again, smiling, but his vision still felt blurry and his heart felt too soft. He removed the condom, turned out the light, and spooned Clair. As he'd already known, she fit him perfectly.

His life, with Clair in it, was good. He hoped like hell she wanted to marry him, because no way would he give her up.

**HARRIS MADE LOVE** to her once again in the middle of the night, when she rolled to face him, and somehow her leg ended up over his waist and her breast was right there, close to his mouth—too tempting to resist. Though he was half-asleep and just going with the moment, he remembered to protect her—just barely. In the future, he'd have to keep a box of condoms on top of the nightstand, for easy access. Having Clair around and accessible would sorely test him, not that he'd complain.

The second time was slower, gentler, and they rocked together for a long time, kissing softly, cuddling, until Clair started to moan. The sound of her pleasure seemed to ignite him, and once again, he lost the battle with control.

After that, Harris didn't wake up again until he felt Clair leaving the bed. He'd seldom slept the whole night with a woman, but having Clair close was comfortable and comforting. As she slipped away, he protested with a groan and tried to pull her back.

She mumbled and swatted at him. "I have to go get ready for work, Harris."

He got one heavy eyelid open and found the clock. "It's early yet." *With plenty of time for some morning hanky-panky.* He glanced up at Clair, and got both eyes opened.

She was naked, with rumpled hair and sleep-soft eyes, but she'd already put on her glasses. She looked like a fetish come to life. His fetish. He wanted her. Again. Always.

But when he tried to reach for her, she laughed and stepped out of reach. "Down boy. I need a long hot shower."

Harris looked at her soft, sweet belly and murmured, "Shower with me."

"Oh no, not on your life. I know where that'd end up."

"Yeah," he agreed, more awake by the moment.

"Harris, I can't."

"Why?"

Her mouth went crooked in a silly grimace. "I'm a little sore."

Harris shoved into a sitting position. He couldn't help it; he smiled like a conquering warrior. "I was too energetic?" He tried to look at her face, but her body held all his attention. Clair naked was a surprise. A wonderful surprise. She was so damned sexy...

"It's just been a long time, that's all."

Harris looked at her hips, and frowned in thought. He'd never seen her nude body before, yet it all seemed somehow familiar. "I'll be more considerate in the future." *In the future.* He liked saying that.

Clair drew a long, steadying breath. "For the record, you can be as energetic as you want." And then, with a small smile, she added, "In the future."

Damn, he loved her. He patted the side of the bed. "We need to talk."

Worry darkened her eyes and she fretted, looking away from him. “I know.”

Why did the idea of talking make her so solemn? Harris didn’t like it that her smile had disappeared. He much preferred her teasing, so he decided to put off the talk until later. “It’ll wait.” And because he couldn’t be with her and not want her, he agreed to let her head home. “Go get your shower before I forget I’m a gentleman and drag you back into my bed.”

“I’ll...see you later?”

Did she have doubts about his intentions? Was that why she looked so burdened? He reached for her hand and laced his fingers with hers. “You’d have one hell of a time getting rid of me.”

Her grin returned, filling him with warmth. “Soon?”

Sooner than she expected, most likely. He’d head to her office first to remove Dane and Alec from the case. Mystery women no longer interested him.

“Absolutely.” But she’d hesitated too long. Harris left the bed to stand in front of her, pulled her close so he could feel her skin against him, and kissed her.

He’d meant it to be a perfunctory goodbye kiss, but her mouth was soft and warm and she smelled so good, he went a little out of control. Only the worry of causing her more discomfort kept him from making love to her again. Against her lips, he whispered, “Damn woman, I can only take so much provocation and you naked is pretty darn provoking. You better go now while I’m still willing to let you.”

Laughing, Clair snatched up her shorts and T-shirt and pulled them on. Harris watched, enjoying the easy familiarity. If he had his way—and he would—he’d be able to watch her dress every morning from now on.

Because he was ready to jump in the shower too, Harris didn’t bother to dress when he walked her to his front door. “After today, I’ll be off for a week. Will you stay with me?”

“For the whole week?”

Forever. But he’d get to that later. For now, he just wanted the immediate future confirmed. “Yeah. With me, in my apartment.” And in a lower, suggestive voice, he added, “In my bed.”

She went a little breathless on him, nodding in mute agreement. But two seconds later, she frowned. “I will—if you want me to.”

“I want you to.” But she didn’t look quite convinced. Was she afraid he’d get sidetracked with the woman in the photos again? Not a chance. Harris wanted to tell her that he loved

her and only her, but it'd be better to show her first. He could wait until he saw her at her work, when she'd witness him tearing up the photos.

Anticipating her reaction, Harris kissed her one last time, then gently urged her out the door. As soon as she left, he went to his window to keep watch. Moments after she entered her building, her lights came on, and right after that, he saw her wave. He smiled and dropped his curtain.

Soon she'd be living with him, and he wouldn't need to watch her go safely into her own place.

In less than an hour Harris had showered and was at her office. He'd pulled into the parking lot in time to see Dane and Alec entering the front doors. They had their wives with them. Both were blondes, both were attractive. *Well hell*, Harris thought. The presence of wives would make it difficult to discuss photos of a naked woman. He could have put it off till the women left, but he wanted everything taken care of before Clair arrived.

They were all in Dane's inner office when Harris got there. He went in, lighthearted and eager to get things underway. Maybe he'd even ask Clair to marry him after he tore up the pictures. He grinned, envisioning how that'd play out, what she might say.

Harris raised his fist to tap on the door frame, announcing himself. Almost at the same time, one of the women said, "Dane Carter! Why in the world do you have naked pictures of Clair on the wall?"

Naked pictures of *Clair*? Harris raised a brow, confused, mentally scoffing.

Dane choked. "It's not."

And the other woman said, "Well, of course it is." And then with some confusion, "You didn't know?"

Together, Dane and Alec barked, "*No.*"

"How could you not know?" one of them asked. "It looks like her."

"It's her shape," the other added. "Her long legs, her posture, her—"

The woman continued, but Harris wasn't listening. He shook his head in denial, even as the pieces began to click painfully into place. His heart pounded and his head throbbed.

The mystery woman wore no jewelry—because Clair didn't wear any. The mystery woman had longer hair—because Clair had recently cut hers.

The mystery woman had a lush derriere—*just like Clair's*.

He remembered Clair's near hysterical reaction to seeing the photos enlarged, how she'd hidden her head on the desk when he and Dane discussed the mystery woman's posterior.

And he remembered those notes, so full of emotion and love, which meant the woman had to know him, and *not* from afar.

The wives had seen what he hadn't. Until now.

Dane's office was eerily silent as Harris stepped inside. Numb, a little unsteady on his feet, he barked, "Get them down. Now."

Alec, not one to take orders, was already doing just that. He moved faster than Harris could have, given his present state of mind.

Harris drew a slow breath, but it didn't help. He was aware of Dane watching him in appalled consternation, Alec grumbling and scowling. Hell, it almost looked as if Alec was blushing. The wives were silent.

And behind them all, Clair strolled in whistling.

Everyone turned to face the doorway in various stages of disbelief and anxiety.

Clair saw them all congregated together, watching her—and her whistling died a quick death. She took in all the expressions of shock, alarm and dismay, and she stalled. "Um...what's going on?"

Dane and Alec began to sputter and cough, and now they were both red-faced. The wives looked worried, casting Clair looks of sympathy. Dane's wife even scooted closer to him. "Dane?"

Dane said, "Shh," then bent to whisper in her ear, most likely explaining the inexplicable. His wife's eyes widened and she darted a fascinated glance between Harris and Clair.

Harris just stared at Clair, trying to take it all in, trying to accept that he'd passed around naked pictures of the woman he loved. Dane and Alec had seen her. Ethan had seen her.

Not once had she let on.

Alec, his hands full of photos, shoved them against Harris's chest, saying, "Here." Then he grabbed his wife and fled the office. Dane quickly followed, stopping to clap Harris on the shoulder in commiseration while avoiding Clair's gaze.

Dane pulled the door shut behind him with a finality that hung in the air like nuclear fallout.

They stared at each other until Clair, her face white, groped for a chair. “You know, don’t you?”

The photos got wadded in his fist. His stomach cramped. Through his teeth, Harris snarled, “Why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

Without answering, she dropped her head and shrugged.

Feeling savage, Harris paced a circle around her. “Jesus.” Then, leaning close to her nose, he said, “*I let Dane, Alec, and Ethan see.*”

Her mouth firmed. “And you carried one photo in your pocket. I know.” Curling her lip, she added, “You were smitten, Dane said. And Alec claimed you were totally obsessed.”

“With *you*, Clair, if you’d only have admitted it before I...” He shuddered with the awfulness of it. “Before I showed them to other men.”

Outrage brought Clair to her feet, to her very tiptoes. “How was I supposed to know you’d do that? But once you did, what would be the point in confessing? It was too late to take it back.”

He waved a shot of her behind in her face. “It wasn’t too late to keep from having them enlarged!”

She slapped the photo aside. “So you’re a pervert! I didn’t know that either.”

Dane tapped on the door before pushing it open. He stared fixedly at Harris. “Um, we can hear you, and in fact, with the way you’re both roaring, most of the people in the building probably can. If you want to tone it down just a little, that’d be good.” He cleared his throat, dared a flash peek at Clair. “Uh, Clair? You can have the day off.” He snapped the door shut again.

Harris strangled on his anger.

Clair didn’t seem to even hear Dane. Somehow, she managed to get her nose even with Harris’s. Her hot, angry breath pelted his face with each word. “Why didn’t you know it was me, Harris? How could you *not* know? We see each other every damn night.” Harris backed up—and Clair followed. “We’ve been friends a long time, close friends, and yet you never once considered it might be me. So tell me, why would I confess to you when you were never interested in me?”

The shock was slowly wearing off, and Harris began to see things clearly again. Clair wasn’t embarrassed—at least, not that he could tell. And she wasn’t exactly apologizing for duping him, either. No, she was royally pissed off.



And she accused him of not being interested? Now that was just plain wrong. He stopped retreating and leaned into her anger. “Since when am I not interested?”

She slugged him. Her small fist thumped hard against his pec and, damn it, it hurt. “I don’t mean to jog, you moron. I mean for more. For *everything*.”

Harris narrowed his eyes. “I was interested enough last night. Twice, as I recall. You could have told me then.”

Alec’s loud whistling could be heard.

“I was going to tell you today.” And then, in a smaller voice, she murmured, “After I got those stupid pictures off the wall.”

“They’re off now.” Harris slapped the crumpled photos onto the desk behind him—facedown so no one could see them. He tried to get himself under control. Most of his reaction was due to jealousy. He couldn’t believe he’d studied her naked ass, in detail, with Dane and Alec. “You told me your boyfriend was nobody. If that’s so, why’d you let him take naked pictures—”

She slugged him again, aghast and appalled and wide-eyed. “I didn’t *let* him.” She swallowed and her eyes looked a little glassy, her bottom lip trembling. “Do you know me at all, Harris?”

She sounded so forlorn, it about ripped him apart. “If you didn’t let him, then how did he...get...” Fury erupted, black and mean and sharp-edged. His jaw set, his teeth locked. “That son of a bitch.”

Clair looked resigned. “He has a tiny little spy camera. I didn’t even know he was looking at me, much less that he was photographing me. I never would have allowed that. I was only with him for a little while, because...” She stared up at him, solemn and sad. “He wasn’t you.”

Harris’s eye twitched. His lips felt stiff. “I’ll kill him.”

Clair held her breath, then said, “Why?”

“*Why?*” Harris caught her shoulders and brought her eye level. “I love you, damn it. No way in hell am I going to let some bastard—”

“You love me?”

He gave her shoulders a gentle shake. “What the hell did you think?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes were round behind her glasses, filled with hope. “You didn’t recognize me. Even after last night, you didn’t recognize me.”

Harris couldn't believe she was hung up on that. "I looked at those pictures with totally detached lust. It was a naked woman, period. How I looked at them is entirely different from how I looked at you."

"How'd you look at me?"

He pulled her closer. Took a deep breath. "With lust, for sure. God knows, Clair, you make me hot. But with so many other feelings, too—love, tenderness." He hesitated and then added, "Need."

"You need me?"

Harris hauled her into his arms. "I love you so damn much I almost can't think straight, so of course I need you. You make me laugh, and you make me feel easy, sort of rested. Like I've found the perfect place to be. With you."

She smiled up at him, laughing a little, weeping a little. "I love you too."

Finally hearing her say it relaxed something inside him, something he hadn't realized was tense until she fully accepted him. "That's a relief." He released her and rubbed his hands together. "Now if we can just figure out where this ex-boyfriend of yours is, I'll go have a talk with him. Then everything will be perfect."

Dane again tapped on the door before opening it. Alec was beside him. "Give us his name, Clair. We'll handle it."

Clair bit her lip. "I don't know...."

"He could have negatives still," Alec pointed out.

"Or more shots," Dane added.

Harris watched her face flush with anger, saw her hands curl into tight fists. "*I'll* go talk to him—"

Harris pulled her around in a bear hug. "Forget that idea. I don't want you anywhere near the creep."

Dane's eyes narrowed. "You shouldn't go near him either, Harris. You just want to take him apart."

"Damn right."

Alec raised a brow. "Hitting him would only get you in trouble. Whereas we can likely prove what an unscrupulous jerk he is."

“How?” Harris demanded.

“If he did this to Clair,” Dane explained, “then he’s likely done it to other women, too. All we need is the evidence, and hey, gathering evidence is what we do.”

“Then we can have criminal charges filed against him—and neither Clair nor her photos will have to be involved.”

It didn’t feel right to Harris, letting Dane and Alec take care of the matter. Clair was his, and he felt so damn protective. He needed to punch the guy at least once. Hell, he wanted to break his nose. But he definitely didn’t want Clair involved.

“Think of it as a wedding present,” Alec urged him.

At the mention of a wedding, Clair pushed away from Harris with a gasp. He hauled her right back again. “We are getting married, Clair.”

Her brows snapped down and she looked at him over her glasses. “Since when?”

“Since I just told you I love you and you told me you love me too.”

Angel Carter, Dane’s wife, grinned. “Sounds reasonable to me, Clair.”

Celia Sharpe nodded. “Let Alec go get this awful man, and you and Harris just concentrate on wedding plans.”

Clair still looked mutinous. “I expected a proper wedding proposal.”

“Everyone in this room has seen you in the buff, Clair. Hell, Dane and Alec were looking at your photos with a magnifying glass, trying to spot details. They were—”

“I’ll marry you.”

Harris grinned at her burning face and the rushed way she’d interrupted him. But now the wives were scowling at their husbands too, and the husbands looked ready to hang him. Harris laughed. “Sorry. All’s fair in love and war.”

Dane caught his wife’s hand. “Let’s go before Clair starts shedding blood and gets my office all messy.”

Alec threw his arm around Celia. “Wait for us.”

They were gone in moments, leaving Clair and Harris alone. With everything in place, Harris relaxed. “Ethan and Riley are going to be damned pleased, but Buck will have a fit.”

“Buck is one of your friends, right?”

“Yeah, soon to be my only single close friend. He won’t like it that I’ve jumped ship too.”

“So he should get married.”

“He claims he’s married to his lumberyard.”

Clair rolled her eyes. “Some guys just like the bachelor life, I guess.”

“No.” Harris tipped up her chin. “Some guys just haven’t met the right woman yet. Which is why I have to get you tied to me. I may not have recognized you in the photos, but I definitely recognize you as the perfect woman—for me.”

“**CAN WE ESCAPE, NOW**, do you think?”

Clair smiled at Harris. Because they’d both wanted a small, simple wedding with only close friends and family, they’d been able to organize it all in just under three weeks.

Harris had been very impatient the entire time. The rehearsal dinner had lasted hours, filled with good food and a lot of laughter. Her family loved Harris, and vice versa. Ethan and Riley were beyond pleased, and Buck wasn’t too disgruntled. In fact, he seemed to be wallowing in the fact that he was the only single one in the bunch.

Dane and Alec were finally able to look at Clair again without turning red, but they were still more hesitant with her. For her part, she doubted she’d ever be able to face them again without blushing.

“I think we can leave now.” Clair scooted closer to him. “You have big plans?”

“Yeah.” Harris nuzzled her neck. “Plans to have my way with my soon-to-be-bride.”

She sighed, now as anxious as he was to be alone. They made an announcement, put up with a few more toasts, and finally headed out the door.

In the parking lot, however, Celia Sharpe and Angel Carter chased them down. Celia carried a large package and Angel had a manila envelope.

“We’ve been elected to do the honors,” Celia explained when they reached them.

“The men are still shy about that whole photograph thing,” Angel added with a shrug. “They say you’re too valuable to the office to replace you, but no way can they discuss this with you.”

Harris put his arm around Clair and smiled. “Discuss what?”

Angel presented the envelope with a flourish. “They located that ex-boyfriend of yours. They found these.”

Clair went blank. “Ohmigod.”

Beside her, Harris stiffened in anger. “Damn it. I should have—”

“Dane did that for you. Punched him right in the nose.” Angel seemed to relish the retelling. “And he did it in such a way that he wasn’t the one who started it. If I know Dane, he goaded the guy into taking a swing first.”

Celia nodded. “Then *pow*, Dane laid him out.” She laughed. “Alec thought it was great.”

Clair bit her lip. “If they found more photos...”

“Not to worry,” Celia rushed out. “They went over his place with a fine-tooth comb. There wasn’t much that pertained to you. Just a few souvenirs, apparently.”

Clair closed her eyes in mortification, then felt Harris hug her to his side.

“It’s all right now, Clair.”

“It really is,” Angel assured her. “He’d done the same with two other women, one that he was still dating. Dane and Alec clued them in, and they confronted the jerk, even ransacked his place until they found some of the photos themselves. They both agreed to prosecute, so he’ll be taken care of for sure.”

Clair pulled herself together. It was over and she had her whole life ahead of her—a life with Harris. “Please, tell Dane and Alec how much I appreciate it.”

“You also get this,” Celia said with a grin. “It’s a paper shredder. Alec said the photos belonged to you, and you could do whatever you wanted with them. But he said he figured you’d want to shred them.”

“He figured right!”

Harris snatched the envelope out of her hand. “We’ll definitely do that.” He leaned toward Angel for a hug, then to Celia for the same. He held the bulky box under one arm, the envelope in his free hand. “Thank you, ladies. Knowing that situation is settled is the very best wedding present.”

Celia and Angel left them with smiles. The moment they were gone, Harris opened the envelope and started to peek inside.

Clair snatched it away and held it behind her back. “Oh no you don’t.”

Trying to look innocent, and failing, Harris said, “I just wanted to see—”

“I know what you wanted to see. But these are getting destroyed the moment we get home. You’ve seen all the nude photos of me that you’re ever going to see.”

Harris grinned, and the grin spread into a laugh. “All right, babe,” he soothed. “Don’t get all bristly on me.” He turned her toward the car.

Clair didn’t understand his new mood and thought to soften her denial. “I’m sorry, Harris. I hope you can understand how I feel.”

“Yeah, I do.” After she was seated, he leaned in the door and kissed her. “I was just teasing you. It doesn’t matter to me at all.”

“You’re sure?”

He took her mouth in a long, satisfying kiss. “Positive. After all, what do I need with photos when I’ve got the real thing?”