

Nica's got a new look, and an attitude to match. Logan doesn't stand a chance...

Nica Morelli is through wasting time mooning over Logan Donovan from afar. It's time to make him see her as more than his tomboyish, honorary little sister. Now, armed to the teeth with a sexy makeover, Nica's kicking butt in four-inch heels and taking no prisoners.

One minute Logan's enjoying a beer at the bar. The next, he's mesmerized by the finest butt he's ever laid eyes on. It shimmies, it shakes. It makes him want to do all kinds of wicked things to it. Then he realizes who the butt belongs to—his best friend's little sister. No matter how badly he wants the tasty bait she's dangling in front of him, she's forbidden fruit.

Except now that she's got him turned on, tied up in knots, and swimming in intense emotion, what's he supposed to do? Fall in love? Not in a million years...

Warning: This book contains hot 'n steamy graphic sex brought about by the flagrant use of seduction, near-nakedness and lavish amounts of tempting, teasing and tequila.

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# Brazen or Bust

Anara Bella

### Dedication

To my mother, who taught me the important things in life. I miss you, Mom.

To my good friend and critique partner, Cat, without whom this book would never have been finished.

To my editor, Heidi, who works tirelessly to bring out the best in my books. Thank you so much for all you do.

#### Chapter One

"Is that really me?"

Nica turned this way and that, checking herself out from every angle. But no matter how much she looked, she still couldn't take in her unbelievable transformation.

Her best friend, Carmen, stepped into view in the three-way mirror. "You'd better believe it."

Nica shook her head. "This just doesn't seem real. I feel like I've been taken over by aliens or something."

That had to be it. How else could Nica explain the fact that she didn't recognize herself? Or that she'd gone ahead and made this drastic change to her appearance in the first place.

Voluntarily.

She who had always shied away from change whenever possible. The fact that she'd had the guts to go through with a makeover this time was shocking enough, but who would've thought she'd turn out looking like this. Hell, she actually looked sexy.

Sexy of all things. Imagine that.

Carmen grinned like a Cheshire cat. "If you've been taken over by aliens then I want to be taken over too. You look fabulous."

And amazingly she really did. It was just so unexpected. Her past attempts to change her looks could only be called resounding failures. Mind you, she was sixteen the last time she'd done any experimenting. But she still shuddered whenever she remembered the fluorescent-blue eye shadow, the bad bleach job, and who could ever forget the nightmare perm fiasco that had frizzed her hair out to impossible proportions. She'd ended up looking like a souped-up poodle on steroids. It'd almost been enough to turn her off ever trying it again.

But try it again she had. Thanks to Carmen's nagging and her heartfelt promise that everything would turn out great this time because she would help. Thank God, she'd known what she was doing. Carmen, the ultimate fashionista, had steered Nica in the right direction.

At last.

Maybe, just maybe, this would make Logan notice her. Logan—the dark-haired hunk who'd grabbed a hold of her heart when she was still a teenager and had never let go. He was the only man who made her want to take chances. It was his continued indifference that had prodded her to stiffen her backbone and change the direction of her life.

But who would have believed a simple haircut, some make-up and new clothes could bring about this miraculous transformation to her appearance.

Nica continued to stare in wonder at her radically altered reflection. She shook her head back and forth, enjoying the feel of her fiery-red hair swinging freely about her face instead of being confined in its usual ponytail. Its carefree vitality invigorated her. And the new color did fabulous things for her skin and eyes. Hell, her eyes looked downright exotic. More blue, more dazzling, just plain *more*. As for her lips, all she could say was wow. That was some amazing lipstick the make-up artist had used because she now had full, downright sexy-looking lips.

She couldn't take in all the changes. Especially the transformation from the neck down. The new body-hugging clothes she wore made her look as if she had a figure. She, Nicola Francesca Morelli, described by one and all as slim and boyish, *actually* had a figure.

Fancy that.

"I'm telling you, you look amazing."

Nica tore her gaze away from herself and took in the huge grin of satisfaction on Carmen's face. "I really do, don't I? I can't believe it."

"I can. Why do you think I've been after you all these years to do something with yourself? I always knew the potential was there hidden under your indifference. Hell, after all this time your sexy side must have been screaming to get out."

What could Nica say? Carmen was right. It was past time she stepped out of her comfort zone and did this.

Way past time.

In her defense, it wasn't easy being the only girl in a family with three boys. Her brothers had always treated her like one of them, which no doubt contributed to her being a tomboy all her life. Working in the family construction business didn't help either. Although she worked in the office, it was on-site, so her daily uniform consisted of baggy jeans and even baggier T-shirts with the ultra-attractive addition of a hard hat.

She'd never felt the need to be feminine and it didn't help that the whole girlie thing had always eluded her. Whenever she'd tried to break out of the tomboy mold in the past she'd always felt just plain ridiculous.

If only she'd known Carmen when she was sixteen, because this time was way different. This time she'd been talked into going to the beauty salon Carmen frequented, with insistent claims that Enrico was a genius with hair. Carmen wasn't wrong. Yep, going to a proven professional made all the difference. With the hair and especially with the make-up. Letting Carmen pick out her new clothes was the *pièce de résistance*.

She looked different. She felt different. As crazy as it sounded, she *was* different. And not just on the outside.

Her twenty-fifth birthday had been the impetus. The thunderbolt moment when she'd realized time was marching on, and if she didn't do something soon Logan would be snapped up by someone else. That instant of clarity changed something in her. Forced her out of her state of inertia and brought her to this very moment.

"I honestly didn't think I could ever look like this, no matter what I did. And yes—" Nica quickly inserted, "—I know you've been telling me to do this for years."

Carmen, looking very pleased with herself, laughed. "As long as you admit I was right for nagging, I'm happy."

Nica ran her fingers across her new wispy bangs. "Do you think Logan will like the new me? I mean, really like me."

"Honey, if he doesn't then we'll shove him in the nearest hole and bury him 'cause it'll mean he's dead."

Nica turned from the mirror and fingered the sleeve of the jacket Carmen was holding. "I wish I had your confidence. It's going to take more than just looks to get Logan's attention. He thinks of me as his honorary kid sister. I'm going to have to pull out all the stops to get him to see me as a woman. Do you think I can pull it off?"

Carmen turned thoughtful, and Nica knew she had doubts as well. "I know you're a bit awkward around men you're attracted to—"

"A bit awkward? Talk about an understatement."

Talking over Nica, Carmen continued, "—and flirting doesn't come naturally to you—"

"I think it's safe to call what I do idiotic babbling."

"—but you can do this, Nica. I know you can. It just takes some practice."

Could she do this? Did she want Logan enough to make a fool of herself? She closed her eyes and pictured Logan's sea green eyes twinkling with laughter. The dimple in his chin that kept his strong features from looking harsh. She'd lost count of the times she'd wanted to taste that dimple. Just thinking about him made her heart race.

No way around it, she wanted the man more than she wanted just about anything else. And for the first time in a long time she was willing to take a chance and go after him. "I'm in. Where do we start?"

Carmen tapped her fingernail on her teeth. "I'm not quite sure. You know, I think I'm too hungry to think." She shoved Nica back into the change room overflowing with a wide assortment of pants, tops and dresses. "Finish trying on the clothes I've picked out. Then we'll go eat and figure out your next move."

Nica laughed. "You don't have to force me. I can't wait to see how this stuff looks on me."

And shockingly, it was true. Up to now she'd always avoided shopping whenever possible. She'd never experimented, always chosen comfort over style. She never even tried anything on. Just held it up to her body to see if it would fit. If it looked big enough she bought it. Probably the reason nothing ever fit her right.

But Carmen had changed all that. She'd been telling Nica for years she could look better if she wore the right clothes. Obviously, she was right. Nica sighed. She'd never hear the end of this. But if her new look turned Logan's head it would all be worth it.

Nica took a huge bite out of her burger and chewed in blissful satisfaction. "I didn't realize how hungry I was."

Carmen daintily bit into a fry and grinned. "You're always hungry."

"Not always." Nica stopped chewing for a moment and then returned her grin. "Okay, most of the time I am, but today I was so excited I didn't think I'd be able to eat at all."

Carmen took another bite of her fry. "It's tough work turning yourself into a guy magnet."

Nica sat back in the booth. "I'm hardly that. You know when I was a kid I thought if I could just put on a bit of weight maybe my boobs would grow."

Carmen laughed and waved the half-eaten fry at Nica. "Big boobs aren't all they're cracked up to be. It took me a long time to stop being self-conscious of mine. And it doesn't always get you the kind of attention you want. Guys often think women with big boobs are easy."

Nica sighed. "Just once I'd like to have that problem."

"That's what *you* think. You have no idea what it's like to have a guy hold an entire conversation with your chest. Certainly not my idea of a dream date." Carmen finished off another fry and sat back in the booth. "A guy thinking you're sexy is one thing. A guy thinking you're just a great set of tits is another. Besides, there's nothing wrong with your figure. Once Logan gets a glimpse of the new you he'll be blown away."

Nica frowned as something occurred to her. "Right up until the moment he realizes it's still just me. I know I *feel* different, but my basic personality hasn't changed. Not really."

"Thank God for that."

Nica glanced around the mall's busy food court searching for the right words to get her point across. "What I mean is, I'm not the sex-kitten type. I'm not the kind of woman who mesmerizes men. I'm kind of boring."

Carmen scoffed. "No, you're not."

"I'm definitely not a sexy femme fatale. This makeover is like putting tinsel on a Christmas tree. I'm still just a plain old tree underneath all the brand new glitter."

"Yeah, but trees are beautiful all on their own. The glitter just attracts attention. Makes them festive and unique."

Nica wrinkled her nose. "But once I nab his attention, then what?"

Carmen sprinkled more salt on her fries, getting more on the table than on her food. "Once you've got a man's attention you have to keep it based on who you really are. Otherwise they won't stick around." She put down the saltshaker with a thud. "And why the heck are we talking about Christmas trees in July?"

Nica shrugged. "I'm sitting here trying to figure out what a man like Logan would want with someone like me, makeover or not."

Carmen leaned forward and looked her straight in the eye. "You want Logan, don't you?"

Did she even have to ask? "Yes."

"Then you need to get over this insecurity of yours. You've been wasting years just sitting around dreaming about this guy. You owe it to yourself to at least try to get him. Think of love as a battle field. See the hill, take the hill."

Nica broke eye contact and drew idle circles through the spilled salt on the table, her mind racing with a myriad of renewed doubts and worries. "I don't know if I can pull it off."

"You'll never know unless you try." Carmen reached over and stopped Nica's hand, making her look up again. "Twenty years from now, do you really want to look back and wonder what could have been if you'd just made the effort? You're a smart, funny, good-looking woman. Why wouldn't any man go gaga over you? Cut yourself some slack, Nica. It's time you took some risks. Do you want the hunk or not? Because if not, there's no shortage of women who'd like a shot at Logan."

Carmen was right, of course. Nica was tired of pining for Logan. The truth was, she already regretted the time she'd wasted. How much worse would she feel if she didn't follow through after making it this far? How would she feel if Logan found someone and settled down and she hadn't even tried to get him for herself?

Nica tossed her a playful salute. "Okay, general. What's next?"

"I think we need to take you out for a test run."

"A test run?"

"Yeah, we need to go to a bar. Throw you into a mass of men and see how you react to the attention."

A spike of fear shot up her spine. "A bar full of guys? You can't be serious. I turn into a stammering idiot whenever I try to flirt."

Carmen nodded. "Exactly. So what's better than practicing on a bunch of random men?"

She had a point. "I'm with you in theory, but I haven't got a clue how to do this."

"It's very simple really. You need to be bolder. More brazen. Pull out all the stops and flaunt your inner vixen for all it's worth."

Oh God. Could she do that? "I don't know if I have an inner vixen."

"Of course you do. Every woman does. You just haven't tapped into yours yet."

Well, that was obvious. "No kidding."

Carmen sat back, the wheels turning in her head practically visible. "You know, maybe what you need to do is pretend you're someone else. Someone sexy and confident, like Angelina Jolie. Don't think what *you* would do or say, think what Angelina would do or say."

Nica stopped short, realizing that wasn't a bad idea at all. It was certainly worth a shot. Maybe pretending to be someone else would make her feel less like an idiot. And what would it matter? Even if she made a fool of herself she'd never see any of those guys again.

Feeling nervous but surprisingly excited by the idea, Nica leaned in close. "You're right. I need a new attitude to go with my new look. It's time to pull out all the stops."

"That's the spirit. Go, Nica."

Nica laughed, feeling exhilarated, energized and ready for action. "Yeah. I'm going to go for it. No half-measures. No false starts. No stopping until I've done what I set out to do. Here I come, Logan Donovan. I'm going all the way. Brazen or bust."

#### Chapter Two

That there was one mighty fine piece of prime real estate. Bar none, the sweetest ass he'd ever seen.

Logan watched in mesmerized fascination as the mouth-watering backside in question shimmied and undulated to the heavy beat of the dance music blaring through the bar's sound system. He'd always been an ass man and that one right there was enough to make a grown man cry.

It was a pure bonus that she had red hair. He *loved* fiery redheads.

He didn't recognize this one though. She had to be a newcomer because he never would have missed spotting her before this. No way. Not with that ass, or with how often he came to PJ's Bar.

He took a swig of his beer. Without taking his eyes off the visual feast before him, he absently enjoyed the slightly bitter taste of the cold brew as it trickled past his tongue and cooled his throat.

He was trying to get a good look at Red's face, but with the flickering lights and strobes he hadn't had much success. But that first-class ass was enough to make him want to get to know her better anyway. A *lot* better.

The music finally switched to a slow tune. That was his cue. Time to make his move.

Putting down his beer, he stood and then made his way over to his quarry. Her current dance partner put his arms around her and pulled her into his embrace, settling in to enjoy holding her close for the dance. But that didn't deter Logan.

He tapped the guy on the shoulder. "I'm cutting in."

Without looking up, the guy snarled at Logan to get lost, but he wasn't put off. He tapped him again. "I guess you didn't hear me. It's my turn."

The guy pulled back, and shot Logan a look meant to intimidate and chase him off. It might have worked too, except the moment the guy caught sight of Logan, his eyes widened, he dropped his arms and quickly backed away from the girl. "Okay, sure thing. No problem."

Logan hid a smile. He was used to this kind of reaction. He was a big guy. Taller than most, not to mention the fact that he worked out. People were often intimated by his size, and he wasn't averse to using it to his advantage.

Logan nodded. "Thanks."

With the testosterone war over, Logan could finally direct his attention to the tasty female treat in front of him. "Name's Logan. And you are?"

With frustration, he realized even though he was now facing the woman of his dreams, he still couldn't get a good look at her. Not with her standing there with her hand clapped over her mouth as if she was in shock or something.

Fighting the urge to make sure he hadn't left his fly open, he tried smiling to put her at ease. This was a damned strange reaction. He was a decent-looking guy but he'd never affected a woman like this.

He tried again. "I'm Logan. And you are..."

She blinked a couple of times before finally dropping her hand. "Logan."

Her name is Logan?

And then he realized there was something very familiar about this woman. He looked closer. He knew her. Sort of. Didn't he? He scanned her face again. He did know her. But something was different. So different he couldn't quite place her.

All of a sudden the penny dropped.

Holy shit! It's... "Nica. I didn't recognize you. What happened to you?" Okay, that didn't come out right. "I mean, you look different."

*That* was an understatement.

He looked her up and down, still not quite believing his eyes. Could this really be his best friend's kid sister? Hell, she was as good as *his* kid sister. He'd watched her grow up and he'd never seen any sign that this little siren lay hidden beneath the shapeless clothes she usually wore.

Nica blushed. For a moment she looked flustered, but then something in her expression changed. Almost seemed to firm up. She smiled and started to preen. "I do, don't I." She peeped up at him. "Do you like it?"

*Hell yeah.* He'd be mortified if he liked it any better. Shit, the fantasies he'd been running through his head before he knew it was her were more than a little X-rated.

Completely thrown by both the shock of finding out the woman he'd just been lusting after was Nica and... Well, there was no and. That was enough. More than enough.

Disappointment speared through him as it sank in this was Nica and he'd just been wondering how he could get into her pants. "Uh...you look great."

She smiled coquettishly. "Thanks."

"What brought on the dramatic change?"

She shrugged and he noticed how the movement did interesting things to her breasts.

"Oh, I just thought it was time to do something different."

She was different all right. And he wasn't at all sure it was for the better. He glared at several guys who were staring at her, not liking the speculative look in their eyes. "I can see that."

She blushed and looked down, then seemed to come to some decision. He watched fascinated as she tossed her head back and straightened her shoulders. "I'm still trying to get used to it myself."

Was this the same girl he'd watched grow up from a plain child? Just yesterday she'd been the same old Nica. Reliable. Trustworthy. People like her didn't change overnight. What had happened to cause this radical transformation? Because it was for damn sure something had.

"What's this really all about, Nica? You're not the type to do something so drastic."

Her eyes flashed sizzling blue fire at him. "How would you know what type I am?"

That struck a nerve. "I've known you since we were kids. I think I know you pretty well."

She looked him right in the eyes, and he saw a flash of temper there he'd never noticed before.

"You don't know squat about me. Not the real me inside. You just think you know me."

He took in her flushed cheeks and flashing eyes, her stance screaming her readiness to take him on. Maybe she was right. He certainly didn't recognize the spitfire in front of him right now.

Taking in her sparkling eyes and heaving chest, he fought back a grin. Damned if he didn't like her this way too.

The grin finally won out.

She scowled and planted her fists on her hips. "Don't you laugh at me, Logan Donovan."

Oh look. She's even trying to look tough.

It was too much. He burst out laughing. "I can't help it. You're just so damn cute like this. I think I'm going to like the new you." *Maybe a little too much*.

Just like that her anger dissipated. "Really?"

"It'll take some getting used to, but yeah."

The smile she graced him with was like sunshine breaking through storm clouds. It lit up her entire face and accentuated the beauty he'd never noticed before. Had it always been there and he'd just not seen it?

"Thanks."

Still busy trying to take in the radical change, he jumped when she put her hands on his shoulders. "What are you doing?"

Looking confused, she said, "I thought you wanted to dance with me."

Shit. He'd forgotten that was why he'd come over here. If he tried to back out now it would hurt her feelings. "Oh right. Of course."

Smooth, Logan. Real smooth. He all but rolled his eyes at himself.

Feeling more than a little awkward and probably looking worse, he hesitated while trying to decide what to do. He knew he should put his hands on her waist, but the fact that he wanted to so much sort of made him feel like a perv.

She was practically his little sister for crying out loud. Okay, so she wasn't, but he'd always viewed her that way. Until now.

Damn it. He couldn't believe this was Nica. And that she looked so fucking hot.

He shook the thought out of his head, told himself to snap out of it, reached over and put his hands on her waist. There, that wasn't so hard. At least not yet. He strove to keep as much distance between their bodies as he could manage without looking too obvious.

Nica had ideas of her own though, because the next thing he knew she'd draped her arms over his shoulders and clasped her hands behind his neck. In the process she'd pressed her sweet breasts up against his chest until their bodies were so flush against each other a microbe couldn't have squeezed in if its survival depended on it.

His groin started to tingle.

Shit.

Could this get any worse? She smelled fantastic and felt even better. Now what the hell was he supposed to do?

She started moving to the beat of the music and whoo-boy, that wasn't helping to calm his dick down any. What it did manage to do was cause a friction that would incinerate his brain if he didn't do something to stop it soon.

With no other option, he started swaying to the music too. At least this way the friction thing had stopped. Problem was now her whole body was pressed up against his from breasts to pelvis. And they were moving. Together. In synch.

Holy hell. That tingling in his groin was getting worse. What the hell was he going to do? His cock was getting harder by the second and just thinking about the fact that it shouldn't be happening only made it worse.

He needed to think about something other than the fact that her soft, sweet body was mashed up against his like a sheet of paper on a telephone pole during a tornado.

He needed to think about something mundane. Like baseball. Or work. Or multiplication tables.

Anything other than how great she felt in his arms, pressed up against him. Her head resting on his shoulder. Soft hair tickling his chin. Fingers running through the hair on his nape.

Her luscious ass was so close to his greedy fingers. All he had to do was let them drop a few scant inches to be able to feel it in all its sexy glory. Full, firm, just ripe for his hands. The skin there would be so soft. So smooth. So kissable.

*Shit.* Why was he tormenting himself like this? She was totally off-limits. He *so* could not go there, no matter how much he wanted to. If he could just convince his cock of that.

Nica sighed and snuggled even closer, making him even more aware of every inch of her lithe body. God, this was pure torture.

She looked up at him, her eyes hypnotic pools sucking him in. Their gazes locked, awareness and longing flashed between them, silently beckoning the forbidden. The air crackled with the pent-up energy

flowing between them. Her slumberous eyes dropped to his mouth, causing his gaze to drop to hers, making him yearn to answer the siren call of her lips.

Unbidden, he leaned closer as she stretched up until their lips almost touched. So close, her sweet breath wafted across his lips. He wanted to kiss her so badly he could taste her already.

But this was wrong. Beyond wrong. What the hell was he thinking?

He snapped his head back. Shit. He'd almost kissed Nica.

With fearsome determination, he put her away from him and stepped back.

She blinked and shook her head, looking baffled by his out-of-left-field retreat. "What's wrong?"

He raked his hands through his hair to keep from reaching for her. All he wanted was to pull her back into his arms and kiss her senseless. Instead he concentrated on not pulling out his hair. Because agitation over his inappropriate thoughts was quickly driving him to do just that. "Nothing."

He looked away from her hurt expression, pained that he'd been the one to put it there. He glommed onto the first excuse he could think of to put more distance between them and get them back on familiar footing.

Logan nodded towards her brother standing by the table he'd been sitting at before this catastrophe of a dance had happened. "Tony's looking for me. I'd better find out what he wants."

"Mind if I tag along? I haven't shown Tony my new look."

"I'm sure he'll be appropriately blown away." I sure as hell was.

He made sure to lead the way because he really didn't need the enticement of her delectable ass swaying in front of him like a red flag to a bull. A very horny bull with very little self-control.

As they got closer, he shouted out to Tony, "Hey, I wondered where you'd gotten to."

Tony turned an assessing eye towards Nica. "Who's the lovely lady?"

Nica giggled and made an adorable pose. "Hey, big brother."

Tony blinked. "Nica? Good God, I didn't recognize you."

She tipped her head to the side as if considering what he'd said. "You know, everyone keeps saying that. I'm beginning to wonder if that's good or bad."

"Come on. You're my baby sis. You always look good to me no matter what."

Nica laughed. "That's not much of an answer."

He threw his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "Of course you look good. You look great. I guess Carmen finally got her way and talked you into that makeover she's been after you about."

Her gaze shot to his. "You knew about that?"

"Are you kidding? She's been bugging me to get after you too. But I told her you'd do it when you were ready." He shook his head in wonder. "I guess you were ready."

She smiled up at her brother. "I guess I was."

Logan watched their exchange, shocked that Tony was taking Nica's altered appearance in stride. Was he the only one who saw the dangers? She was going to be fighting off guys left and right and she wasn't used to it. Some guy would end up taking advantage of her.

Nica waved towards the bar. "Carmen's flapping her arms at me so I'd better go see what she wants. Talk to you later."

Logan watched her head over to the bar. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the same doofus she'd been dancing with earlier making a beeline for her.

Damn. Nica didn't know how to handle this kind of attention.

He looked at Tony. "Maybe we should head over to the bar and keep a closer eye on Nica."

Tony put down his beer and laughed. "What are you, her father?"

Logan scowled. "No, but as you're her brother I thought you'd want to look out for her."

"I'll always look out for her, but she's an adult. She doesn't need me running her life. Besides, how much trouble can she get into? She's with Carmen and Sam. She's fine."

Unconvinced, Logan took another swig of his beer, keeping his eyes peeled on her, especially now that she was talking to doof-boy who was standing *way* too close. "Maybe."

"Definitely. Come on, relax. Want another beer?"

Maybe if he had enough to drink this gnawing feeling of unease in the pit of his stomach would go away. Or drown. "Yeah."

The waitress came over and Tony ordered their beers. After she left to fill their order he shook his head and grinned. "Nica really does look different, doesn't she? She's going to have more male attention than she knows what to do with."

And that was so not what Logan wanted to hear. "Remind me why that's good news?"

"She needs more fun in her life. She's stuck at home too much."

That stopped him cold. He'd never thought about Nica being alone. "I know she doesn't date much, but she seems happy enough."

"I didn't say she was unhappy. I just think she's lonely."

Logan had never thought about Nica being lonely either, or that she might want more in her life. Come to think of it, he didn't think much about her at all, which he now realized was pretty damned selfish of him.

Their conversation shifted to idle chit chat, but he never took his eyes off Nica.

After a while Tony decided to go home. "Got the company pool party tomorrow and I have to help the folks set things up, so I'd better head out. You coming?"

"Naw, I think I'll stick around a bit longer."

Tony glanced over at Nica and laughed. "Yeah, I can see you're pretty preoccupied."

"Shut up. I'm just making sure nothing happens to her."

Tony slapped him on the back. "You go ahead and keep telling yourself that."

What the hell does that mean? "Later."

Logan ordered another beer and turned his attention back to the redhead with the great ass. Hell, he still couldn't believe it was Nica. She was laughing and flirting. He'd never seen her flirt before. Did she even know what she was doing? He sighed. Probably not.

He settled back in his chair and brooded while she joked around and danced with a slew of different guys who included the annoyingly close and persistently touchy-feely doof-boy.

#### Chapter Three

"I have a plan."

Even Nica could hear the excitement laced with terror permeating her voice. "It's a bit sketchy, but I think it's worth a try."

Carmen turned away from the dance floor and leaned in with avid interest. "What kind of plan?"

"I'm going to seduce Logan."

Carmen screeched. "No way!"

Nica gulped, then nodded. "Way. I'm scared shitless. But I'm determined to be brazen. Just like we talked about. I just hope I don't chicken out."

Carmen pushed the tequila shot she'd been about to drink over to Nica. "Here, have some liquid courage."

"Good idea. Thanks." Nica downed the shot in one go, then sucked in a sharp breath as the searing heat scorched its way down her throat. She willed the fluttering in her stomach to go the hell away and banged the empty shot glass down for emphasis. "God, I hope it kicks in soon."

"It will. Especially if you follow it with a few more." Carmen ordered another round of tequila for them. "What can I do to help?"

Grateful to have such a great friend, she covered Carmen's hand with her own and squeezed. "Leave." Carmen blinked. "What?"

The shots were placed in front of them and Nica downed another one. This one didn't go down any easier. "Tony's gone, but as long as you and Sam are here I have a ride home. If you guys leave I'm here all by myself. I figure if I can get Logan just a bit drunk, I can suggest to him that we share a cab home. I'm hoping I can make my move then."

Carmen looked thoughtful, then slowly nodded. "That's not a bad plan. Just don't get him too drunk or he won't be of much use to you."

Nica frowned. "Yeah, that's true. He needs to be loosened up, not unconscious."

Carmen waved Sam over. "Time to go home."

Sam paused with his beer halfway to his mouth. "Now?"

Carmen rolled her eyes at Nica. "You have to be firm with them." She looked back at Sam. "Yes, now."

Looking from Carmen to Nica and back again, he seemed to realize something was going on. Instead of arguing he threw his arm around Carmen. "Okay, babe. Let's go. I have plans for you anyway."

Carmen giggled and whispered something to Sam that made him grin and kiss her neck. She giggled again and winked at Nica. "Okay, we're out of here. Call me later and let me know how the battle goes."

Nica wiggled her fingers in a playful wave. The tequila must be doing its job because she was feeling *much* better already. More relaxed, sort of loose. And best of all, the fluttery feeling in her belly had died down to a tolerable tickle. "Will do."

Once Sam and Carmen had left, Nica sent a tequila over to Logan's table. She knew the moment the waitress told him Nica had sent it because his head snapped in her direction.

He raised the drink in a silent salute and downed it. She grinned to herself with glee. The plan was underway.

Nica picked up the two tequilas she'd ordered and headed over to Logan's table. Watching his expression change to one of surprise, she placed the tequilas on the table and parked herself beside him. "Since neither of us should drink alone I've decided to join you."

He took in the drinks and raised his eyebrow quizzically. "What's this?"

"Tequila shots."

"You know that's not what I mean. When did you start drinking tequila?"

She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. "Just now. I think I like it."

"Do you now?"

"Yep. Come on, drink up." Nica threw her shot back and gasped. Somehow the scorching effect wasn't lessening all that much.

Logan watched her with a lazy grin. No doubt he was laughing at her inexperience with hard liquor. She decided to ignore the grin and taunt him instead. "What's the matter, can't handle it? You're falling behind here."

"Yeah, right. I can drink you under the table."

This was going to be easier than she'd thought. "Prove it, big boy, I'm two shots ahead of you. From where I'm sitting you're all talk."

He picked up the shot glass and downed it. "We'll just see about that."

Luring Logan to her place had been a snap and Nica was more than a little stunned by that.

Her hastily improvised ruse had turned out to be unnecessary. She hadn't had to do a thing to get Logan over here. He'd *insisted* on seeing Nica up to her apartment all on his own.

Now here they were in her tiny, walk-up apartment. All alone. Together. *Alone*. Nica couldn't believe it. Okay, so they were both slightly drunk, but this was her chance and she wasn't going to waste it.

It was past time to make Logan see her as a woman, not as his honorary kid sister. Past time to show him she didn't see him as a brother. Way past time to make her move.

She walked over to the living room window and looked down to the road. "Looks like the cab left."

Logan started. "What? Why the hell would he leave? I haven't paid him yet." He moved to join her at the window.

Nica hid a secretive smile. Probably because I paid him and told him to go when I pretended to forget my purse in the cab and went back for it. "Who knows? Maybe an emergency came up and he had to leave."

Stopping beside her, he scoped out the area. "That's just weird."

"Isn't it?" She turned towards him. "You may as well crash here. The couch is comfy enough."

He eyed the huge old couch. "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Why not?"

He hesitated a long minute, and Nica waited with bated breath. "Come on. Why not? It'll take forever to get another cab out here."

He finally nodded. "You're right. Why not." He scrubbed his hands over his face. "Do you have any coffee?"

"Coffee?"

"Yeah, I think we both could use a little coffee about now."

It was kind of late for coffee but maybe it would give her time to think. And to work up her nerve for part two of her plan. "Sure. I'll go make some."

Besides, with nervous tension ratcheting her panic meter higher by the second, she'd take any excuse to stall making her move. She was such a pathetic chicken.

She headed to the kitchen on slightly unsteady legs. Okay, she might be a little more buzzed than she thought. Maybe coffee was a good idea after all.

She took her time measuring out the grounds and the water as she contemplated her choices of what to do next. She was *so* hopeless with this kind of thing. In her entire life, she'd only ever slept with one guy. That was back in college. And the whole incident had been a resounding fiasco. Nothing to draw on there. How on earth did a woman go about seducing a guy?

Seduction scenes from various movies flashed through her head, all of which she discarded. And then Carmen's advice popped into her head. *Just show up naked. The guy will do the rest*.

She immediately rejected the idea. No way she could do that. Could she?

She thought about things staying the same between her and Logan and quickly decided maybe she could. Especially if it meant their relationship changed from vertical friends to horizontal lovers.

There was one major problem though. Naked wasn't a good look on her. She had no illusions about her assets. She wasn't voluptuous and sexy like a woman should be. Her new clothes made the most of

what she had, but without the sexy trappings she wasn't anywhere near the big-boobed sex kittens she saw splashed across the cover of every men's magazine.

She chewed her bottom lip and vacillated over what to do as she watched the coffee drip. Strip. Don't strip. Go for it. Forget it. The coward in her wanted to forget the whole thing, but when she thought of everything she'd done today to change she couldn't. She just couldn't give up on Logan that easily. She'd made those changes for a reason and now was not the time to back down. *Now* was the time to pull out all the stops. *Now* was the time to remember her new mantra—brazen or bust.

In an effort to quell the jitters doing the cha-cha in her tummy, she took a few deep breaths, filling her lungs to bursting and letting them out slowly. It didn't take long for her to realize it wasn't going to help. She could stand here taking deep breaths until she hyperventilated and passed out, she still wasn't going to calm down.

Maybe she should've had more to drink. Then again, maybe she'd all ready had *too* much to drink. Was she seriously standing over the coffee maker thinking about taking all her clothes off before casually strolling back into the living room?

Carmen's advice sounded in her head again. Go for it. Don't wimp out.

That was yet another reason not to back down. Carmen had helped so much with everything Nica couldn't face her again if she didn't at least try. To hell with it. She wanted Logan and this was one way to find out if he wanted her too.

Without letting herself think about it any further, she whipped off her top, shucked her jeans, then reached up to take off her push-up bra. But that was as far as she got. Her hands just wouldn't do it. She couldn't take that final step.

Then again, her bra wasn't covering much, and the matching thong Carmen had talked her into was covering even less. Maybe this was close enough to naked for her purposes. Either way, she'd find out soon enough.

She poured two mugs of coffee and set her shoulders. I *am a brazen woman*. She took a step towards the living room. I *am a brazen woman*. The phrase ran through her head in tempo with her feet. Every time she said it she moved another step closer to Logan.

When she finally made it back to the living room she stopped cold. Logan was slumped back on the couch with his eyes closed.

Great. He'd fallen asleep. All that agonizing for nothing.

She put the coffee on the side table and nervously, cleared her throat.

Nothing.

Shit. Had he passed out? She hesitated, uncertain about what to do next. Should she keep going or just forget it? It was a no-brainer. After working up her nerve to come this far, hell if she was going to back

down now. He could just bloody well wake up and that was all there was to it. She hadn't gone through all this for nothing. She might never be able to work up her nerve again.

She cleared her throat again. Louder and more insistently, determined to go over and shake the living daylights out of him if she had to.

Seconds before she went to do just that, his eyelids fluttered.

#### Chapter Four

God what a night.

With his eyes closed to help him focus, Logan tried to gather his thoughts. The first thing he needed to do was clear his head and get some coffee into him as soon as possible. The last thing he needed was to act on any of the wild impulses he'd had running through his brain tonight. Why the hell had he said he'd stay the night?

Lost in his own thoughts, he didn't hear Nica come back with the coffee. Not at first. But when she cleared her throat he forced his bleary eyes open.

And the erotic vision he saw before him made him wonder if he was hallucinating. Or had died and gone to heaven. *Shit.* Was he drunker than he thought? Because he couldn't be seeing this right.

Nica was standing only a few feet away from him and she was almost *naked*. He felt his eyes go wide with shock until he thought they'd pop clear out of his head. He slammed them shut again.

That couldn't have been what he'd just seen. Could it? The urge to look again was overwhelming, but he knew it was a bad idea. He shouldn't look. No, he really, *really* shouldn't look.

He opened his eyes.

*Holy shit.* She really was right there, almost close enough to touch. And with just two tiny scraps of fabric covering her breasts and an even smaller scrap covering her pussy. She was close enough to naked for it not to make any difference.

Holy fuck. "What the hell are you doing? Put some clothes on."

She blushed and with relief he saw her waver. It was going to be okay. She was going to come to her senses and go and get dressed. Thank God, because his self-control was hanging by a thread. He shouldn't have had all those damned tequila shots.

He quickly made a deal with God. If Nica went away, or at least threw some clothes on, he swore he'd never drink again.

But nothing was going his way tonight. Instead of leaving, the little siren threw her shoulders back and took a tiny step closer.

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening.

But it was. And it just kept getting worse as Nica slid a finger under her bra strap, running it back and forth before letting the strap slip off her shoulder. "Putting clothes *on* wasn't what I had in mind."

What the hell was she up to? Was he seeing this right? He scrubbed his face with his hands again, trying to snap out of the drink-induced haze he was in. He needed to sober up in a big hurry. Like yesterday. "What are you saying, Nica? Be plain because I'm not thinking clearly right now."

She took another timid step towards him. Then another, stopping right in front of him. Her bare knees almost touched his. "Do I really have to spell it out for you?"

He swallowed. Hard. Hard being the operative word. His entire body stiffened. Especially the out-ofcontrol part of him that had no business showing any interest in Nica.

Nica who was like a sister to him. Nica who he'd known since she was a kid. Nica who was wearing almost nothing, making his mouth water and his dick stand at full attention.

Still struggling to gain control of his unruly body and his wild thoughts, he didn't notice her move until she did the unthinkable. She leaned forward, *closer* for God's sake, putting her hands on his shoulders.

Stunned, he couldn't move. Not even when she shifted her weight and crawled right up onto his lap, settling in with one leg on either side of his. Her hot core was so close to his striving cock she all but scorched him through his jeans.

He choked back a groan.

Without thought, he reached up to steady her and found his hands filled with her satiny-smooth, luscious, kissable, very naked ass and almost blew a gasket.

She gasped at the contact and stiffened. He expected her to jump up and bolt but instead she wiggled her butt and settled back on his lap.

Shit. He was so fucked.

Against his will, he let his hands squeeze her butt cheeks, enjoying the womanly feel of her soft, rounded flesh. His mouth was so temptingly close to her breasts, to the delectable tips he was dying to taste and lick to hardened peaks. His cock strained in his jeans, desperate to get out and bury itself in her oh-so-sweet sex.

And just one thing pounded in his brain to the tempo of his reckless, irresponsible, throbbing cock.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Because that was all he wanted to do right now. Fuck Nica until neither of them could see straight. Until they were burnt up, blissed out and completely sated.

How the hell did he get out of this? How the hell did he not act on his lust? How the hell did he sober up enough to stop this insanity and remember Nica was off-limits?

The decision was taken out of his hands when Nica buried her fingers in his hair and kissed him with those lush, inviting lips that had been haunting him all night.

God, she tasted incredible. He was drowning. Sinking down, down, down. Into the honeyed heat of her luscious mouth. Their tongues parried, plunged, tasted until his will was obliterated. All he could do was take in, feel, react. The sane inner voice telling him this was a really bad idea faded away to

nothingness, the warning ignored and unheeded. And finally thinking ceased altogether as he reverted to instinct and drive and desire.

With a moan, Nica broke the kiss and leaned back. Logan watched in mesmerized fascination as she popped the clasp at the front of her bra with shaking fingers and let it drop to the floor.

God, she was beautiful. So beautiful.

Her breasts were small but perfectly formed, with dusky little nipples that called to him in their already peaked excitement. He had to taste their sweetness, sample their texture. Lose himself in the soft flesh beckoning him.

He captured one gentle swell in his mouth and suckled, enjoying the salty taste of her skin. She started to squirm and the movement made her breast slip out from between his lips.

He thought for sure she'd demand he stop, but instead she grabbed his T-shirt and started to pull it off. "Too many clothes."

She was *so* right. In short order, he helped her dispense with the offending shirt. Not satisfied with just his shirt, she started on the front of his button-fly jeans.

In a hazy sort of fascination, he watched as she freed his buttons faster than he ever would have thought she could. He blurrily wondered where she'd learned to remove men's clothing with such efficiency and found just thinking of her with another man made him want to bash the unknown guy's head in.

All thought fled when her hot little hands clasped his straining cock. A groan ripped from his throat at her exquisite touch. More. He wanted more. He pushed his pants lower to give her greater access and she didn't hesitate to take the invitation. One hand left his erection to cup his balls, while the other kept working its magic on his shaft. His eyes rolled back in his head, a tingling sensation already starting in his balls.

He'd never been so turned on so quickly by anyone in his life. That Nica was the cause of it was more than a little mind-blowing even in his semi-inebriated state.

Still trying to take it all in, Nica took him by surprise when her magic fingers stopped stroking him and she scooted off the couch to kneel in front of him.

In shock, he watched as demure little Nica lowered her head and took him into her hot, wet mouth. The incredible feelings shot down his cock and up his spine. "Fuck. Me." It wasn't an order but rather a heartfelt declaration.

She pulled away from him and his dick left her mouth with a pop. "Do you like this? Am I doing it right?"

"Shit, yeah."

She grinned an all-knowing grin as old as time.

Lowering her head again, she ran her tongue up the length of him and around the bulbous head of his cock before taking him fully into her mouth.

The groan that ripped out of him came straight from his balls.

She sucked. And licked, and took him so far into her mouth he thought he'd died and gone to heaven. And still she continued to lap him up like a starving woman. She moaned deep in her throat and the vibration ricocheted through him. He wasn't going to last much longer this way, and he wanted to be deep inside her sweet pussy when he came.

He clasped her shoulders in shaking fingers. "Come here."

She gave his cock a final lick, and then looked up at him with eyes darkened by desire. "I like doing this for you."

"Baby, I love you doing that too, but I want to be inside you when I come."

She stood, an adorable mixture of ingénue and siren. Hooking her thumbs in her thong, she pulled it down and stepped out of it. He almost came just from seeing her completely naked. For a moment she looked so vulnerable his heart ached, and he rushed to reassure her. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

She blushed. "Thank you." Without hesitation, she started towards him and then stopped. "I almost forgot."

"What?"

She snagged her purse off the end table where she'd tossed it earlier and rooted around, grumbling under her breath until she held up a condom. "Found it."

His heart sank. He'd forgotten about protection. She had him so nuts he wasn't thinking at all, but still, it was unforgiveable of him not to think of it himself. "Thank God, you remembered."

She grinned. "Carmen to the rescue, yet again."

"Remember to give Carmen my heartfelt thanks."

Nica grinned with abandon. "Don't worry, I will."

She ripped open the packet and moved to put it on him, but he stopped her. There was no way he could hold himself together if she did it so he took the condom and rolled it on.

She seated herself facing him in his lap again and the fleeting thought that she belonged there danced in the back of his head. He ran his hands along the silky skin of her back, her hips, her ass. She felt incredible. So soft. So smooth. Like a dream. One he never wanted to wake up from.

He let his fingers drift past her nether curls and stroked her already soaking sex. God, he couldn't believe she was so turned on so fast. He petted and stroked until Nica moaned deep in her throat.

"Fill me up, Logan. Do it now."

She was so sexy, so hot, so inviting. Where had this little vixen been hiding all his life? He was so worked up that he was tempted to do as she asked. But he wanted more from her. He wanted her to come at

least once before he was inside her because God knew how long he'd be able to hold off once her pussy was squeezing his right-on-the-edge cock.

He continued teasing her clit, rubbing the hard little nub until she was practically panting. When he was sure she was going to come at any second, he stuck one and then two fingers into her vagina. She gasped and pulsed around him. Finger fucking her, he didn't stop until she came with a shuddering scream.

He grabbed her hips and plunged her down onto his throbbing cock in one hard thrust. They both groaned, long and loud.

"God, you feel incredible. So hot, so tight. I'm fucking going to lose my mind."

She immediately started to move and, with his hands still on her hips, he helped her ride him with the frenzied tempo they both needed. He was right about not lasting long. His balls pulled up tight to his body, and the familiar tingling shot up his spine. He was a goner.

Thank God, Nica picked that moment to come again and saved him from embarrassing himself. Free to follow, he plunged over the top to join her in shouting out his shuddering release. The spasms racking him while her pussy milked his cock until they were both completely spent.

His head fell back and Nica sagged against him. They both sat there taking agonized breaths for what felt like ages. Through it all, he continued to hold her close as wonder filled his being. He'd never felt this close to a women after sex before. All he wanted to do was keep holding her and that was downright shocking.

It was also the last thing he had any business feeling about Nica.

#### Chapter Five

Who the hell let someone into my head with a jackhammer?

Wary of the backlash to his brains, Logan took a chance and carefully lifted an eyelid, only to slam it shut again. Disbelief rocked through him. He couldn't have just seen what he thought he'd seen. Because if he did then he was a complete asshole.

He peeped his eyelid open again, but nope, nothing had changed. He was still in bed with Nica.

Naked.

At least she looked as if she was naked under that sheet. And he most definitely was naked.

Shit. What the hell had he done?

No sooner did he wonder when everything came back in a rush of Technicolor still shots. The drinking match, helping Nica back to the apartment, her standing before him naked, and, oh God, him losing all control not once but over and over again, both on the couch and in this bed after he'd carried her over here. Hot images of the things he'd done to her and with her assailed him, making his morning woody throb and ache to do those things all over again.

Repeatedly and with enthusiastic gusto.

But there was no way that was going to happen. That he'd done it at all was already inexcusable.

He groaned. This couldn't be happening.

Still trying to take in the enormity of what he'd done, he watched as her eyelids fluttered open and she looked right at him. A radiant smile spread across her face, dazzling him with its happiness. She all but glowed as she reached out and caressed his cheek. "Good morning."

How the hell could she be so happy? She should be furious, screaming or slapping his face silly, not looking at him like this. For God's sake, he'd just taken advantage of her.

Good God. He couldn't deal with this. He'd just had sex with his best friend's sister. And he'd been worried about *other* guys taking advantage of her. What a hypocrite he'd turned out to be. He hadn't been *that* drunk, just sort of loose and buzzed. He frowned. Obviously, too loose and buzzed. His common sense and decency had become completely unhinged.

He thought back and was pretty sure that although Nica had been tipsy, she hadn't been plastered. She'd known what she was doing, right?

Shit and double fuck.

How the hell could he explain any of this to Tony? The tequila shots, the nakedness, the hot sex. With his sister. Repeatedly.

No way would Tony understand. What the hell had he done?

He jerked back from her touch and threw himself out of bed even though the abrupt movement cost him dearly. The pounding in his brain increased double time. Remembering he was naked, he searched for his boxers and threw them on.

The smile faded from her lips. "What's wrong?"

"You have to ask?" He scanned the room for the rest of his clothes.

"I guess I do." She sat up, the sheet dropping to her waist exposing her beautiful little breasts. The ferocity with which he wanted to jump back into bed and lavish those breasts with kisses freaked him out worse than he already was. What a fucked-up pervert he was.

"Cover yourself up, for God's sake."

Her face crumpled. She literally looked crushed and he felt like shit for being the cause of it. She picked up a corner of the sheet and drew it up to cover herself.

"What's the matter with you, Logan? It's not like you haven't seen my breasts before. As I recall, you didn't have any problem with seeing them last night. You seemed to like them. A lot."

"Yeah, and that's the trouble. I never should have seen them, or touched them, in the first place. None of this should have happened." His throbbing head kept getting worse, just about killing him. Which was all he deserved. "God, how I wish I hadn't had anything to drink last night. If I'd stayed sober then this disaster wouldn't have happened."

"Disaster? You think sleeping with me was a disaster?"

He heard the hurt tinged with anger in her voice but he had to make her see this was never going to happen again. "Of course it's a disaster. You're like my little sister."

"I am *not* your little sister. We're not related at all." Her eyes flashed fire and she scrambled to her knees on the bed. "I know what this is really about. You just can't believe you slept with plain old *me*. That's it, isn't it? You're *embarrassed*."

Shit, now he'd insulted her. "No. That's not it at all. You're twisting this all around." He ran his hands through his hair and dug his fingers in. His brain hurt. Hell, even his hair hurt. "Shit, I am so not up for this discussion right now."

"Well, don't put yourself out on my account. You're free to leave whenever you want."

"Maybe I should leave. I'm not thinking clearly enough to reason with you."

"Oh, so now I'm being unreasonable."

"No, I didn't mean that..."

He gave up trying to explain. Every time he opened his mouth he made things worse. He threw on his jeans and spotted his cell phone on the floor. Picking it up, he slammed it into his front pocket. "I'd better go. We'll talk later."

He left the bedroom and nabbed his shirt off the floor as he headed for the door.

Nica shouted after him. "Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Before he could react, the TV remote flew past his head and shattered against the wall.

"I hope the remote put a permanent dent in the back of his head."

Nica wished it had too. She was still in complete turmoil over Logan's unflattering rejection earlier that morning. "No such luck. I missed."

"Too bad. Maybe it would have knocked some sense into him." Rustling through bags from the previous day's shopping spree, Carmen continued, "I can't believe you slept with Logan and now you're back to square one. I knew he was stubborn but I didn't know he was *this* stubborn."

Slouched down in her favorite wingback chair, Nica miserably watched Carmen toss clothes all over the couch, trying hard not to remember that she and Logan had just had sex there only a few short hours ago. "He's an obstinate asshole, is what he is."

Carmen grunted in agreement. "No kidding."

Anger, hurt and embarrassment churned through Nica's gut, making her feel slightly ill. It didn't help she was still a bit hung over. How was she ever going to deal with seeing Logan later today? "You know, I really thought once I got him past the kid-sister thing I'd be home free. What do I do now?"

Carmen held up a shopping bag in triumph. "Here they are. I was beginning to think we'd left the damn things in the store." She spread two bikinis on the back of Nica's couch. "*This* is what you do next."

Nica looked askance at the cherry red and black bikinis Carmen referred to. "What are you talking about?"

Carmen held up the bra half of the super-skimpy black suit they'd picked out during their hunt for Nica's new wardrobe. "This is your secret weapon. You need to wear this to the company pool party today."

Nica flushed as she took in the flimsy scrap of fabric masquerading as a swimsuit. She shook her head with uncertainty. "I know that's why we bought those suits but I don't know if I can do it."

"Of course you can. You're just feeling raw after Logan's bullheaded rejection this morning. Don't let him win this round."

"Is there any point in a round two?"

"Of course there is. You can't give up already."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You have to get out there and show him what he's missing. Show him what's he's giving up."

Nica slumped further into her chair. "You don't think it's hopeless? Because I'm kind of thinking maybe it is."

Carmen waved away Nica's negative attitude. "No way. Like I said, Logan is stubborn. You'll have to wear him down, tempt him into crossing that stupid line he's drawn. Break down his defenses."

A glimmer of hope poked through her pessimism. Carmen was right. She did feel defeated right now. Not surprising after this morning's disaster. The big question was whether she wanted to take the chance of being mortified like that again? But she really didn't have to think about it, she knew the answer was yes. She was ready to take that chance because she wasn't ready to give up on Logan. She just didn't feel up to trying again so soon.

As for the swimsuit... "I have serious doubts about whether I can pull off that suit."

Carmen dropped the bikini and sighed. "I knew you'd chicken out on me."

"I'm not chickening out."

"Who do you think you're fooling here? I twisted your arm to buy these swimsuits yesterday and now you're having second thoughts."

"It's just... I don't know. I'll feel ridiculous in a skimpy suit like that."

"No, you'll feel sexy and desirable. Exactly what you need after this morning."

Carmen had a point. Her newfound confidence had taken a major beating. There was no question she was feeling really wobbly today.

"Come on. You know you need this. You need to *use* your anger. Channel it to your benefit. What's your new mantra?"

Nica hugged the throw pillow into herself. "Go all the way. Brazen or bust."

Carmen rolled her eyes and yanked the pillow out of Nica's hands. "That was beyond pathetic. Think of what's at stake. Now stand up and say it again. With conviction this time."

Nica closed her eyes and pictured Logan in all his naked, ripped and sexy gorgeousness. A yearning so sharp she almost gasped washed through her. She longed to kiss him again, to feel his steely strength beneath her fingers, to have him hot and naked against her flesh. Sliding into her, thrusting home...

A bubble of lust burst through her depression, fueling an unexpected surge of motivated excitement and determination. There was no way in hell she was going to give up her chance to have those things again.

She jumped to her feet, all of a sudden feeling more than ready to do battle. To take Logan on and show him they belonged together. "I'm going *all* the way. Brazen or bust!"

Yeah, that definitely felt better.

Hands on hips, Carmen nodded her approval. "That's more like it. And don't you forget it either. You had the makeover. You've got a hot new look and a new attitude to go with it. Now follow through on it. Go out there and knock 'em dead."

With elated satisfaction, she realized her earlier hopeless anger had now turned into hopeful anticipation. What if she really could make Logan jealous? What if she could make him sorry he'd turned her down? What if she *could* entice him? It would be worth everything she'd gone through and more if she could make that happen. Exhilaration churned through her at the possibility of succeeding this time. "You're right. I'm not done yet."

"Damn straight. Live a little. You need to go out there and have a blast. Flirt with all the single guys and say yes when they ask you out. Maybe even try a few of them on for size. You might even make Logan jealous in the process."

Nica'd had the same thought about making Logan jealous, although she wasn't too sure that would happen, but it was worth a try. "That's exactly what I need to do." Nica picked up the skimpy black bikini as a wickedly decadent feeling washed over her. "Whatever else happens, it's time I had a little fun."

#### Chapter Six

Logan spent the entire day freaked out about what had happened with Nica.

He'd tried his damndest to banish her from his thoughts, but no matter what he did he couldn't stop thinking about her. Especially the delectable, naked parts of her. The parts he could still see when he closed his eyes. The parts he wanted to taste and explore all over again. At his leisure. With rapt attention. Inch by luscious inch.

Damn it. There he went again.

It didn't help that he remembered everything that had happened between them with a lucidity that shouldn't have been possible in the inebriated state he was in last night. Apparently, he wasn't a forgetful drunk.

Lucky him.

Instead of being blissfully unaware, he was dealing with flashbacks of the two of them deliciously naked, hot and sweaty, in a variety of erotic positions he craved to explore again.

Not one thing, not one tiny detail of last night, had escaped his steel-trap memory. He remembered it all. The silkiness of her hair, her sweet scent, the softness of her skin. How incredible she tasted. And felt. The way her lips begged to be kissed. Every bit of it taunted him with its vivid clarity.

He clenched his hands into fists and slowly straightened them again finger by finger. He didn't know how, but he was going to have to shove these inappropriate and way-too-crystal-clear-for-his-own-good images out of his head. She was forbidden fruit, his best-friend's kid sister, and that was the end of it. There was an unwritten code between guys about this kind of thing and he'd already broken it once. He wouldn't make things worse by doing it again.

The first step towards that was to avoid Nica whenever possible. It was the coward's way out, but he didn't know how long he'd be able to keep his hands off her if he saw her all the time. He wished there was a way to avoid her today, but there was no way that was going to happen. Today was Morelli Construction's annual pool party. The Morellis threw the big bash for all their staff towards the end of July and no one from Morelli Construction missed it if they could help it.

That went double for him. It was enough the Morellis often used his architectural business for their construction jobs, but even more important was that they were almost family. He would never hurt them by not showing up. After everything they'd done for him over the years—helping him out so he could become

an architect, giving him summer jobs, showing him what a real family was all about—no reason, short of his death, was good enough to miss it. He just had to suck it up and deal.

At least he'd bought himself some time by telling them he'd be a little late. It wasn't much as far as reprieves went, but it was better than nothing. And it gave him a bit of breathing room.

As he turned onto their street he saw all the cars parked on both sides and pulled into the first spot he could find. It was the perfect day for a pool party. Hot, sunny, no rain in the forecast. And judging by the number of cars, it looked as if everyone had made it.

Deliberately dawdling, he sat back in his truck and looked around the neighborhood. With fondness, he took in the enormous trees and huge lots with nice family-sized bungalows on them. He had so many great memories in this neighborhood. Hanging out with Tony, meals with the Morelli family, hot summer days spent swimming in the pool. Hell, he'd spent more time at their place than his own and each memory was more cherished than the last. He wouldn't have had any happy-family type memories without the kindness of the Morellis. His father sure as hell hadn't given him anything happy to remember.

It was mostly due to those good memories that he wanted to live in this neighborhood someday. It was also because it was a great place to live and raise a family. When he was ready to settle down, Logan fully planned on buying a place around here.

Deciding he'd procrastinated enough, he forced himself out of the truck and headed towards the side gate. The sound of children's laughter reached him at the same time as the music and he smiled. These annual pool parties were a lot of fun for everyone and he'd always looked forward to them in the past.

Today was another matter entirely. He dreaded seeing Nica again. He'd hurt her and he wanted to apologize, but he was ashamed to admit a part of him didn't want to face her. Not that an apology was going to help or change anything, but he owed it to her.

It wasn't going to happen today though. Not with this many people around. And this damned inconvenient attraction to Nica wasn't helping anything. He'd just have to avoid her as much as possible.

He spotted Tony and his twin brothers Mario and Marco manning the barbeques as soon as he hit the backyard. He shouted out a hello and moved to join them.

Tony waved him over. "There you are. I thought you weren't going to make it."

Logan stood beside Tony. "You know I wouldn't miss this." No matter how much I wanted to.

Seeing Tony jabbed more shards of guilt into his sorry hide. What should he do? Should he tell Tony what he'd done, or not? Hell if he knew.

Tony flipped a rack of ribs. "There's still time to catch a swim before we eat."

Swimming. What a great excuse to make his escape. Look at me. I'm turning spinelessness into an art form. "I think I will. This heat is something else."

Tony grinned. "I know. Great day for the party."

Unless you were a guilty prick who didn't want to face anyone. "Sure is. Talk to you later." Unless he could figure out a way to avoid it.

Logan headed to the pool, confident it was the best place to avoid Nica. She never went anywhere near the pool during these things. She was always too busy helping her mother with preparations.

His swimsuit was on under his clothes so he shucked his T-shirt and shorts and tossed them onto an empty chair before diving in. The bracing water shocked his heated flesh. Too bad it couldn't cool off his fiery conscience too. He immediately started doing laps, hoping the workout would clear his head and get rid of his residual headache at the same time.

"Hey, Nica. Toss it this way."

Logan pulled up mid-stroke and whirled around. Nica's in the pool?

He scanned the area but couldn't see her anywhere. When he finally did spot her he almost drowned. All thought vacated his brain. No doubt because there wasn't any blood left in the top half of his body. He forgot to tread water. He forgot to breathe. He forgot his own goddamn name.

Nica stood at the edge of the pool in the skimpiest black bikini he'd ever seen.

Holy hell. She was damned near naked.

And Joe was lapping up every bare inch of her.

Logan fought the urge to grab Joe by the throat and throttle him. Instead he focused on calming down. A necessity since choking fellow guests was not considered good form, no matter what the provocation.

Besides it wasn't Joe's fault Nica was wearing next to nothing. All he'd done was ogle the view she so freely provided. She was the one who needed to be throttled.

And he'd be happy to do it too. Just not right now. Because right now he couldn't even think of getting out of the water. At least not without embarrassing himself and everyone around him.

He was pathetic.

What the hell was wrong with him anyway? It wasn't as if he'd never seen a woman in a skimpy bikini before.

He tried to peel his heated gaze away from her barely clad form but his eyes had their own agenda. He just couldn't seem to do it, afraid he'd miss the sight of her perky little breasts peeking out of her bikini top as she bent over to pick up the beach ball that had been knocked out of the pool.

She tossed the ball back to Joe and headed over to a lounge chair, giving him a lovely view of that incredible ass he'd been working so hard to forget. The memory of it had given him a hard-on all day. The reality damned near took his breath away. He swiped away the drool he was certain was on his chin.

It looked as if he wasn't getting out of the pool any time soon with Nica parading around in all her near-nakedness. Yep. A whole lot of laps looked to be in his immediate future. He only hoped the exertion would work off all that sexual tension revving up his cock.

He started swimming in earnest and forced himself to concentrate on each movement of his arms. Stroke after stroke, lap after lap. The vigorous exercise didn't help much at first, but in the end it was just what he needed to cool off his libido and get control of himself.

By the time he heard the call for supper, he was able to get out and join the others crowded around the tables of food.

He'd worked up one hell of an appetite and everything looked great. Barbequed back ribs, corn on the cob, fried chicken, potato and macaroni salads, hamburgers, hotdogs were all loaded on the table in front of him. He knew the other table would be filled with traditional Italian fare, like pans of Mamma Morelli's amazing lasagna, assorted pasta dishes and her mouth-watering desserts.

He spotted Nica helping her mother. Thank God, she'd covered herself up with some kind of wraparound thing. It wasn't much but it was better than having her beautiful little body on display for all to see.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem to help *him* any. His imagination simply kicked into overdrive filling in the gaps as he pictured the sweet curves he knew were there. Her silky skin, so warm and inviting, beckoning him to taste and stroke it to life until she moaned and writhed for him.

Shit.

He had to stop torturing himself like this. Oh for the days when he'd been in blissful ignorance of what was underneath her monotonous selection of baggy clothes. Now that he knew there was no going back.

He forced himself to concentrate on his plate of food. Not that he had much success, but he did try.

When he'd finished eating, he tossed his paper plate and went over to the drinks table. He was fishing out a beer from an ice-filled cooler when Joe sauntered over and grabbed one for himself.

Joe nodded and twisted off the cap. "Great spread, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I always eat too much at these things."

Joe laughed. "Who doesn't?"

"True." A movement caught Logan's eye and he watched as Nica brought out a bowl of something and set it on one of the tables.

Joe's gaze followed Logan's and he grinned. "I see you've been checking Nica out too. What a hot number she turned out to be." He leered in her direction. "I plan on getting to know her a *lot* better."

Logan fought to keep his temper under control. "You sure that's a good idea? She *is* the boss's daughter."

Joe's hot gaze raked over her again. "She's worth the risk."

Logan glared at him. "You should probably rethink that."

Without taking his eyes from Nica, Joe shook his head. "Mind's already made up." He raised his beer in a mock salute and started to move off. "See ya."

Logan watched him amble away with a potent mixture of anger and frustration prodding him to do something. Anything. Joe was nothing but a player, which meant he was major bad news for Nica.

Deciding he'd better talk to her about it, he headed over and pulled her aside. "We need to talk."

She speared him with a look. "Why? I thought you pretty much covered everything you had to say this morning."

He ignored her anger, knowing she was entitled to it. "Trust me, we need to talk."

"I disagree." She tossed her head and started to turn away.

"Don't be like that." He caught her arm.

She pointedly looked at his hand. He dropped it. "Hurry up and say what you have to say. Mom needs my help."

"You're asking for trouble parading around like you have been today. That bikini of yours doesn't leave much to the imagination."

She threw him a scoffing look. "What's the big deal? Carmen and several others here are wearing similar suits."

She had a point, but none of them seemed to attract the same kind of attention Nica did. Or was that just him? "You have half the guys here ogling you."

"What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is that you're asking for the kind of attention you don't want."

Her eyes sparked in anger. "How the hell would you know what kind of attention I want?"

"What are you saying? That you want guys to be thinking lewd thoughts about you?"

"Maybe I do. Maybe I want men to find me attractive."

He raked his hand through his hair in frustration. "You aren't getting this."

"Oh, I'm getting it, all right. You're in full big-brother mode again. The thing is, you're not my brother and I don't want you to be my brother. I have quite enough of them already. Besides, I've decided I don't care what you think."

He fought to keep his voice calm. "Don't be this way."

She looked towards the other guests and leaned closer to Logan, whispering furiously. "I can be any way I want. You have no say in what I do or what I wear. You made it abundantly clear this morning you're not interested in me in that way, so I can do whatever the hell I want. I can fuck every guy in town if I want to and it's got nothing to do with you."

Stunned speechless, he watched in amazement as she stomped off back to her mother.

Well, damn.

He blinked. He couldn't believe she'd just said that to him. This new version of Nica sure didn't pull her punches. He knew he'd be furious at the thought of her being with any other man later, but for now, he was just plain blown away by her feisty chutzpah.

He shook his head. Nica had definitely grown up. All the way up. He had to admit, he fucking loved it.

### Chapter Seven

"Oh my God! You really said that?"

A huge grin on her face, Nica looked up from the assortment of paper plates she was filling with leftover desserts for guests to take home with them.

She loved the fact that she'd shocked Carmen as much as she had Logan, and it made her want to do it more often. Saying whatever she wanted was liberating. "Yep. I sure did."

Carmen nabbed a homemade cannoli. "What did Logan say?"

Nica followed Carmen's example and nabbed one too. "I didn't give him a chance to say anything. I just turned around and left him standing there with his mouth hanging open."

Carmen threw back her head and laughed. "Way to go, girlfriend. Guess you gave *him* something to think about."

Nica couldn't wipe the grin off her face. "Guess I did." She shook her head. "Honestly, the words just poured out of me. The way he'd already shifted back to treating me like a little sister after all the intimate things we did together last night got me more steamed than I've ever been in my life. So I let him have it."

Carmen talked around a bite of cannoli. "Good for you. You need to do that more often."

The grin got bigger. "I have to admit, it felt incredible."

"That's because he deserved it. I hope the thought of you sleeping with other guys gives him nightmares. You're going to follow up on your threat, right?"

About to take another bite, Nica stopped mid-motion. "What do you mean?"

"I know you're not going to go out and sleep with every guy in town, but you need to at least date a few of them. And make sure Logan knows about it."

Nica'd had the same thought. Making Logan jealous was more than a little appealing on so many levels. "A couple of guys have already asked me out. I was thinking I should take them up on it."

Carmen licked cannoli filling off her finger. "Damn straight you should. Who asked you out?"

"Mickey for one, but he's so not my type. If you can believe it, Joe asked me out too."

Carmen's eyes went wide. "Joe. Do you think you could handle him?"

"Sure, why not?"

Looking doubtful, Carmen hedged. "I don't know. He's a real player. Definitely likes to love 'em and leave 'em. There's a long trail of broken hearts behind him."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't be one of them. Joe's not my type either. But I'm thinking he's good looking enough it might actually make Logan jealous if I went out with him."

Carmen reached for another cannoli. "You have a point. I guess if you're careful you could make it work to your advantage."

"It's worth a try. Logan needs a major wake-up call if I have any hope of getting him past thinking he should treat me like a sibling."

"That's for sure. Last night should have done that in spades."

"You'd have thought so. Stubborn ass."

Even though Nica had sounded confident she could handle Joe, the thought of actually going out with him made her feel a little queasy. There was also something else that bothered her. "I don't like playing games like this with a guy. Even a jerk like Joe."

"At least with Joe you know you wouldn't be hurting his feelings at all. I don't think he has a heart. Women are all just potential conquests to him."

Nica reached for another cannoli as she thought that over. "I know. I guess I just don't like sinking to his level."

Carmen pooh-poohed the idea. "You're doing nothing of the kind."

Nica wasn't so sure, but she let it drop. "You know, it's always amazed me the way women throw themselves at Joe."

"I know. It's kind of mind-boggling. Although, I'm sure a lot of them are just out for a good time themselves. And some must delude themselves into thinking they're going to be the one who changes him."

"And some get hurt."

"Yeah, unfortunately they do. You know, it might do Joe some good to have a woman not fall for his charms for a change."

"Hey, maybe I could view this as a public service." They looked at each other and burst out laughing. "Okay, that's definitely reaching."

"Definitely. You'll be okay if you only go out with him once or twice. Just to see if you get a reaction out of Logan. If it doesn't work you'll know you need to move on and get over the stubborn idiot."

Carmen was right. Nica would give this a try and if it didn't make Logan jealous, then she'd know. She just hoped she'd be *able* to move on, because right now even the thought of never being with Logan again the way they'd been last night made her want to curl up in a ball and cry her heart out.

That's more than enough torture for one night.

With gut-deep relief, Logan looked around the Morelli backyard at the considerably thinned out crowd. Darkness had settled in and patio lanterns had been turned on, but despite the festive lighting the party was winding down. Those with young children had already left. Of the stragglers who were still there, some were chatting in small groups, others had gone back into the pool to cool off. A very few of the more energetic were dancing. But Logan didn't fit into any of those groups. He was done in.

He hadn't gotten much sleep last night. And he'd spent an inordinate amount of time and energy that day struggling with an exhausting combination of anger and turned-on libido. With the party all but over, he figured he could make his escape and no one would comment on it. Even more importantly, the Morellis wouldn't be hurt or offended.

He looked around the yard one last time but couldn't see where Nica had gotten to. Even though she'd eventually changed into a slightly less revealing top and shorts, it had been a relief to his strung-out system when he realized he couldn't see her anymore.

It was, however, more than a little annoying that he couldn't seem to stop looking for her. He shook his head at his newly developed masochistic tendencies.

With his goodbyes said to the Morellis, he headed for his truck, only to stop short partway down the driveway.

So much for not seeing Nica again. Not far down the street she was talking to Joe beside his slightly rundown pickup. The jerk was leaning in, standing way too close to her.

Logan gritted his teeth, fighting the instinct to charge over and whisk Nica away from Joe's clutches. She'd already told Logan in no uncertain terms who she spent time with was none of his business. And she was right. He had no business having these possessive feelings for her and he knew it.

The trouble was, logic played no part in how he felt. Now that he'd slept with Nica a part of him felt like she was his. Which was ridiculous, impossible and downright stupid.

Of course, it would have helped a lot if he'd never slept with her in the first place. But since he had, forever burying all memories of last night was his only option.

Like it or not, he had to jam all the he-man nonsense down and stroll past them as if he didn't want to reach out and rip Joe's head off. Nothing to it.

Taking a deep, calming breath, he continued walking towards them, ignoring the fact that Joe had his grubby hand on Nica's bare shoulder, rubbing his thumb back and forth across her skin as if he had every right to touch her.

The guy was seriously asking for it and Logan again had to tamp down his newly acquired violent streak. A few more steps and he'd be past them. He just had to keep calm and focus on getting to his truck. Might have worked too, except when he was close enough to hear what they were saying his inner Mr. Hyde threatened to erupt again.

Joe leaned even closer than he'd already been to Nica. "I'll pick you up at seven."

The crazy woman smiled up at Joe with an expression Logan could only call come-hither. "I'll be ready."

*Shit.* She was actually going to go out with that numbskull? Didn't she know he was a player? All manner of protective instincts screamed for his attention. He had to clamp down on every last one of them, burying the urge to do something, *anything*, to stop that date from happening. But it wasn't his place, and he had to remember that.

With a calm façade he wasn't even close to feeling, he didn't break his stride. He just kept walking past them. A quick nod was his only acknowledgement he'd seen them at all. How he'd managed it he had no idea.

Unfortunately, once he got home his new-found knowledge wouldn't leave him be. He spent the rest of the night imagining the many interesting and enjoyable things he could do to stop the date from happening. Most consisted of him smashing Joe's face in just for daring to think of the lascivious things Logan knew were on his filthy mind.

Which he had to admit wasn't a totally unpleasant way to spend a sleepless night.

## Chapter Eight

This was a huge mistake.

One of epic proportions.

Agreeing to go out with Joe was the worst idea Nica had ever had. All day, the guys at work had been giving her looks best described as comically lewd. As for Joe, he'd been strutting around like some kind of demented peacock. It was nuts. All she'd done was agree to go out for a drink with the guy.

Big deal.

At least it shouldn't have been a big deal. But the constant barrage of sly looks aimed her way today had succeeded in making her feel more than a little nervous about tonight even before Joe had picked her up. And now that they were here at PJ's, all she wanted to do was get away from his endless groping. He stood too close, was *way* too touchy feely and all but mashed them together into one flesh whenever they danced.

Worst of all was the really uncomfortable feeling she couldn't shake that Joe was expecting a lot more from her than she was willing to give. Trouble was, she couldn't figure out how to get away from octopus boy without blowing her front with Logan.

She glanced across the room to where Logan was nursing a beer in the sexy, laid-back way only he seemed able to pull off. Right on cue, the ever-familiar thrill looking at him generated made her heart skip a beat and her pulse quicken. It'd be nice if her hormones weren't so single-minded where men were concerned. Joe was a good-looking guy, but he totally left her cold. She sighed at the impending doom of her great plan. She couldn't stand being anywhere near Joe and with Logan here she was stuck.

When he'd first shown up at the bar she'd been thrilled, figuring her plan to make him jealous was going to go better than she'd hoped. But the more uncomfortable Joe made her, the harder it got to keep up the façade that she was into him.

But like it or not, somehow she had to stick it out if she had any prayer of making Logan jealous. The question was, how much longer could she stand Joe's constant groping?

She sipped her drink as she considered tossing the whole stupid plan out the window. And then she had a brilliant idea. Maybe if she pretended to have a headache she could get Joe to take her home early. Logan wouldn't know she'd ditched Joe. To Logan it might just look as if she'd taken Joe back to her place for a night of hot sex.

How had she not thought of this sooner? It was the perfect solution. An absolute win-win situation for her. She'd get rid of Joe and still make Logan jealous.

Joe came back from the restroom and threw his arm around her shoulders, pulling her flush against his side. "Did you miss me?"

Hardly. She dredged up a smile in case Logan was watching. "You have no idea."

He kissed her on the neck, and she inwardly cringed from the unwanted contact.

"Knew you would."

This guy's ego had no limits. "Listen, I've got a headache that just won't quit. Would you mind very much if we cut tonight short?"

He looked taken aback for a second and then, much to her amazement, gave her a knowing smile that didn't make a lick of sense. "Sure thing." He finished off his beer and dropped his hand to the small of her back. "Let's go."

Unease washed over her. He looked far too happy about this. Was she missing something?

They left the bar and he guided her through the parking lot to the far end where he'd parked his truck. He unlocked the doors with his key fob and hopped in leaving her to find her own way into the vehicle.

What a gentleman.

She shook her head and opened the door. By the time she slid onto the bench seat, Joe had the CD player crooning a slow love song. The nervousness she'd been fighting down all day kicked up a notch. He'd had hard rock playing when he picked her up so what was this about? When he didn't start the truck right away her anxiety increased tenfold. Was this some kind of seduction thing he had going?

With alarm, she watched him turn towards her, laying his arm along the back of the seat. He dropped his hand and ran the back of his fingers along her cheek. She barely suppressed the shudder of distaste.

Good grief. He really was making moves on her, right here in the parking lot. This guy was class all the way. Before she could get over her incredulity and say something, Joe moved closer and put his arm around her.

How the hell was she going to get him to just take her home?

He leaned in close to kiss her and everything inside her revolted. She jerked back to avoid the kiss. "Could you just take me home? I wasn't kidding about the headache."

He didn't move his arm, just pulled back and studied her for a moment. "You don't really expect me to believe that."

"Why not?"

"Come on. You've been giving me signals since I picked you up?"

He had to be joking. "What are you talking about?"

He let his hand drop until his fingers almost skimmed her breast. "You want me. I know you do."

Was this guy for real? "What I want is to go home."

He nodded. "That'd be better. My place is a mess." He leaned closer and the disgusting smell of beer assailed her. "Come on, honey, let's have a little taste to get things going."

As she struggled to deal with the fact that he just wasn't getting it, he laid a slobbery kiss on her. She squirmed to get away, shoving hard at his chest to dislodge him but he didn't budge. What's up with him? He'd only had one beer so he wasn't drunk. Talking through the side of her mouth, she told him to, "Knock it off."

"Don't fight it, sweet cheeks."

He moved to kiss her again. She pulled back as far as she could without putting her head clear through the seat and turned her face away. "I said *stop* it."

Not even remotely listening, he kissed her again but this time she ignored the revulsion that shuddered through her and felt around until she found the door handle.

Finding its cool steel shape with relief, she yanked it up. As soon as her door opened, she shoved at Joe with every bit of strength she had, dislodging him enough to slip out from under him and land feet first on the parking lot asphalt.

He reached for her and she skipped back.

"What the hell are you doing?"

She snatched up her purse from where it had fallen on the ground. "I'm finding my own way home, asshole. Have a nice life."

Before he could react, she slammed the door in his face and scurried for the safety of the crowded bar. She could have used her cell to call a cab right here but she didn't trust Joe not to come after her. Besides, one of the lights in the parking lot was out and it was pretty dark, making her feel even more nervous. It was probably the reason Joe had parked back here in the first place.

Feeling isolated and alone, she glanced back at Joe's truck to make sure he wasn't following. Pure relief washed over her when she saw he wasn't. The last thing she wanted was another run-in with that jerk.

Preoccupied with her thoughts, she barreled along, not paying attention to where she was going until she crashed into another person coming around the corner of the building.

She grasped at strong arms to keep from falling at the same time as firm hands steadied her. Apologies rang out. Their gazes locked. And recognition hit them both at the same time.

"Logan."

"What the hell?"

Damn it. So much for making Logan think she'd gone home with Joe.

Logan's eyes narrowed. "What happened?"

Like I'm going to tell you. She shook her head, hating the way her body came to life just by standing this close to him. "Nothing."

He raised an eyebrow. "Forget something?"

She snatched onto the excuse. "Yeah. I, uh, was just heading back in to get it before we take off."

The lie might even have worked if Joe hadn't picked that exact moment to zoom past them and roar out of the parking lot. Was nothing going to go her way tonight?

Logan had looked skeptical even before Joe took off without her. Right now he was the poster child of disbelief. "What's going on?"

Maybe if she downplayed things he'd back off. "Nothing you have to concern yourself about."

"Let me be the judge of that."

She shrugged. "We had a disagreement, is all."

Logan narrowed his eyes. "Did he try something?"

Annoyance vibrated through her, and she stiffened. "That's none of your business."

"Of course it's my business."

She raised her voice. "No, it's not."

"Yes, it is!"

Why was he yelling at her? Anger bloomed, full and lush and she yelled back. "No it's not!" She stabbed him in the chest with her finger for emphasis.

Logan's hands twitched on her arms and he leaned closer. "What did he do to you?"

"What the hell is this, an interrogation?"

A muscle ticked in his jaw and she could see him trying to get a grip on his temper. She stared him down, willing him to back off and at the same time forcing herself to get a grip on her raging hormones. Angry or not, with Logan this close it was hard to ignore the overwhelming urge to kiss him.

Finally, Logan broke their tense contest of wills. "It's not an interrogation. I just asked a simple question."

Maybe so, but she wished he'd stop pushing. A few drops of rain peppered her face and she put her hand out to see if she'd imagined it. She hadn't. It was as good an excuse as any to make her escape. "It's starting to rain. I'm going in."

"You're avoiding the question."

What could she say to make him stop drilling her about this? Maybe if she was flippant he'd get frustrated and take the hint. "What question?"

He gave an exaggerated sigh that conveyed his irritation better than words. "Did Joe try something he shouldn't have?"

Nica wanted to scream out of sheer frustration. This whole night had turned into a huge disaster. Instead of being jealous, Logan was doing the over-protective brother thing. Again. And she'd had enough.

She fisted her hands on her hips. "You made it quite clear the other night you don't want any part of me, so what do you care?"

"That doesn't mean I don't care what happens to you."

"That's exactly what it means."

Logan growled in apparent frustration. "I care, damn it. I shouldn't, but I do. Too much."

"But not the way *I* want you to." She hated the betraying hitch in her voice. She moved to run back to the bar but Logan wouldn't let her go. Frustration and hurt pumped through her system. She pointedly looked at his hands on her arms but he didn't remove them.

He opened his mouth, but whatever he'd been about to say died on his lips when the sky opened up and rain deluged them in earnest.

And still, he didn't let go.

For one long, tense moment, they glared at each other. Neither moved. They barely breathed. Logan seemed to be battling with himself but for the life of her Nica couldn't understand why. In fact, she didn't understand any of it. Least of all why he refused to see her as a woman.

And then a tiny flicker of hope danced around the edges of her psyche. Was this the chance she'd been hoping for? Could she use this to push Logan over the edge? Damn, she wished she was better at this seduction thing.

Unsure of what to do next, she didn't do anything. But Logan took the decision out of her hands when he dipped his head and crushed her mouth in a devastating kiss.

As if by magic, her anger vanished. She melted like butter on warm bread. It didn't matter that it was pouring. It didn't matter that she was frustrated with his bullheadedness. It didn't even matter how hurt she was. He still took her breath away. And apparently also her will to resist. She was hopeless. And the truth was, even that didn't matter.

Warm, drenching rain continued to fall, but she didn't care. She barely even took notice. She pulled him closer, wishing their clothes weren't in the way so she could touch his bare skin. Their mouths ate at each other in a desperate dance of need and want. Everything inside her came to life and sizzled in a frenzy of erotic yearning. Why was Logan the only man who could set her on fire this way?

In seconds their clothes were soaked through, making everything feel more intimate. More immediate. More urgent. They were in their own little world, drowning in the heat and taste of each other.

Fiery desire blazed through Nica. All she wanted was to have Logan inside her again. Here. Now. Up against the brick wall behind her. Consequences be damned.

Maybe then he'd see they weren't a fluke. Maybe then he'd see they were meant to be together.

Logan's head whirled in a red haze of desire. He couldn't seem to think at all. Moments ago, he'd never been angrier. Now, he'd never been more turned-on in his life.

Somehow his anger had morphed into this gut-wrenching, rampant need. He didn't care about Joe. He didn't care about Nica's recklessness. He didn't even care where they were. All he cared about was this moment and how incredible she felt in his arms. How she made him feel more alive than he'd ever felt before.

Focused solely on Nica, he relished the feel of her wet skin beneath his fingers. Her lips beneath his, her tongue doing wicked things that made his dick throb in tempo with his heart. All he wanted was to have her wet and writhing beneath him. Nothing else mattered. It was the most important thing in the world. It was the only thing.

He pulled her closer still, dropping his hands to her incredible ass, squeezing and grinding her into his throbbing erection. He searched every corner of her mouth, toying with her tongue, tasting her as deeply as possible. He wanted to consume her.

The pelting rain just added to the frenzy, the prevailing urgency of lust driving them on. Swept away by sensory overload, he pushed her up against the brick wall. Her pelvis pressed snug against him, but that was nowhere near enough. He needed her closer. He needed to be buried in her wet heat. He needed to fuck some sense into her.

Thank God, it was secluded and dark where they were. And the torrential rain was a blessing in disguise because no one was around to see what they were doing.

He grasped her thighs and pulled her legs around his waist, achingly grateful her short denim skirt didn't hamper the movement. With access to her hot core right there, his heart all but pounded through his chest in anticipation. He was almost where he wanted to be. Just a little bit more. Pushing the crotch of her panties aside, his seeking fingers found their way to her hot, wet pussy and teased her sensitive clit.

She writhed against his fingers and threw back her head. "God, Logan, what you do to me."

Her declaration was music to his ears.

He thrust into her with one finger, then two. She was so damn ready for him his cock jerked in anticipation of plunging into her pulsating core. Her searing flesh beckoned him to do the unthinkable.

God, they were in a public place, but that didn't matter. He had to have her. She burned like living flame through her clothing. The only thing hotter was the blaze of lust driving him on.

One handed, he worked at the buttons on his fly while holding her up with his free hand. God bless her, Nica didn't hesitate. She freed his cock and gripped his erection with both hands almost sending him over the edge.

He groaned at the exquisite sensation of her soft hands touching him. "Baby, I have to get inside you before I go crazy."

She nipped his bottom lip. "What are you waiting for?"

Fuck.

Her eagerness blew his mind. He couldn't believe his beautiful wildcat wanted this as much as he did.

Still holding his cock, she led him towards her waiting pussy while he held the crotch of her panties aside. Rain was in his eyes. He could barely see but he didn't care. He was almost there. Nirvana was within reach.

A wolf whistle cracked through the air.

They froze.

Quickly, Logan concealed Nica as much as he could, burying her face in his shoulder seconds before a couple ran past them in a flurry of giggles and laughter.

Neither of them moved until the couple was out of sight, but the interruption had done its job. The madness of the moment had passed and good sense reigned supreme once more.

Nica slid her legs down his hips and they broke apart. Still breathing hard, they stared at each other in shock for endless seconds before Nica looked away and started rearranging her disheveled clothing.

Stunned to find himself in this predicament, Logan followed suit, his mind reeling with the enormity of what had happened.

They'd almost had sex, right here in a public place. "My God."

Nica looked up, her face a study of wary expectation.

Furious with himself, he let his anger fly. "Damn it. This shouldn't have happened."

Her features immediately contorted with anger. "You're going to do it to me again, aren't you?"

He struggled to understand what she meant. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the other morning."

The light dawned. She was talking about the fateful morning after when he'd freaked out and then bailed on her. Not one of his shining moments. And she wasn't wrong. He would have thought it impossible, but he was even more freaked out now than he'd been then. That he was keeping his cool this well was nothing short of a miracle. He seriously needed to get a grip. He had to make her understand that this thing between them was wrong. That *he* was the one at fault here. Not her. And he had to do it in a calm, reasonable way. Unlike the last time.

"This isn't about you. This is about me. I'm a complete slime for taking advantage of you. Again."

She was anything but calm. "Damn it all to hell. Maybe I *want* you to take advantage of me. Did you ever think of that?"

Her anger hit him like a freight train but he pressed on. He had to make her see why this shouldn't have happened. "You can't be serious. You're like my—"

She cut him off with a finger against his lips. "If you call me your little sister one more time I swear I'm going to throttle you."

His mind raced. How did he make her see how wrong this was? Before he could try again, the pouring rain quit as abruptly as it had started. Logan swiped his hands over his face to clear his eyes. His gaze bore into hers, willing her to see his side of this. "You don't understand. Tony's my best friend. Best friends don't sleep with their best friend's sister."

Nica blinked, clearly taken aback. "You have to be joking. This is about Tony?"

"Yes. No." He shoved his hands through his dripping hair. "Damn it. I don't even know anymore."

She shook her head, looking numb. "There's no winning this argument with you, is there?"

He shook his head. "No, there isn't. Tony, hell, your whole family, was there for me at a time when I really needed them. I still can't believe I've abused their trust like this. They'd be appalled at what I've done. My only hope is to stop before I make things worse."

Nica took a moment to absorb what he'd said and then nodded once. She glanced down, her shoulders slumped, looking deflated. At last, without looking up, she nodded again. "Okay, then." She turned away and started for the bar.

He called after her. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

She stopped. "There's nothing left to say. My family's more important to you than I am. This is a fight I can't win."

He reached out to catch her arm but stopped. "Where are you going?"

She turned around to face him again. "I'm going inside to get a drink while I wait for a cab to take me home."

Pain lanced through Logan's chest. Nica looked hurt and broken and he felt like a complete shit. The last thing he'd ever intended to do was hurt her, yet that was just what he'd done.

If ever there was a guy not worthy of Nica, it was him. He was even worse than a creep like Joe. Joe had never pretended to be anything but a player. Logan, however, was supposed to be like family. Someone who would protect her, not hurt her. He'd not only let himself down, he'd let them all down.

"I'll take you home."

"No, thanks. I'll find my own way."

"Don't be silly. I'll take you home."

She looked down and shook her head. "Fine. Whatever."

Her utter dejection slammed into Logan and he wanted to smash his fist through the wall. He'd do it too, gladly breaking every bone in his hand, if it meant he could take her pain away. Instead, all he could do was helplessly witness how he'd single-handedly ripped the sparkle right out of her.

Fuck.

## Chapter Nine

Nica rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

Last night had left her so depressed she couldn't even muster enough energy to get out of bed. The pervading heaviness in her chest refused to go away and the accompanying sense of bleak hopelessness had sapped all of her strength. She hadn't even called Carmen to tell her what had happened. She just couldn't face it.

The only thing she'd managed to do so far that morning was call in sick. And that was just because she didn't have a choice. No way did she want to see Joe after their tussle in his truck, and she sure as hell couldn't face running into Logan. It was way too soon and she was feeling way too raw.

Last night she'd given in and let Logan take her home, but she was certain it was the most uncomfortably tense ride since the invention of the automobile. They'd both sat in total silence, neither of them saying anything, with Nica strenuously avoiding looking in his direction.

Adding to the discomfort was the fact that she felt him constantly glancing her way, checking to see how she was doing. It'd been enough to make her want to throw open the door and jump out just to get away.

Maybe if she'd been able to break the awkward silence it wouldn't have been so bad but she hadn't been able to think of anything to say. Feeling crushed, small talk was beyond her. What more could she say anyway? There didn't seem to be any way to get past Logan's reasons for not being with her.

And that was the worst thing of all. The loss of hope. Up until last night, she'd thought it was just a matter of forcing Logan to see her as a woman. She couldn't have been more wrong. If last night's hot and heavy make-out session had proven anything it was that he most definitely saw her as a woman. And he didn't need to be drunk to desire her either. Hell, they'd almost had sex right there in the parking lot because they'd been so hot for each other.

But for Logan, it wasn't enough.

The stubborn jerk was convinced her whole family would hate him if they knew he'd slept with her. As if that weren't sufficient, he'd broken some kind of sacred male-bonding code-of-honor thing.

What the hell could she do with that? Nothing, that's what. Because she would never do anything to get between the close friendship he and Tony had.

She loved him too much to do that to him. Logan's own parents had never been there for him. His mother had run off when he was very young and his father had taken to drinking, much more interested in

booze than he'd ever been in his son. It was the reason why Logan had spent so much time with Tony and her family.

She sighed. Nope, she was just going to have to accept Logan's feelings on the matter and move on.

Incessant banging on her front door interrupted her quality wallow-time.

She tossed the blankets over her head and mumbled, "Go away."

But the banging didn't stop. "Open the door, Nica. I know you're in there."

What the hell was Tony doing here? She lowered the blankets and raised her voice so he'd hear her this time. "I'm not in the mood for visitors. Go away."

"I'm not going away until you open the door."

Oh crap. She knew *that* tone of voice. He meant business. "Do we have to do this now?"

"Yes."

Shit. "I'm coming."

She threw off her comforter with a resigned groan, pushed herself off the bed and schlepped to the door. Throwing it open, she glared at her brother. "What do you want?"

Tony stepped in and closed the door. "I want an explanation."

Oh great. He wanted to talk. That couldn't be a good sign. "I'm really not in the mood to talk about anything."

"You're going to talk about this. What's going on between you and Logan?"

Shit, does he know something? "What do you mean?"

He raised his right eyebrow. "Give me some credit. I noticed the hot looks between you two at the party on Sunday. I wondered about it then, but you not coming in to work this morning settles it. It's not like you to beg off work. The clincher is that Logan's stomping around like a stirred-up bear but he won't tell me what's bugging him. He always tells me what's bugging him. Even when I don't want to hear it. So what's going on?"

Nica crossed her arms in front of her. "What makes you think I know what his problem is?"

"Because when he found out you weren't coming in today he practically bit my head off."

Why would that make Logan mad? "That's hardly conclusive."

"No, but now you're being evasive. Something's up with you two and I want to know what it is."

Panic buzzed through her system. Tony was like a dog with a bone when he was onto something. Impossible to shake off. But she couldn't tell him what had happened between her and Logan without damaging their friendship. The last thing she wanted was to cause trouble between them. "There's nothing going on between us." Not anymore anyway, so it wasn't really a lie.

"You must think I'm blind. Ever since you got this makeover Logan's been acting strange. And when you're around he can't take his eyes off you."

"Really?" Hope flickered to life in her heart but just as quickly went out when she remembered it didn't change anything.

"Really. Look, I know you've had a crush on Logan for years. This makeover was all about him, wasn't it?"

"No."

Tony laughed. "You've always been a terrible liar."

"Okay, so it might have had something to do with him, but he's not interested so it doesn't matter."

"Not interested? Or he backed off?"

Nica's gaze shot to Tony's. Did he know what had happened between them? "What do you mean by backed off?"

Tony nodded as if he'd just figured something out. "So that's why you look like your cat just died and Logan looks like he's being audited by Attila the Hun. Did you two have a fight?"

Oh hell, Tony had obviously guessed so why fight it? "Close enough. He doesn't want to see me anymore."

"Did he say why?"

Nica shrugged. "Because I'm your little sister. Some kind of male code-of-honor thing. He can't get past it. I guess you and the folks are more important to him than I am." She couldn't keep the resentment and hurt out of her voice.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so. What of it?"

He smiled. "Nothing."

A decidedly devious look crossed his face. What is he up to? Suspicion flared to life. "That look on your face doesn't look like nothing to me. You'd better not say anything to Logan about this."

"You worry too much." He looked at her consideringly. "In fact, you look really stressed out and tired. I think you need a break. Why don't you take off and get away from here for a bit? Go to the cottage for a few days and get your head together."

Well, that was out of left field. Although, she had to admit the idea had real appeal. "I doubt that would help."

"It always helps me. Fresh air, the lake, peace and quiet. It's just what you need."

Maybe it was. "You think?"

"I know."

She pictured the serene lake on a misty morning, lounging on the deck listening to the birds singing their hearts out in the trees. The more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea. There was no way she wanted to face anyone right now anyway. She needed time to lick her wounds and get her head on straight.

Tony was right, she should go. "You'll okay it with Dad?"

Tony nodded. "You bet."

Just the thought of going up there caused a feeling of peace to wash over her. This was a perfect idea. "Okay. I will."

Besides, if she didn't feel better soon, at least she'd be close to the lake. She could just jump in and drown her sorrows

Logan was in a piss-poor mood.

It'd been a crappy couple of days and today was the absolute worst of them all. He couldn't shake the guilt gnawing a hole in his gut, both for what had happened in the parking lot last night and especially for how he'd hurt Nica afterwards. He'd never forgive himself for what he'd done.

She hadn't come in to work today and he knew it was because of him, which made him feel like a shit. The fact that a part of him was glad not to have to face her today made him not only a shit but a cowardly shit. At this rate he wouldn't be able to find his self-esteem with a magnifying glass and a pair of tweezers.

It didn't help any that he was miserable and chewing everybody's face off if they even looked at him wrong. If he kept this up no one would ever speak to him again.

His cell rang, giving him a much needed distraction from his unpleasant thoughts. "Donovan."

Tony's voice greeted him. "Come up to the trailer. I need to see you."

"On my way."

Walking past Nica's empty desk gave him a fresh stab of guilt. But that flew right out the window the second he walked into Tony's office at the back of the trailer. Something was wrong. "What's up?"

"Close the door, would you?"

Unease washed down Logan's spine when Tony didn't greet him in his usual easy-going way. Logan closed the door and sat across from him, wondering what was going on. He repeated his question. "What's up?"

Tony sat forward in his chair with a stern look that put Logan even more on edge.

"When were you planning on telling me you have a thing for my sister?"

Logan all but bolted back out of the chair. "What?"

"Have you slept with her yet?"

Holy shit. How had Tony found out? Had Nica told him about them out of spite? What could he say?

He quickly ran through his options and settled on coming clean. It was the only way to go. "Just once and we were both a little drunk at the time." Okay, that didn't come out right.

Logan half-expected Tony to leap over his desk and smash his face in. Instead, Tony nodded solemnly. "Do you love her?"

Logan blinked. His brain stalled. "Geez, where did that come from?" And how the hell did he answer? "Well, do you?"

Did he? She was sexy as hell for sure. But love? He thought about Nica's sweetness, her reliability, her loyalty to her family. Traits he'd never seen in his own family, traits that meant the world to him. That he'd always admired in her.

He suddenly realized the answer with great clarity and was grateful he was sitting. Because the lightning bolt epiphany wasn't at all what he would have expected. "Yeah, I think I do."

He waited for the axe to lop off his head. But instead Tony just nodded again. "Good. So what are you going to do about it?"

Logan's mouth fell open. Then closed. "You mean you're okay with this?"

Tony sat back, at once looking more relaxed. "I've always thought you two would be great together. I just thought you weren't interested in Nica in that way."

"Well, I wasn't until the other day. I mean, I've always cared for her. I just didn't realize there was more than friendship between us."

"So what's the problem?"

With Tony being so up front and cool about the whole thing, Logan suddenly felt really stupid. "I thought you'd kill me if I even looked at her."

"Well, that depends."

"On?"

"On what your intentions are."

Logan hid a grin. "Do you realize how much you sound like your dad right now?"

Tony shrugged. "I guess my parents' old-fashioned values have rubbed off on me. Especially when it comes to my sister. Look, I know it's too soon to be talking about anything serious here. I just want to know if you're messing around with her or if you're more serious than that."

"I've been so busy telling myself what I feel for Nica is wrong that I'm not quite sure what I'm thinking, but I'm not just messing around."

"Good. Because I think she'd be good for you. You'd be good for each other. You've always been like family to us, and we know you're a great guy who would never hurt Nica. What more could we want?"

Well, damn. "You're really not mad? I thought you'd punch me out and never speak to me again."

Tony shook his head and laughed. "You always did have an overdeveloped sense of honor. It's one of the things I like best about you."

Struck dumb, he just sat there.

"Do you still want to see her?"

Without hesitation, he said, "Yes."

"Then you need to go talk to her because she thinks you want nothing to do with her."

Shit. Tony was right. Logan jumped up, ready to sprint into action.

"Hold up. She's not at home. She went to the cottage for a few days."

Logan knew his way to the cottage. He'd spent many a happy vacation there with the Morellis. In fact, it was the perfect place to try to set things right with Nica. Up there she wouldn't be able to run away from him that easily.

"Let everyone know I'll be gone for the rest of the day, would ya?"

Tony smiled, looking very pleased with himself. "Sure thing."

Logan turned to leave, thinking about being alone with Nica, completely sober and without any guilt. Of finally being able to touch her soft, smooth skin, exploring every inch of her sweet little body the way he wanted. Of slipping into her warm moist pussy...

He came to a sudden stop. A few hours really wasn't going to cut it. He grinned. "On second thought, there aren't any issues that can't wait. Tell everyone I'll be back in a couple of days."

It would take at *least* that long just to scratch the surface of everything he wanted to do to Nica.

Tony's laughter followed him as he raced out the door.

#### Chapter Ten

Nica sighed with contentment as she stretched out on the chaise lounge. The huge deck in back of her parent's cottage had always been her favorite place. She couldn't count the number of hours she'd spent back here flaked out with a good book.

Today, her mind was in too much turmoil to concentrate on a book, but that was okay. She loved this view. The lake was so beautiful and peaceful and the evening was perfect. She heard the gentle call of the loons in the distance, their mournful wail soothing her hurt and troubled mind rather than adding to her depression.

Tony had been right. This was exactly what she needed. A bit of time to collect her thoughts, sort out her feelings and regroup before she faced anyone. Or more specifically, before she faced Logan again.

Now that she realized Logan's reasons for not wanting to be with her, she very much needed to come to terms with them. But damn, it was hard to let go of a dream. Harder still to move on. But it was time, no matter how much it hurt to do so.

She wanted love in her life. Love with a man who loved her as much as she did him. A true relationship of caring. The new her couldn't, *wouldn't*, settle for anything less. And it was now painfully obvious Logan wasn't going to be the man to share that kind of love with her.

When she'd told Carmen what had happened with Logan, even she'd agreed it was time for Nica to let go. Carmen's commiserating disappointment was a soothing balm to Nica's shredded heart. And her anger somehow lifted Nica's spirits, at least a little bit.

There was something special about sharing your troubles with a friend that made even the most horrible things better, even though nothing had changed. Even now, remembering Carmen's exact words made Nica smile. How did Carmen put it? Something along the lines of Logan being a shit-for-brains male without an ounce of sense in his head, and that he didn't deserve Nica if he wasn't willing to fight for her.

Truer words were never spoken.

Her growling stomach interrupted her thoughts and reminded her she hadn't eaten since she'd arrived. Actually, she hadn't eaten since last night. Which went to show just how depressed she was. Nothing ever killed her appetite. But despite her tummy's insistent rumblings, she couldn't work up any enthusiasm for food.

Even knowing she had all her favorite comfort foods on hand didn't help. She thought about the pint of Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk in the freezer, the box of cream puffs sitting on the counter, the salt and vinegar chips in the cupboard and the assorted chocolates chilling in the fridge. Nothing. Obviously stopping to buy all that stuff on her way over here had been a wasted effort. Hmmm. Maybe she was coming down with something.

Laughing at herself, Nica stopped thinking about food and tried to think about the positive things in her life. Her plan *had* failed, but she really couldn't regret anything she'd done or that had happened since her makeover. Because of it, she'd learned things about herself. Important things. Like that she could put herself out there no matter how nervous she was. That she was stronger and gutsier than she'd *ever* imagined she could be. And most amazing of all, that she could attract guys if she just made the effort.

She'd also learned that Logan wasn't for her. It was a bitter pill to swallow but valuable to finally know beyond a shadow of a doubt. She was done with dreaming for the impossible. She was going to lick her wounds and then put on her big-girl panties, go out there and find the right guy for her.

Her new mantra had served her well for the past few days and she was going to keep it. It was an integral part of the new her. And she was going to hold onto its ideals with both hands, and experience life with the gusto she hadn't had the nerve to show up until now.

Yep, she was going to do *all* of that. Just as soon as her heart stopped feeling as if it was going to shatter into a million jagged pieces. That should only take an eon or two. Just as soon as she forgot the bliss of being held in Logan's arms. The sweet excitement of his lips against hers. The heart-stopping fullness of when he thrust home and took her to a hitherto unknown dimension where they alone existed.

Yeah, that shouldn't take too long at all. Once that initial eon or two was past she was good to go.

Shit. She was so screwed.

She shivered as the early evening chill permeated her consciousness. It was getting dark. Because the cottage was two hours farther north than home the nights had more of a nip to them. She rubbed her arms for warmth as she headed inside just to stop short when she saw headlights flickering through the trees on the long driveway leading up to the cottage.

Had Tony followed her up here? Had Carmen decided Nica needed company no matter how much she'd insisted she didn't? Curiosity overrode her desire to hide from whoever it was and she waited at the top of the steps.

When the pickup got close enough, shock chased through her as she realized it was Logan's. Her heart slammed into her throat, almost choking her, and she clenched her hands tight with nerves.

What was he doing here? What did he want? The need to run inside and bolt the door like a wuss almost overtook her. She didn't want to face him just yet. That's why she was up here, to get away from him.

Taking deep, calming breaths, she forced herself to stand her ground. There was nothing she could do about it now. He was here and hiding was rather childish. Besides, she was made of tougher stuff than that.

With deliberate precision, she straightened her shoulders and pretended to look a hundred times calmer than she felt. At least, she hoped she looked calmer than she felt. Because if she didn't, her eyes were bugging out and her hair was standing perpendicular to her head.

Logan parked his dusty GMC Sierra beside her two-year-old Chevy Cobalt and opened his door.

Still striving to look cool, she slowly descended the steps as he made his way towards her. "What are you doing here?"

He stopped in front of her and jammed his hands into his front jeans pockets, managing to look sexy as hell in the process. With him on the ground and her standing one step up, they were almost eye to eye. "I had a good talk with Tony."

She clung to the railing for support while her heart skipped about erratically. "What about?"

"About us." He reached out and skimmed his fingers along her cheek.

She closed her eyes, her traitorous heart relishing every nuance of his touch before sanity returned and she pulled back. "I thought you didn't want Tony to know about us."

"I didn't. He already knew." Logan gave her a sheepish smile. "I wish I could say it was my idea but Tony was the one who brought it up. How did he find out about us, Nica?"

Did he think she'd told Tony about them? She searched his face but he didn't seem angry with her. "He guessed. He's far more observant than either of us gave him credit for."

Logan nodded, acknowledging what she'd said. "I still can't believe he didn't kill me on the spot. Hell, I would have killed me."

She couldn't stand the suspense. "Why are you here, Logan?"

"To tell you how sorry I am that I hurt you. To try to make things right." His gaze bore into hers. "I'm here because we need to talk, to sort things out."

He tentatively touched her arm but she shrugged it off, afraid of reading more into what he was saying than was there. "Nothing's changed. I'm still Tony's little sister and your honorary little sister by default."

Logan shook his head. "That's just it, everything's changed. I thought Tony would be furious when he found out about us, but he isn't. By some miracle he's fine with us being together." He reached out again but stopped short of touching her and dropped his hand. "Thank God for that, because I can't stop thinking about you. Of how it is between us. Of how much I want to be with you."

She stomped on the hope that flickered to life deep in her heart. Was he saying what she thought he was saying? Or was she reading more into it because she so desperately wanted to hear it? She had to be sure. "What do you mean?"

He leaned in closer. "I mean I want to give us a chance."

His distracting closeness overwhelmed her so she backed up a step. He followed after her. "I mean I want to get to know you as a woman."

She stepped back again, her insides shaking in earnest. Is this really happening?

He stalked her up yet another step. "I mean I want to know what we're like together as a couple, not just as friends."

"You do?" She hated the quavering in her voice.

He nodded, his gaze boring into hers. "I do. With every fiber of my being."

She kept moving backwards and Logan shadowed her every move until her back hit the door to the cottage. He leaned in, all but touching her lips. "I finally know what I want, Nica. You. And I feel anything but brotherly towards you."

He ran his fingers down her neck, sensitizing her skin. "I want to touch you. Everywhere. In every way imaginable."

Her heart raced double-time. His thumb skimmed across her lips. "I want to kiss you until you melt in my arms and we both go insane from the pleasure of it."

He brushed her lips with his own, the brief contact making them tingle. "I want to taste every inch of your luscious body until you're mindless with ecstasy."

Her body instantly heated and thrummed to life. His words seduced her, mesmerized her, drew her under the spell of his deep rich voice until she wanted nothing more than to fulfill every one of his desires and then some.

"I want to make love to you until you scream my name in blissful release over and over again."

Yes, please.

Enthralled, she watched his fingers circle the tip of her right nipple, the hardened peak clearly showing through the fabric of her halter top. She shuddered with urgent hunger.

"Do you still want that?"

Was he kidding? She tried to breathe with lungs that had forgotten how. Her brain activity had shut down. She existed only to feel, absorb, react. Her head fell back against the door as she savored the sensation of his fingers on her breast with closed eyes.

After endless moments, she took a deep, shuddering breath and answered his question. "God, yes. I've wanted all of that and more for as long as I can remember."

He continued caressing her breast while he nuzzled her neck, his warm breath sending tingles skittering throughout her body. "I think I have too. I was just too blind and too stupid to realize it."

He cupped her face in his big, callused hands, making her feel cherished and wanted. Something she'd never thought to feel from him. Her breath hitched with burgeoning emotion and tears of joy slid down her cheeks. He brushed his lips across hers and the sweetest ache she'd ever known instantly set up somewhere around her heart.

She sighed in contended bliss as the pain of his previous rejections melted away. None of it mattered anymore. Nothing could touch her as long as he was here with her.

He deepened the kiss, devouring her mouth until she couldn't think. Their tongues danced and tasted, parried and tantalized. Hot, hungry urgency raced down her spine to gather in her core. She *never* wanted this kiss to end, but he inexplicably pulled back. She was about to ask why when he undid the ties on her halter top. Cool air washed over her exposed breasts, making the already aroused peaks harden further. His hands covered them, both keeping them warm and exciting them to an almost unbearable degree.

Leaning down, he laved first one nipple then the other until they felt achingly full and sensitive. The brisk evening air added a delicious biting contrast to his hot, moist mouth.

Her single thought was that they needed to take this inside.

Now.

She fumbled behind her back until she found the knob and opened the door. "Let's take this where we can be more comfortable."

He grinned against her breast. "I'm comfortable right here."

Feeling a lightness of being she'd thought was lost to her, she laughed with pure delight. "I'll just bet you are, but I'm not. I can think of somewhere *much* more comfortable."

She backed through the open doorway and turned to scamper off to her bedroom, but didn't get very far. Logan caught her hand and whirled her back around so he could kiss her senseless where they stood. When she'd stopped resisting he pinned her up against the old, worn dresser in the hallway, kissing and teasing everything his lips could reach.

Her top hit the floor. So did his shirt.

She let her fingers wander aimlessly across his chest, enjoying the feel of hard muscle under soft skin.

He tested the top of the dresser and waggled his eyebrows. "This looks plenty comfy to me." His hands dropped to her hips while he leaned in close and ate at her ear. "Upstairs is way too far away."

"Here?" Her voice squeaked in surprise. More than a little scandalized by the idea, she felt her face flame. Which was kind of ridiculous after they'd almost had sex in a public place just yesterday. This should have paled in comparison.

"Yes, here." He teased her breast with his wickedly talented mouth. "And now."

His urgency fed hers. In immediate response, her stomach muscles clenched and moist heat pooled in her throbbing core, weakening her resistance until her inner vixen won out over her embarrassment. The decision taken out of her hands, she was secretly thrilled about being decadent and having sex right here in the hallway. "You do realize I'll never be able to look at this dresser the same way again."

He grinned against her breast. "You're right about that. So let's make it memorable." His nimble fingers slid down her belly and undid her shorts, shoving them out of the way. He cupped her mound, seeking out her clit. She couldn't hold back the moan of ecstasy the intimate touch elicited. His magic fingers slicked through her hot folds as she clung to the dresser for support.

Looking at him through slumberous eyes, she gave him a teasing smile. "I had no idea you were so spontaneous."

He nipped the sensitive skin below her ear. "There are a lot of things you don't know about me."

His fingers distracted her until she could barely think. "All good things, I hope."

"I sure hope *you* think so."

She almost cried when his fingers stopped their tormenting play. Before she could complain, she felt his hands caressing her behind, his fingers trailing along the crack between her butt cheeks. Her stomach muscles clenched in anticipation of something she couldn't name. But instead of continuing his tantalizing explorations, he grasped her hips and hiked her up onto the dresser.

She squealed in surprise and grabbed onto his shoulders to steady herself. "Well, aren't you the heman."

"You have no idea. The way I'm feeling right now I'm more beast than man. One that wants to eat you alive."

She thrilled at his suggestive words. He kissed her belly and a trillion nerve-endings leapt to ecstatic life.

Not wanting the feelings to stop, she leaned back on her hands to give him easier access. "If what you're doing right now is any indication, I can't wait to find out more about this side of you."

He grinned against her skin and then tongued her belly-button, setting her even more on fire. "Glad to hear it because I have big plans for you."

"You do? What kind of plans?"

"Wait and see." He kissed his way up to her breasts and suckled first one and then the other until she started squirming from the exquisite torture. He rested his hands on her legs, nudging them farther apart while his thumbs caressed her inner thighs in an erotic promise that teased and tantalized her needy center.

Her inner muscles clenched in anticipation of his touch. God, she wanted—no, *needed*—him to touch her there. But he continued teasing her, almost touching her, but not quite. She decided it was time to do some teasing of her own. Turnabout was fair play after all.

She hitched her fingers into the waistband of his jeans, dispensed with the opening and freed his ironhard shaft into her waiting hands. She eagerly grasped it, loving the silky-steel feel of his impressive length throbbing in her grip, before reaching down with one hand to lovingly cup his sac. He groaned and surged forward, rocking against her in a primitive motion that fueled her excitement even more.

Impatient to have him inside her, she tried to pull him closer.

He pulled back. "Hold on."

She so didn't want to stop. "Why?"

"Protection." Using quick, efficient movements, he shucked his jeans and donned a condom.

With a grin of pure lascivious intent, he grabbed her hips and pulled her to the edge of the dresser. "God, I'm hungry for you, but right now I just can't wait. Next time."

She wondered what he meant but immediately forgot when he buried himself to the hilt in one hard thrust.

Nica moaned long and loud. Wild heat spread like a flash fire, making her wetter than she already was. God she wanted this, his hard cock inside her. Stretching her. Filling her.

Logan groaned and dropped his head onto the top of hers. "I have to stop for a sec or this is going to be over real quick."

Nica smiled, thrilled she affected him as much as he affected her. She savored the moment, appreciating just how precious it was. This was what she needed right now. To feel this closeness with him. To reaffirm their connection.

She kissed his strong neck where it met his shoulder, inhaling his unique scent, thankful to be with him like this. A well of emotion, overwhelming in its poignancy, threatened to bring her to tears again. Swallowing hard, she fought down the feeling, but the tender way he kissed her nape undid her.

He tilted her head up so he could meet her gaze. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He thumbed away the one tear she hadn't been able to hold back. "Doesn't look like nothing to me. This is my fault, isn't it?"

She sniffed and nodded. "Yes, it is."

"Not pulling any punches, I see."

She shook her head. "Nope. I can't. Because it's your fault I'm so happy right now."

"You cry when you're happy?"

"When I'm this happy, yes." She gave him a watery smile. "I never thought I'd be this way with you again. Ever."

He sighed and kissed her nose. "I'm sorry. For everything. For being an insensitive jerk. For thinking of myself before you. For not coming to my senses sooner. Can you ever forgive me?"

His earnest apology touched her on so many levels her heart almost burst with happiness. Suddenly, the humorous timing of his question struck her. She looked down and touched his cock where they were so intimately joined together. "Considering where you are at this very moment, I'd say I already have."

He gave her a long, lingering kiss. "Thank you. I don't deserve it."

She pinched him on the ass hard. He yelped. "No, you don't. Now stop talking and get back to the business at hand."

Logan threw back his head and laughed, unbelievably grateful she'd forgiven him and given him another chance. "Your wish is my command."

Wanting to draw it out, he started to move with long, slow thrusts, stoking the fire higher and higher until he thought he'd go up in flames. She started to pant and squeezed his shoulders so hard he was sure there'd be bruises tomorrow. Sweat broke out on his brow. He couldn't hold back any longer.

Pounding into her, he reached down and found her clit. That's all it took. She arched her back and screamed out his name.

Thankful he'd been able to hold off long enough, he thundered against her in abandon until he joined her over the edge into the sweetest release of his life.

He collapsed against her, bracing himself on the dresser so he wouldn't fall. Their agonized gasps filled the silence surrounding them.

When he was almost breathing normally, he lifted his head, taking in her flushed cheeks and kiss-swollen lips. His heart clenched at how beautiful she was. "That was amazing."

Still trying to catch her breath, she merely nodded her agreement.

"So amazing, I want to do it all over again. Just not right here."

Spent, but nowhere near done with her, he scooped her up to carry her to the nearest bed. She giggled and threw her arms around his neck. "Seems to me the bed was my idea from the beginning."

He laughed and kissed her luscious mouth. "When you're right, you're right."

He took the stairs two at a time. When he got to her room, he tossed her on the bed. She squealed as she bounced hard on the mattress. "Smart woman. You already made up the bed."

Before she could move, he knelt between her legs, spreading them farther apart. Her pretty little pussy, glistening in invitation, set him on fire all over again. "I've been dying to taste you for days now."

He kissed the inside of her thigh, his hair grazing her nether curls.

"What are you doing?" she gasped.

He chuckled. "What do you think I'm doing?"

Her face turned an adorable shade of pink. "You tell me."

He nipped her soft, silky skin. "I'm going to make you come until you can't see straight. And then I'm going to fuck you blind."

She sighed blissfully. "Sounds wonderful."

He saw the trust and love shining from her eyes and it almost brought him to his knees. "Doesn't it? Now where was I?"

Logan spread her folds, leaned in and gave her clit a long, lingering lick, tasting her like he'd been dying to for days. God, she was like the sweetest ambrosia. Intoxicating. Delicious. She shuddered and speared her fingers in his hair as he tongued the nubbin. His cock twitched. He needed to be inside her again, but she hadn't come yet.

He slid one finger into her vagina while he continued to suck and lap, bringing her to a gasping precipice. God, she was so close already. Not breaking his tempo, he worked another finger into her. And another.

She was almost there. He sucked hard on her clit and she came with shattering intensity, screaming his name in release. It was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard. One he hoped to hear over and over again for the rest of his life.

If Nica never moved again it would be too soon.

Lying on her stomach, she was completely sated and exhausted. Logan had been true to his word. She'd definitely come her brains out. And she wasn't the only one. Neither of them had moved for at least an hour and Nica suspected she may never be able to move again.

Certain he'd fallen asleep, she gave a start when he started kissing his way along her spine. A fresh frisson of desire washed over her. Apparently, she was insatiable with Logan. "What do you think you're doing?"

He chuckled and bit the back of her neck. "I'm having my way with you."

She giggled. "I'm too tired to move, but knock yourself out."

"I will."

He worked his way down to her ass, tarrying for a moment at the base of her spine, licking and tasting before continuing his exploration and kissing each butt cheek with loving care. He chuckled. "You know, this ass is what started all the trouble."

She turned her head and struggled to look at him. "Really?"

"Oh yeah. The second I lay eyes on your delectable ass in those new skin-tight jeans of yours I was a goner. Ever since then, I've imagined doing a lot of really wicked things to this ass."

He took a nip and she gasped. "Like what?"

He ran his finger along her lower spine and tickled the crack between her butt cheeks before he continued farther down and teased the puckered rosette he found there. Her vagina clenched from the unaccustomed touch, and a secret thrill skittered through her at what he was doing. "I was the first to go down on you. I'm pretty sure I'd be the first one here too."

Her breath hitched and she felt herself getting wet all over again even though the very idea of him touching her there was embarrassing. Her face heated and for a moment she was speechless. Could she do something like that? It wasn't something she'd ever thought of doing before, but the truth was she wanted to do it all with Logan. And she wanted to be everything to him.

Despite her embarrassment, there was no denying she was intrigued. Deep down, she wanted to at least try it. She was a brazen vixen now after all. And pulling out all the stops was the name of the game.

"Brazen or bust," she whispered.

Logan stilled. "What did you say?"

Startled, she looked back at him. She hadn't realized she'd said it out loud. "Go all the way. Brazen or bust. It's my new mantra. It goes with the new me."

He considered her for a moment and then grinned. "I like it. It suits you." He lightly bit one ass cheek. "In fact, I love everything about you."

He slid his hand from her ass to toy with her clit. "Let's explore the new you together, shall we?"

She squirmed with pleasure. "Yes, please. Every inch."

He nodded. "Every inch." He thrust a finger into her slick pussy. "All the way."

She gasped and then laughed with uninhibited glee. "All the way sounds perfect to me."

## About the Author

To learn more about Anara Bella, please visit <a href="www.anarabella.com">www.anarabella.com</a>, follow her on Twitter at <a href="http://twitter.com/AnaraBella">http://twitter.com/AnaraBella</a> or check out her Facebook page at <a href="www.facebook.com/anarabella">www.facebook.com/anarabella</a>. Send an email to Anara at <a href="manarabella.com">anarabella.com</a>.

## Look for these titles by Anara Bella

Now Available:

Ready or Not The Trouble with Curses Batteries Not Required Wanted: One fling, orgasmic satisfaction guaranteed.

## **Batteries Not Required**

#### © 2009 Anara Bella

In Dana Appleby's experience, really bad, boring sex and long-term relationships seem to go hand-inhand. Enough is enough. She's now on a mission and her main objective is finding excitement in the bedroom. And she knows just who she wants to give it to her: Reese Cooper.

Short-term relationships are Reese's specialty—and so is sex. Dana's proposal to have a little fling is right up his alley, but things go awry when he starts to realize short-term isn't all it's cracked up to be. And suddenly the idea of Dana moving onto someone else doesn't appeal one bit.

So, what's a guy to do? The only thing he can do. Set out to show Dana that long-term doesn't necessarily mean boring. Not with relationships—and definitely not with sex.

Warning: This book contains graphic sex, a scorching office quickie and the teensiest bit of newbie handcuff play. Please note: Batteries not included with this book. But don't worry, you won't need any.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Batteries Not Required:

This was it. She'd made up her mind. Nothing could stop her now.

It all started on the count of three.

Dana looked towards her target and took a deep, fortifying breath before starting the nerve-racking countdown.

One.

Butterflies fluttered ruthlessly in her throat, threatening to choke her. She swallowed hard.

Two.

Her palms started to sweat. She swiped them on her hips.

Two and a half.

Breathing would be good about now. Hey, were those stars?

Two and three quarters.

Get a grip girl. Hike up your backbone and go for it.

Three!

By some complete miracle Dana's legs started to move in the direction she wanted to go. Well, that wasn't quite true. If they went in the direction the chicken side of her wanted to go she'd be headed in the opposite direction, straight out the door. But no, she was definitely headed towards Reese.

Who knew she possessed this much nerve? Not her. Not anyone. She wasn't a wimp, but in all truth, she was anything but a risk-taker. Nor was she the attention-grabbing type.

If anything, with her plain brown hair and boring brown eyes, she tended to blend into the background. She was the one everyone said had her feet planted firmly on the ground. A straight-forward, no-nonsense kind of girl, that was her. In point of fact, she was the last person anyone would ever expect to do anything the least bit daring or "out there". Especially with regards to men. And not with a man she'd only seen around the office and never met. She was the very antithesis of a femme fatale.

But tonight was different. Tonight marked the coming of the New Year and the new her. Tonight she was going after what she wanted. And what she wanted most was Reese Cooper.

No more lying in bed all alone, fantasizing about what she would like to do to his super sexy body. Fantasizing about what she wished he would do to hers. Fantasizing about what they could do to each other. No sirree. She'd made her New Year's resolution and that resolution meant she was going to start this year with a bang.

Or more precisely, with a kiss. The kiss to end all kisses. Or maybe just the kiss that would bring an end to her fantasies about Reese. Because if things didn't go the way she wanted, at least she'd finally know. And maybe, just maybe, she could move on and find a man who would give her what she wanted—a taste of what great sex was all about.

She really had nothing to lose. At the very least she'd find out what it was like to kiss Reese Cooper and that alone was a thrilling prospect. Heck, it already had her tingling down to her toes.

Besides, what else was New Year's for? It was a time for change. For adventure. For new beginnings. All the things she was determined to kick off right now.

After pushing her way through the crush of people, she reached her quarry and stopped just behind him. All six-foot-three-scrumptious inches of him. The place was so packed it was a wonder she was able to get this close to him, but at least the crowd and noise had helped in her quest. She was certain Reese hadn't noticed her approach.

She looked around and quickly sized up her options. Now that she was in position, it was going to take a bit of maneuvering to accomplish what she'd come here to do. Because a man like Reese was too good looking and sought after to come to a party by himself.

His present arm candy was even now primping herself in expectation of getting his New Year's kiss, and the countdown was about to begin. But Dana knew something the blow-up blonde didn't—she was doomed to disappointment. Because, date or no date, in about ten seconds Reese was going to be kissing *her*, Dana Appleby. Not blissfully unaware, destined-to-fail, Cosmo girl.

All Dana had to do was get the timing right.

At that moment the music stopped and the host of the party called for everyone's attention, announcing the countdown was about to commence.

This is it. The moment of truth. The moment she'd been waiting for. She shored up her nerve and got into position.

```
"Ten...nine...eight..."

Steady. I can do this.

"Seven...six...five..."
```

Pretending she'd tripped, Dana very neatly fell into Reese's very strong, very yummy arms.

I did it.

"Four...three..."

She looked into his surprised grey eyes and almost melted. She'd never seen them up close like this before and their impact was staggering. She could happily drown in those eyes. "I'm so sorry. I'm such a klutz."

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"Two...one..."
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He steadied her with his hands but didn't remove them from around her. She took that as a good sign. Now if she could just get rid of the damn blush making her complexion a bright, fire-engine red. It was hard to look sexy when you looked as if your head was going to catch fire at any second.

"You okay?" He seemed genuinely concerned. How sweet.

A chorus of "Happy New Year" being shouted from every corner of the room effectively interrupted her answer.

As the surrounding crowd whooped it up and kissed the one they loved, or whoever was convenient, Reese looked around, obviously trying to sort out his current dilemma. His gaze flitted between blow-up Barbie—who was frantically trying to shove Dana out of the way—to his armful of Dana.

Dana, however, didn't have any such dilemma on her hands. She knew exactly what she was going to do. She ignored the bimbo, disregarded Reese's shock when she grabbed his lapels, and tossed off what she hoped was an impishly sexy grin. Red face and all. Then she proceeded to kiss the living daylights out of him.

At least she hoped that's what she was doing.

For an instant, he went perfectly still, no doubt taken aback and not quite sure what to do with her, and a feeling of panic fluttered in her stomach. Oh no, what if he pushed her away? Before that thought could fully take root, he relaxed and took the kiss over with an eagerness Dana would never have dared hope for.

Oh God, it was a million times better than she'd ever imagined. *This* was the stuff fantasies were made of. *This* was what a kiss was supposed to be. *This* was what it was like to be swept off your feet, and then some.

This was what she'd been looking for.

Now all she had to do was hang onto it.

# My Christmas Wish © 2009 Ember Case

Tara Walsh has come a long way from paying her dues in a smoky New Orleans club. Her albums sell millions, her tours sell out and she has a hit DVD. Her name is known around the world. Now she's back home for a holiday charity concert—and to say a proper goodbye to the past. A past named Duncan Rousse.

Five years ago, Duncan pushed Tara away for one reason: to force her to reach for the stars. She deserves the life she's earned, even though it left him with a broken heart that's never healed. Having her back in his arms only makes the pain worse, yet the last thing he can do is beg her to stay.

One wild, passion-filled night in the sexy Cajun's bed has Tara's body singing with pleasure. But can they both get what they want this Christmas?

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, second chances, making up for lost time with a sexy Cajun, and Christmas wishes that might really come true.

Enjoy the following excerpt for: My Christmas Wish

Looking at his lips had been a bad idea. Tara had too many memories of what they had felt like against her own. What they'd sounded like telling her goodbye.

She pushed the thought aside. Better to think about what they sounded like saying hello.

Dragging her gaze back to his, she thought she saw the glow of hunger there. "I stayed away too long, Duncan. It's good to be back."

"We were starting to wonder if you'd left us behind forever." His voice was as warm as her memories.

"It was hard to leave." She held his gaze and saw the faint flinch as he recalled how she'd left. "It was harder to come back."

He nodded slowly, accepting with that simple gesture both her leaving and his role in it. For a minute there was only the sound of the music and the feverish noise of the crowd on the dance floor surrounding them.

Memories of how it felt to be held in his strong arms filled the lull. Dangerous memories that she'd relived a thousand times in her dreams. How many times had they danced on that floor, his arms pulling her tight while she thought she'd found her home at last? She'd begun to believe in love and dream of happily-ever-after. Then her dreams had turned into nightmares and left her the way she'd been since she was eight years old. Alone.

You couldn't change what had already been, and wishing for things to be different wasn't going to make them so. With a mental shrug, Tara put the past where it belonged—away.

"The club looks like it's doing good business. I was in Miami a few months ago and your new club there had a line out the door that stretched three blocks. You've done well with them."

"Mais, we were lucky after the storms. The Brick Lady held up well to Katrina, better than many of the other buildings in the Quarter. We had to replace some of the tanks in the brewpub and we had to strip the first floor walls down to the studs. Some of the locals think the ghosts held off the worst of the flood waters and protected what they consider theirs." He chuckled.

"Stranger things have happened in the French Quarter." She let the smile that had always come naturally to her lips show, relaxing as the old feeling of intimacy came back. With Duncan it had always been this way, ever since the moment they'd met. When he was around, the rest of the world faded into the background until it was just the two of them. Nothing and no one else mattered.

Not even a stepmother driving a wedge between her beloved stepson and the young woman who had dared to make a place for herself in Duncan's world.

"How's Marie? Is she here tonight?" Tara tensed as she glanced over his shoulder, almost expecting to find the older woman staring her down from across the room.

"She doesn't come down here much anymore," Duncan stated grimly.

"No? Have you moved back home then?"

"Not bloody likely—I still live up over the club when I'm here in New Orleans." He gestured vaguely towards the back hall, where she knew steps led to his private rooms above. "Marie learned she's happier sticking with her Garden Society friends than poking her nose into this part of the family business. And she's busy these days trying to find a wife for Stephen before he marries himself to the corporation."

Duncan's older brother had always had a head for business. It wasn't a surprise to hear he had taken a larger role with the family firm. Tara relaxed again, reassured that the dragon lady wasn't going to be bearing down on them tonight.

"Are you home to stay?"

"Just until after the show." Two short nights. Tonight and Christmas Eve, the night of the performance. The clock was already ticking.

"So you head back to la-la land on Christmas Day?" Was that disappointment in his voice, or was she only wishing it was there?

"I've got a six am flight back to LA—I'll be on the West Coast in time for brunch." Los Angeles couldn't have seemed further away than it did right now. And without anyone special to spend it with, Christmas would be just like any other day. An hour or two in the gym, another afternoon in the dance studio, some time working on songs for the album she was due to start recording in late January. Another holiday alone. Yet another thought she tried to push out of her mind.

"Have a drink with me, *chère*." She wasn't sure if he was pushed towards her from behind by the crowd or if he'd stepped closer. She didn't care as his body was right where she most wanted it to be, pressed tightly to hers. Chest to chest, thigh to thigh, the heat that rose from his skin spread across her own and brought an ache of longing that throbbed through her veins.

Then he was bumped from behind, pushed suddenly forward by an overexcited patron making a move to the bar. As his arms tightened around her waist to steady her, she felt his pelvis forced against the gentle mound of her belly. Feeling his warm body pressed against her own brought a damp weakness to her core. Gut-wrenching, mind-shattering need claimed her body and left her quivering in his embrace.

"Yes." The word slipped out. His throat was mere inches from her lips, and the familiar smell of him filled the air she breathed. Surrounded with scents of evergreen and spice, her mouth flooded with the remembered taste of his skin beneath her tongue. The urge to lick her way up the firm column of his neck possessed her.

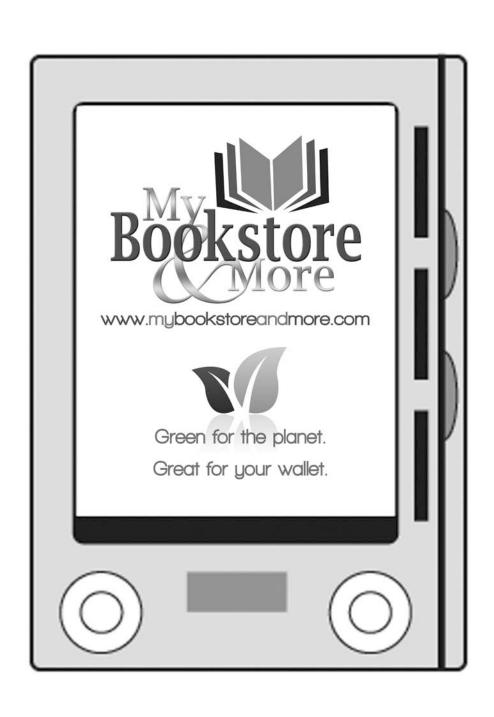
She tilted her head back instead. His eyes were narrowed, the hot fire in their depths mirrored by the dark flush rising on his cheeks. Hard hands clenched on her hips with demanding strength, feeding the hunger that had sparked to life when he'd first said her name.

Before she could fight it his lips were on hers, devouring, possessing, sweeping away her ability to think. With the touch of his mouth all the need of five long years roared to life. The taste of him, the scent of his skin, filled her senses, left her gasping for more. She was lost, drowning in the heat of his embrace. Her heart leaped, blood pounding furiously as her body molded itself to his warmth.

She cried out softly when their lips were torn apart. The low sound was swallowed by the crowd as their bodies were separated by the jostling of the people surrounding them. Her eyes flew open

Her heart was more vulnerable than she'd ever believed.

Maybe coming to see Duncan wasn't the smartest decision she'd ever made.



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