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*Hot For Nick*

Betty Womack

# **HOT FOR NICK**

**Betty Womack**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



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**HOT FOR NICK**

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# HOT FOR NICK

BETTY WOMACK

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## Chapter 1

Shelby set the phone back in its cradle and stared at it in stunned disbelief.

*“We’re finished.”*

He had just dumped her.

The cold statement rang in her ears, even after he’d hung up.

*You should have expected it. It all happened too fast and you gave Nick Gualdoni everything you had like a love-starved hooker.*

The five-karat diamond on her left hand blazed in the light streaming through the window. Nick had put the ring on her finger less than a month after they met.

She clenched her hand to hide the reminder of how quickly she’d fallen for him. In the past, there had been relationships, great men and romance that she’d broken off when the men became too possessive. She hadn’t been ready for the commitment they’d wanted.

Until Nick. At first sight, she’d known he possessed every quality she wanted in a man.

Playing hard to get would have been stupid and a waste of time. She wanted him.

From the start, she’d been aware Nick always got what he wanted and had the means to buy it.

Shelby flushed with anger. She deserved a decent explanation for his sudden decision. Before he came into her life, she had built a successful architectural firm and didn't answer to anyone.

The idea that he might be thinking she wasn't high caliber enough for his world ticked her off. No, that wasn't it. He'd probably found someone new.

*Don't be stupid. He's spent every waking moment on that project when he isn't with you.*

All that seemed unlikely and she wilted under the idea he simply didn't want her.

The photo of them taken several months ago showed a tall dark, gorgeous man and her, stupidly happy just to be with him.

Shelby got up to look out the window, staring down at the park where heat weary plants wilted in the sun.

She agonized over the last words he'd said, clenching her teeth as the finality of them sank in.

This was so unlike him, so cowardly. Hot resentment churned her stomach. How presumptuous of him, instructing her to meet him at their favorite restaurant. He'd said he had something to tell her. Hadn't he said it all?

Anger replaced reasoning, and she grabbed her keys off the desk.

*I have something to tell you, Nick.*

\* \* \* \*

"Lord have mercy."

Nick Gualdoni muttered the words, hoping for some defense against sure defeat. He couldn't see anything but Shelby Rand after she walked through the restaurant door. She looked mad as hell, showing it with the lovely lift of her chin and the high rose tone dusted over her cheeks like an Arizona sunset.

Seeing her as a disagreeable stranger was impossible. His soul wouldn't let him. He knew her intimately, every curve and hollow of

her slender body. The tightening in his groin wasn't unexpected. It happened every time he thought of her, every time he looked at her coral pink lips or into her blue eyes.

He'd known from the moment he met her, Shelby was no ordinary woman, a tiger in a fight and a kitten in a clinch. Her pretty pink nails became claws if someone crossed her. It was a damned good bet she wore little under her short black coatdress, except the string of South Seas pearls nestled in the deep slash of her neckline.

He shifted in his chair and relaxed his legs to allow the hot blood to move out of his crotch. His teeth clenched against the pain of a massive hard-on that would last for days if he couldn't have her. And he couldn't.

As usual, she carried no handbag or briefcase, only a fancy key ring that made soft jangling music, as she got closer to him. Nick wondered how she could sashay through a man's life with no idea of the havoc her presence created, not caring about anything but winning.

Being a classy woman with a lot of power and she used her attributes splendidly. Shelby was a sleek woman with a mop of pale blonde hair and long, strong legs. Her outward beauty hid the intensity that lay just beneath the surface of her well-toned skin. She was five foot six inches of well-educated, self-assured dynamo, weighing in at one hundred twenty pounds.

The woman had the ability to switch from cold steel to hot sensuality and he couldn't forget the feel of her under his pumping body.

*Don't be distracted by remembering how she can battle all day long with competitors and make love all night.*

Nick crushed the urge to meet her halfway like he normally would have. He stayed in his chair, casually watching heads turn in her wake. He understood other men's interest in her. The scent of wild plum blossoms accompanied her was as unforgettable as the woman wearing it. The scent was hers exclusively. He inhaled deeply,

automatically moving to stand up, but she waved her hand to stop him.

“Don’t bother, Nick.” She sat down and raked a cool glance over the crowd before turning her attention back to him. “Do you really want to discuss this in a public place?”

He signaled to the waiter, holding up two fingers to double his drink order and then looked back at Shelby. “I don’t give a damn where we talk. I just thought you might prefer to hold this little party in a place with witnesses.” He loved the slight show of annoyance in her eyes.

She looked at her wristwatch. “We could have finished this discussion over the phone and saved us both time and money.”

“Just hold on. You’re not leaving until I show you a few things and tell you what’s on my mind.” He allowed himself the agony of checking out the curve of her beautiful throat. She was exquisite. She cooled his hot blood with her icy blue gaze.

“Say whatever it is you have to say. I have a full schedule today.”

The waiter came back with two double scotches, and Nick swallowed half of his before the guy walked away. Hell, he should have ordered another one. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a letter-sized envelope. “This won’t take long if you tell me the truth.”

Her chin went up several notches. That little show of indignation let him know she didn’t like his attitude, but he didn’t happen to be in the mood to be nice to her. He withheld the envelope for a few seconds and let her stew about it.

“There’s more to this than your telling me to take a hike? Is that a list of things you want back, like some high school jock?” The tremble of her lips was barely noticeable and brief. “You didn’t give me a reason for wanting out of our engagement. Just saying that we’re finished didn’t give me much to go on. Care to tell me the reason now, or do I go through life wondering what I did?”



Nick hated the icy wall between them. It hadn't been that long ago they had turned the world upside down with their intense lovemaking. It could have been that morning and he would still have been hard for her. Shelby cursed through his blood and her larceny didn't erase his love for her. His thought sometimes he might drown in that passionate and fulfilling love that he desperately wanted to shake. He shrugged his shoulders to ward off the memory.

He took several photographs from the envelope and tossed them across the table. "I owe you squat." He raised his glass and drained the last drop from it before getting the waiter's attention again. "You, on the other hand, owe me your ass."

The momentary look of innocent confusion in her eyes angered him. He wanted to strangle the woman he loved and had wanted to spend his life with. He clenched his jaw and watched her sift through the damning photos.

He tilted his head to one side and tapped the stack of black and whites with his forefinger. "I'm waiting."

She looked up to meet his steady gaze and gestured toward the scattered pictures. "Where did you get these?"

"That's not the point, honey." He hoped she would tell him the whole thing had been a joke, but he knew it wasn't. "I got a call from a guy asking if I might be interested in buying some land he'd taken back from a loan default. You could have knocked me over with a feather after I got the aerial photos. And you know why? Another contractor had beaten me to it and with my own damned plans."

"You think I sold your prints to another builder?" His continued silence seemed to strike a fight chord in her. "You're actually waiting for me to defend myself?"

"Now really, sweetheart, where else do I turn for answers if not to you?" He felt angrier with himself than her. If she had ripped him off for every cent and maxed out his credit cards, he would still want to taste her and have sex with her until he became too weak to get it up again.

He fought for control of his emotions, remembered the sting of being emasculated by her unforgivable disloyalty to him and their love. “We’re the only people with access to the blueprints. Isn’t that right?” Was it his imagination, or had the frigid tone of his voice formed ice crystals on the air between them?

She recovered with ease and no longer looked like a victim. The confusion in her expression smoothed into a cool mask of composure. Her spine had straightened and her sweet chin lifted and jutted in defiance. “Okay. I see why you could think that. It’s insane, but I can see it.” She leaned forward to gaze at him. “Nick. I didn’t do this. I’m not asking for your forgiveness. I didn’t do it.”

“Come on now. Damn it, Shelby. Those blueprints couldn’t have gotten into that bastard’s hands any other way except through you.” He grabbed his glass and downed the scotch in one huge swallow.

Shelby pushed her drink toward him. “Here. Have mine. If you’re trying to get loaded, you’re well on the way.”

Unshed tears glistened in her heavily lashed eyes. The deep breath she took made her small nostrils flare in the effort. She hurt and he was to blame. He had to say something to cover the regret swamping him.

“I don’t need your advice on anything, lady.” He sent the pictures flying with a sweep of his hand. Inhaling, he forced his blood to slow in his veins. “You were saying?”

“You’re waiting for me to tell you how this happened?”

“If nothing else, you’re very perceptive.” He gazed at her, thinking he knew how a hunting tiger felt.

She laughed softly and tried to read his closed expression. “You’re not serious? You know I’m the only one with the prints to your project. I drafted them. I’m probably the only architect in Kansas City that would put up with your constant demands for plan alterations.”

“This isn’t about me.” He ignored her swipe at his personality and gestured in his customary palm up manner meant to hurry her along.

“And I’m still telling you, I didn’t do this.” His lengthy silence seemed to fuel her anger. “You really don’t believe me. You’re an idiot, Nick.”

She and several of the nearby lunch crowd jumped in surprise when he set the glass down hard on the table and ice bounced across the floor. “And you’re a thief.” He pressed his lips together to control his anger. “If you needed money, you could have gotten anything you wanted from me.”

Her expression swung from shock to hurt and back to anger. He wondered what excuse her quick little mind conjured up.

She leaned forward a little, toying with the pearls at her breasts, narrowing her eyes in undisguised disgust. “Well, now.” She turned her glass slowly, keeping her gaze on the tumbling ice until it fell to the bottom. “To think I believed your decision to walk out on our engagement was one of the heart, when all along it had everything to do with your wallet.”

He leaned away from her as if he saw something objectionable. “You’re denying this is your handiwork?”

“Of course I’m denying it. You know perfectly well I had nothing to do with this.” She spoke, words bitten off, cold and clear. “Why would I do such a thing?”

“Motive? That wasn’t a stretch to figure out.” He studied her in an appraising manner, touching his fingertips to his jaw before gesturing in her direction. “You maintain one hell of a lifestyle. A classy address, Jaguar, the designer wardrobe.”

She clenched her hands together on the table and bore into him with her steady gaze. “It’s beneath you to attack me like a wild dog. And, Mister Macho, as usual, you’re thinking with your balls. I went through years of school and earned a degree in Architectural Design just so I could buy all that stuff before you rode into town. I didn’t have to rob you to get what I wanted.”

“I’m not the only sucker you’ve known.” Her habit of checking the pale gold coil of hair at her neck took his attention for a second. “What do you propose to do about this?”

She leaned to pick up the pictures from the floor and slowly straightened them. “I’m suggesting you seek professional help.”

“Oh, that’s rich, Shel.” He grabbed the pictures and crumpled them in his fist. “You broke a trust with me.” Frustration loosed his temper. “Now, you’re shrewd enough to realize this is a serious matter.”

She jerked back when the toe of her shoe touched his leg beneath the table. “I’m aware of every law pertaining to the ethics of builder and architect.”

She touched the five-carat solitaire on her finger and began twisting the pricey platinum ring off her finger. To Nick it had to be the longest strip tease he’d ever watched.

Her slender finger lifted to display the brilliant gem and it blazed with a white fire, stabbing him through the heart.

He blinked. It finally came to an end. He struggled to recover his anger. Could it be he still harassed her to keep her close?

His ears roared, and he wasn't sure he could speak. Shelby didn't give him the chance to comment, quickly laying out ground rules.

“Something else. You can be sure the contract you signed will be honored.”

“That’s the one thing I can be sure of where you are concerned.” She finalized the removal of the ring. “I’ll see my complex finished or your sweet ass will be hit with so many lawsuits that you won’t have time to screw anyone else. Literally.”

“Stop the melodrama, Nick.” She clenched the ring in her palm and quieted for a heartbeat. “Of course I’ll honor the contract. I’ll spend as much time as possible at the complex, but you know I have other jobs going. You’re not exclusive.” She lowered her voice and enunciated her words. “I’ve always kept my word, no matter how big a bastard the person I’m dealing with may be.”

She turned in her chair and met his accusing gaze. A beam of sunlight kissed the delicate length of her throat and played on the pulse he would die to be kissing right then. Even caught in a trap and threatened with a life of hell, Shelby ruled his world, and he would never ask for another thing as long as he lived if this nightmare would end.

*Knock it off, man. Get back to business.*

“You know what I want, Shel. The name of the scab contractor you sold my plans to.” He took several bills from his wallet and laid them on the tray the waiter had left. He didn’t want to see the hurt in her eyes and hadn’t counted on the look cutting his heart out. “Give me a name and this won’t go any further.”

He knew before he made the offer, she wouldn’t accept his terms and would put up a great defense. She had taken on a new personality while he had been reminiscing. Like an expert tease, Shelby turned in her chair, just enough for him to see her suntanned legs, and then dangled a sandal. It fell to the floor with a soft thud. He ached to put it back on her small foot.

“Nick.” She brushed at her sleeve with incredible nonchalance. “With nothing more than your fat ego to hold you up and not a shred of evidence to convict me, you’re making threats like a kid that’s had his candy stolen.”

“Shel, you’re caught.” He inhaled, wondering how she could come out of this looking innocent and affronted. But, knowing her, she probably would. “I don’t care what you think about me, just take this seriously. I’m offering you a way out. Take it.”

The smile playing over her lips wasn’t warm or friendly. She leaned over to slip on her shoe and hit him with a steady gaze of sheer self-control.

“Don’t try to roll over me like a bulldozer, Nick. I’m not accepting this accusation as less than a threat to my reputation.”

“Bravo, Shel.” Nick’s sarcastic words had been accompanied by a smile that hurt his lips. Even though he could almost forget why he

wanted to choke her, he wouldn't let his lust for her get in the way of finding out who she had been dealing with.

"I'm probably never going to know the truth about this. But I do know I'm not guilty of any professional misconduct, and I will not be badgered." She stood up and frosted him with her glare. "It's a certainty you and I will be discussing this again, but only through our attorneys." She took a step toward the exit, and then paused to look back at him. "That is, if you don't hightail it for Coyote Ridge again."

She had taken a verbal jab at his hometown of Sedona, Arizona. Or, she had called him a coyote. He wanted to grab her hand and pull her onto his lap and kiss her until she made her juicy little passion noises.

In his staggering desire to hold her, he felt ready to do almost anything to erase what had happened. He loved her. Hell, while he was on his way to reaching orgasm, she walked away. His parting shot drew her up short.

"You will be returning the ring, won't you?" He didn't want the damned ring. He wanted her and yesterday. Yesterday they would have been heading for her place or his to make love before going to work. He finished his drink and looked at her over the rim of the empty glass, finding her heaven blue eyes scorning him for drinking too much booze.

"Naturally." She clenched the costly piece of jewelry in her fist as if she planned to drop it into his palm but changed her mind. "Before I leave, I want to settle this with you. From here on we'll talk about nothing but work. Is that explicit enough for you?"

He eyed her, trying to conceal the emotional turmoil he drowned in and nodded.

She took a breath and looked at the ring in her hand. "I'll leave this with the cashier. You may be able to trade it for the price of the drinks."

She turned her back and left, taking away his reason to get up mornings, along with the future they had laid out together. He

witnessed the cashier's startled reaction to her handing him the ring. What the hell? The ring had no value without her and she had turned out to be a first rate chiseler. He groaned and ordered another scotch, then changed his mind. He needed time to recoup before following Shelby to the job site.

\* \* \* \*

He put off going to the project as long as he could and finally pulled into the dusty parking lot late that afternoon. The sound of hammers and drills, usually music to his ears, was nothing short of maddening now.

*Get out of the car and face her. Let her know she's not getting out of this.*

The car in front of his belonged to the lovely Miss Rand. She hadn't bothered to roll up her windows of the classic Jag, and dust had coated the white leather seats. His instinct told him to close the windows, but he stopped himself.

*No longer your concern, Gualdoni.*

His steps had lost their spring of enthusiasm and it took him a while to climb the hill to join Shelby and her builder, Matt Jamison. He kept his sunglasses on and studied Shelby while she worked on a ledger. She'd gone home and changed clothes. Probably going out after work. Damn. She wore baby pink to the dirtiest place in town and sent his cock into a permanent state of granite. He jumped in reaction to her glance in his direction and covered his dumb expression with a snarl.

"I'll want to talk to you later." As expected, she looked at him as if he had turned into a snake, putting on a hard hat as she sauntered away.

Following her, Nick was helpless to keep his thoughts anywhere above her ass. His tongue must have been hanging down somewhere

around his ankles as he ogled the golden hue of her slender legs. Of course she wasn't wearing stockings.

With every step she took, the skirt of that pink suit swished provocatively at mid-thigh and drew his hungry gaze to the area that would be the fork of her sweet legs. Her short jacket acted like an arrow, pointing directly to her fine firm rear. It would be easier to breathe out of her territory, so he doubled his stride to catch up with Matt.

"Say, Matt. I want to run a couple things by you before I leave." Now, what made him look in her direction? He had clearly lost control. Holy shit, now she leaned over to look in a crate of nails and her skirt hiked up to her butt cheeks. He swallowed his tongue. "Let's walk up to the courtyard, and I can show you what I have in mind."

*What the hell is she doing? Flashing the crew?*

It stunned him to realize he might be acting a little crazy, since she showed nothing more than a nice length of leg. As if she felt his hot stare, Shelby straightened and brushed at the hem of her skirt in a ladylike manner. He caught his breath when he remembered they were not a couple. What body parts she exposed didn't concern him. Right? Wrong. This property belonged to him and he wouldn't stand for it. As soon as he finished his chat with Matt, he would let her know she couldn't bare her rear on this hill of dirt.

*No, you won't. Why let her know you're still nuts over her? Keep your yap shut.*

No matter where he stood, he could see Shelby and the way little wisps of her hair moved sensuously about her pretty neck and ears. He moved away from Matt and jammed his hands deep into his slacks pockets to rearrange the heavy, throbbing monster in his shorts. He felt like a deprived sex fiend.

After gaining control of his privates, Nick walked back to where Shelby and Matt huddled in deep conversation. She scowled as he approached. He planned to put a crimp in her smart alec attitude. She scribbled in her note pad, pointedly ignoring him and only looked up



when Matt spoke. “Shelby, according to Nick, we need to make some changes in the main lobby. He doesn’t think it’s exactly what the plans call for.”

“That’s—” She bit off her comment. “Perhaps Nick is mistaken, seeing an optical illusion.”

Nick took off his sunglasses. “You know the drill. Get it done, Shel, and I mean today.” He checked his watch to avoid looking at her and focused on Matt. “Go back over the damned lobby for a true measurement.”

“I’ll do that. One more thing, Nick. You have to wear a hard hat beyond this point.” Matt cleared his throat and looked at the ground. “You want to discuss this with Shel?”

The sound of her notebook snapping shut echoed like gunfire. “I don’t think we need to worry about Nick’s head.” She bit her words off abruptly, and then finished her comment. “I mean, he won’t be here long enough for anything to fall on him.”

He controlled his tone, keeping his words soft but meaningful. “Don’t get too comfortable, Shel. I’ll be counting every brick and gallon of paint.”

## Chapter 2

Shelby held her breath as her gaze helplessly followed Nick's angry departure. She wished she didn't love him. He may as well have cut out her heart when he said he didn't want her.

Well, there it is. He's going to be a real bastard as long as he assumed she could be guilty of double-crossing him.

She took several deep breaths while Nick walked across the parking lot. She loved his gait, just cocky enough to make a woman check out his lean frame from top to bottom. Nick was a superb looking man whether he wore a tux or battered Levi's. He looked sensational in nothing at all. Matt's deep voice penetrated her thoughts.

"Shel, I'm going to get started here in a bit."

She blinked. "Started? On what?"

"Hell, measuring. You heard the man."

"For God's sake, Matt. Don't waste precious time." She took off her hard hat and hung it on the peg the crew had installed just for her use. "We both know the lobby is spec perfect."

"And you know I can't have Gualdoni questioning my men or their work. It makes them a little nervous and ready to fight."

"Okay." Shelby knew she owed him an explanation, but she didn't want to reveal something so personal. "He's hot at me right now. I'll get him under control."

Matt's grin was crooked as he gave her arm an affectionate pat. "He might be hard to rein in, Shel, but I'll do all I can to keep peace around here until the job's finished."

His words made her heart tremble a little. She wavered a hair's breadth away from crying. "Thanks, Matt. You're a true friend."

"Don't you ever doubt it, kiddo." He plopped his hard hat onto his silvering head. "You go do whatever you have to do. I'll handle things here."

She sighed and looked around at the hectic scene of flying dust and noisy machinery. "I'll go to the Hollister site and get back later this afternoon if I can."

"Stop worrying about this place, Shel. Everything is fine as frog's hair. Go on now. Git." Matt made a gallant, sweeping gesture with his hat, grinning broadly. "One more thing. You haven't forgot about the company picnic on Saturday, have you?"

"No, I haven't forgotten." She laughed and hurried off to her car. If only her problem with Nick was as simple as she had made it sound. But, right now that problem waited at the bottom of the hill.

What in the hell did Nick want now? Blood? He'd been sitting in his car and got out when she approached. There seemed to be no escape since his car blocked hers.

She eyed him with impatience. "Well?"

"About the Builder's Association's dinner tonight."

"What?"

"I'll pick you up at seven." He gazed at her with an arrogant tilt of his head.

"Are you nuts?" She knew he had better than average sized balls but hadn't realized until now they must be made of pure brass.

He smiled briefly. "I have the invitations."

"I don't need one." She tossed her notebook through the open window of her car and grimaced at the dirt covering the seats. Her heart tumbled to an all time low when she turned and met his dark gaze to tell him the biggest lie of her life. "You seem to be under the impression I need you. I don't. Not for invitations or anything else."

He shifted his stance, resting his hands on trim hips and studied her without blinking. Shelby couldn't believe it had been her voice

spouting the words of a fool. He turned his head and brought her out of a moment of regret with his chuckle.

“Have it your way, Shel.” He got in his car and drove away in a cloud of dust. She squashed the desire to run after him, to beg him to take her back and weep like an abandoned kid. But, no. She’d already had her crying jag. Tears and ripping out hair fit helpless women and she sure as hell wasn’t helpless.

The evening couldn’t have gotten off to a worse start. As if on cue, Nick had arrived at the hotel immediately after her. He made no attempt to separate himself from her. Rage smoldered her.

The nightmare seating arrangement turned out to be nothing short of abuse. Being strong was one thing, but she equated this to assault. He went out of his way to bump his knee against hers and touch her arm. After the tenth time of brushing against his thigh, she knew what being in the electric chair had to be like.

On her left, a contractor’s wife known for her wandering eye looked over the crop of men at the gathering. Nick had been assigned the seat on her right. Shelby held her temper when the woman practically sat in her lap, trying to get a look at Nick. The hint of an evil grin on his damned mouth widened to a sensual smile when she caught his eye. Her voice was as icy as she could make it.

“Move your chair.”

“Impossible. If I get any closer to the guy next to me, we’d be leaving together.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind, Nick.”

“I would. He’s not my type.”

“Don’t tempt me. I just might tell you what type that is.” The contractor’s wife bumped her left elbow and Shelby sighed. She couldn’t believe her own anger. All of that angst directed at one person and Nick busied himself chewing on a piece of steak. She hoped he choked.

“You could change places with me, you ass.”

He lay his fork down. “Something wrong with your dinner?”

She spoke through her clenched teeth. “Yes. The range doggie on my left is goring me to get to you.”

He smiled in his most provoking manner and picked up his fork. “I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

“Yes, I will.” She dug her elbow into his arm, wishing it had gained more than a grin from him.

She wouldn’t let him or the panting woman next to her ruin the evening. Yet, she couldn’t keep her eyes off him and forgot to eat eight out of ten courses that came and went.

Nick drew her gaze like a magnet and the longer she watched him, the more she wanted to slug him. He looked like a cross between an impossibly good-looking hit man and one of those heart-stealing secret agents. The dark Italian suit he wore was definitely right for him, expertly cut to fit his broad shoulders and tall frame.

His nearness and the scent of spice and myrrh on his bronzed skin honed her senses to a razor sharp edge. He caught her checking him out and dipped his gaze into the slash neckline of her dress. She became acutely aware of the plunging neckline and the thigh high hem of her white clingy knit dress. Why had she worn a dress with a slit that ended at her navel? Good Lord, he was looking at her breasts again, wearing that smug grin she wanted to smack off his face.

She laid her napkin on the table and slid out of her chair to walk toward the open door to freedom. She smiled at several of the guests who gave her questioning looks and hurried from the dining room into the hall.

The infectious beat of salsa music wafted through the open doors of the grand ballroom and she slowed her step. Happy people celebrating a wedding filled the brightly lit room.

The cool, darkened patio caught her attention and she slipped out the doors into the still, night air. The quiet was temporary. Nick strolled out to stand beside her. He offered her a cigar before lighting the one he took from its gold case and arched his brow at her look of scorn.

“What are you doing out here? Waiting for your cohort in crime?” He drew on the fragrant cigar and then blew the smoke out in a slim trail toward the stars.

Moonlight splashed over him like an icy blue veil, softening the contours of his cheekbones and strong chin. What did he want her to do? Grovel? She mentally counted to ten to calm her temper.

“I’ve been waiting to see how long it would take you to tag after me.” Pride made her straighten her spine and stand her ground.

“Clever but not honest. Of course I don’t expect that quality from you anymore.”

For a brief time, she stood on the brink of humiliation and wanted to squall like a baby. But, no. Hell no.

The best defense would be to do nothing. Getting back in the lobby meant she had to walk around him, ready to make any sacrifice to leave. He caught the gold chain of her evening bag. She spun to meet his annoying smile.

“Let go or you’ll be looking for the first aid office.”

“I just wanted to say goodnight.” Nick inclined his head toward the open doorway. “Doesn’t that music set your blood on fire?” He caught her in his arms and smiled into her eyes.

“Nick.” She pulled back to distance herself from him. “Do I have to call security?”

He swung her out from himself, and then with an easy tug twirled her back against his body. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“No you will not, you big ape.”

“I need to ask you some questions.”

“I don’t see a badge.” She glared at his hand gripping the chain of her bag.

“You’ll see plenty of badges if you keep acting like a fool. All you have to do is give me a name.” He let her go but held the chain.

“Go to hell.” With one hard yank, she freed the flimsy strap from his grip.

He walked beside her and they bumped against each other when they started up the steps. She glared up at him and he pointed to the door, gesturing for her to go first.

She rushed ahead of him until the heel of her flimsy sandal caught in a carpet snag. She pitched forward. He caught her about the waist and pulled her close.

“Damn you, Nick.” She wrestled against him and hurled them toward the wall.

He let loose one of his favorite cuss words as she struggled to free herself.

“Let go.”

“Stop moving. We’re going to…” He braced himself against the wall and held her up. “To fall.”

Shelby twisted away from him, but found herself drawn back like a fish on a line. The lace on her neckline had become entangled with the buttons on his cuff. “You did this purposely.”

“Hell yes,” he growled. He yanked his arm up and her collar followed. “If you wanted sex, you could’ve asked without all the drama.”

“There you go again. Your scrotum still passes as your brains.”

His laughter ricocheted through the hallway. She let her weight hang on his sleeve, relishing the sound of popping buttons and tearing cloth. One button stubbornly clung to his sleeve and her tattered collar. They were still attached.

“Christ, woman. You’ve gained weight.”

She scowled at him, trying not to feel the sweet rush of body contact with him. “Stop the insults long enough to help me untangle this.”

He closed his hand around her upper arm, the tips of his fingers pressed against the curve of her breast. Her blood sizzled. She closed her eyes and choked on a sigh of pleasure. Oh hell. She sounded like a horny cat and he gazed at her with a taunting smile.

“You wanted to say something, Shel?”

Her lips pulsed crazily and heat leaped around her. She knew she was weak, but he wasn't going to get credit for her momentary lapse of sanity.

"Let go."

"I'm not stopping you."

"You're not helping, either." She yanked on her collar and the expensive lace shredded, freeing them. "Oops."

With a casual dignity that belied her frustration, she attempted to straighten her clothes.

"Security's heading this way." He took her arm and turned her to face him. "Someone probably turned us in as drunk and disorderly. We had better dance or kiss or something to convince them we're not trouble makers."

"You know what you can kiss, Nick." Her heart thumped madly against his chest and her lower body was assaulted with rockets of tension. "For a man that finds me revolting, you're spending a lot of time fondling me."

"Not fondling. Frisking."

"I think you've frisked enough."

He made a growling sound in his throat. "You're clean." He smiled. "I'm disappointed though."

"I know I shouldn't ask, but what disappoints you?"

"Oh, I really figured you'd be packing heat."

Stepping back, Shelby worked on her ripped collar and leveled a cold glare on him. "I'm so sorry. I'll try to do better next time."

"You'll have plenty of opportunity for that, Shel." His gaze traveled slowly over her and stopped at her eyes. "I'll always be where you are."

"Just why are you stalking me, Nick? I know it's not my company that draws you."

He took the time to check out the deep slash of her neckline one more time before answering. "I figured you might be waiting for a meet with your rat friend."



“What?” She groaned aloud and raised her hands in frustration. “I can’t believe you’re skulking around, talking like a fool and in general, making an ass of yourself.”

“Sooner or later, Shel. You’re going to slip up and I’ll be there to take your friend down.”

“For Pete’s sake, Nick. You sound like a cheap gangster.” She took a step away, but turned back to look him up and down. “Before I leave, you have to get a few things straight in your pea-sized brain.”

He opened his mouth, but she silenced him with a waggle of her finger.

“You’re getting exactly what you paid for. Nothing more, nothing less. And something else. I won’t have you interfering with the contractor’s work.” Her voice deepened with her warning. “You lay off Matt. You have a problem, you rag me, not him.” Her lip curled in a sneer. “Anyway, he’s liable to deck your smart ass.”

His sardonic smile and laugh infuriated her.

“Are you finished, Shel? I’m going to the bar and have a drink. Join me?”

Just like that, he dismissed her. She choked back a slam to his manhood. “Thanks, no. I have to show up for work like a normal person in the morning.”

“Well, I’ll see you then.”

“Just what I wanted to hear.”

Shelby had that sick feeling again.

She managed to walk a straight line to the lobby entrance before leaning against the wall for support. There had to be a way to get rid of him until she could figure out what had caused her world to fall into hell.

Avoiding Nick became paramount in her thoughts now. She looked around the doorway to see which direction he’d gone. If she had any luck, they wouldn’t meet before she could get to the garage.

The shortest route to her car would be back through the crowded bar and out the double doors that led to the parking area.

Her quick stride became a foot-dragging slump when she spotted him. He leaned against the bar and apparently in deep conversation with a redhead that hung on his every syllable and licked her chops like a mink in heat. He even laughed at something the barfly had said.

What more did he have to do to prove he had no feelings for her at all? A war between despair and anger raged in her heart. Rage won and she marched to the bar and faced him. He looked completely unruffled.

“Shel. You decided to have a drink after all.”

She reached around him and picked up his full glass, holding it carefully as if she didn't want to spill it.

“Yes. But I see you're occupied.” She sipped the drink and set it back on the bar. “Goodbye, Nick.”

“Damn it, Shel.” He grimaced and distanced himself from the redhead. “Wait a minute.”

On her way out of the buzzing bar, she felt his gaze following her. She used to love to give her hips an extra swing for his enjoyment, but not now. Not while he obviously tried to pick up some redhead and acting like nothing else went on.

Out in the entryway of the bar, Shelby fought for self-control and a modicum of dignity. Slowing her heart rate became painful, but she tamed her breathing enough to get out the door and to her car.

While speeding through the empty streets, she raged at herself for having been so blind and sure of him. The answer had always been there for her to see. The project neared completion and he no longer needed her. What better way than to question her honesty. The bastard.

By the time she drove into her apartment building's garage, she considered all the possible reasons besides another woman that might have made him stop loving her. She came up empty.

### Chapter 3

No matter what Shelby did or thought, the Technicolor memory of Nick cuddled up with the redhead refused to be dismissed. She had spent the night wandering about her apartment, eating a bag of green onion chips and sitting on the terrace with a chocolate frosty malt for comfort.

Fatigue took over around four in the morning and she sprawled on the sofa to doze. The bedroom had become off limits, at least for now. She couldn't bring herself to lie in the place that still bubbled with luscious and hot memories of Nick, propped on her pillows, waiting to give her his best.

The hateful sound of the alarm shook her awake. Shelby dragged herself out of bed and into the bedroom to shut it off. Her head swam from lack of sleep. The chirping robins in the tree outside her terrace irked her. "I'm glad someone slept well," she grumbled and closed the terrace doors.

She stumbled into the bathroom and turned the shower on full force, making sure the temp was cool. Regret ranked high in her jumbled emotions. She stepped into the cold mist, and took the punishment, quickly lathering up and shampooing.

Too bad she had worked up a yen for a cup of coffee. Forget it. She hadn't been to the grocery store in two weeks and there wasn't a coffee bean in the place.

Messing with her hair wasn't an option. She didn't think she could stand the heat of the hot rollers. Cool simplicity won out as she pinned the heavy mass into a tumbled fall of loose curls at the crown of her head. A sleeveless yellow silk chemise finished off her quest

for comfort. No fuss, no muss and ready to head off for work, but not until she stopped for a cup of the Quick-Serve gas station coffee.

A search for an emery board unearthed a styptic pencil that belonged to Nick, the one he used if he cut himself while shaving. For a split second, her throat closed and salty tears battered her lids. She wouldn't allow it and casually dropped the pencil in the bowl and flushed. A few minutes later, Shelby joined the rest of the commuters heading downtown.

The mood in her office didn't exactly scream that a party had been going on. The reception area stood empty and the usual talk radio station silent. She went directly into her private office and began collecting anything she might need that day. She punched the intercom button.

"Kate, I'll be out in the field until evening." Shelby opened her computer and scanned the mail. "Forward any calls to my cell."

The only reply a sniffing sound. Shelby peered around the doorway and smiled at Kate. "Is something troubling you?"

"Just a cold, I think." Kate's hand shook as she passed Shelby a stack of memos. "I don't sleep well when I can't breathe."

"I know what you mean." After listening to her voice mail, she mentally beat herself up for hoping Nick had left a message. She shrugged off the foolish disappointment and went out into the reception area.

"Kate, if Matt happens to come in or call before I get a message back to him, tell him I'll be waiting at the Gualdoni site."

A look around her sunny, well appointed office made Shelby recognize the depth of her depleted spirit. Instead of feeling perky and eager, she wanted to flop on the sofa and go blotto for a week.

A colorful reflection from a corner table received her glare. The last lavish bouquet from Nick. "I'll just get rid of these before I go." She wanted no wilted reminders of him. She considered ripping out the page in her address book that held all his personal numbers, but instead calmly collected her things and walked toward the lobby door.

Looking up in time to see Matt sauntering down the hall. He came in everyday to check for any alterations in the plans. She wanted to discuss the new idea she'd come up with, a way to get the project finished far ahead of schedule. Until now, she'd always asked her father his opinion on difficult decisions. Matt wouldn't ask as many questions, but her father would say she was begging for trouble.

"Matt." She juggled an armload of folders and motioned for him to follow her. With the door of the office shut, she let her guard down. "Is there any way we can bring the Gualdoni project in ahead of time? A lot ahead of time?"

"Not a chance." He gestured toward the paperwork she had laid on the desk. "There's too much work left. No possible way."

"That's not what I wanted to hear." She walked to the window and stared out at the beehive activity on the street below. "There's a way and we're going to do it."

"Excuse me." Matt joined her at the window. "I don't think I heard you."

A possible end to her personal hell might be in view and Shelby breathed easier. "It will all be on the up and up. Absolutely legal. We'll just have to work a little overtime. I'll leave it up to you to hire all the sub-contractors and extra men we need. They have to be the best in their field." She crossed her arms at her waist and waited for his comment.

"My men and I will give it all we've got, Shel. 'Course you know that." He reached behind him, patted his wallet and grinned. "You also know skilled craftsmen don't work cheap. You sure you want to do this?"

"I don't give a damn what their scale is. Just get them if they are out there." Her bravado dimmed a bit. "If we go over budget, I'll pay them out of my pocket. When it's finished, I want to hand Nick a punch list so clean a saint would eat off it."

He twirled his hat in his hand and grinned. "You still ticked off at Gualdoni?"

“Our disagreement is on-going.” She realized it wouldn’t do to let her hurt and anger be so visible. She smiled and picked up her car keys. “Let’s just make sure he’s home with his parents for the holidays.”

“Gotcha.” He slapped his gloves against his thigh. “See you down the road.”

Shelby could hear him chuckling as he walked toward the elevator ahead of her. He grinned like a Cheshire cat when he turned back to look at her.

“Say, you probably don’t care, but I got a call from Nick this morning. Said he would be tied up in meetings all day and would probably spend the night in Wichita.”

The delight she felt must have registered in her eyes. “Is that so?” God, she had always been pathetic at hiding her emotions.

“He told me to tell you that.”

“Thank you, Matt. That news is almost as welcome as rain for this drought.”

She watched from the window as his big red pickup pulled away from the curb and out into traffic. He probably wondered what the hell had happened but wouldn’t think of asking questions.

\* \* \* \*

Shelby couldn’t believe Nick wouldn’t be breathing down her neck for an entire day. With all the freedom, she could drop in to visit her father, or go back to the office and download months of entries in her computer. If by the slightest chance Nick told her the truth, she had to know how it happened and who might be responsible.

All of her high blown idealistic plans fled when Nick’s apartment building loomed up on the crest of a hill. The busy thoroughfare would take her straight to his penthouse. Her hand went out to silence the keys that jangled against the ignition.

The plot that came from nowhere might be evil, but it made her smile. She took mental inventory. Nick's apartment. Nick's door key. Nick out of town. The musical notes from the swinging keys rang like tolling bells with a message. So dishonest, so foolish and so easy. Her course had been set. She would break into his pad and commit petty something. Well, not really. She did have a key.

After parking three blocks away just like she had seen done in a detective television series, Shelby got into the building and up to his apartment without incident. The cute little doorman waved her on and went back to his racing form.

Hot blood pumped through her veins with a roar. She could hear her pulse beating in her ears and it made her dizzy. Flushed with guilt and a sense of adventure, Shelby got off the elevator and skulked to his door. There in front of her loomed number 601. A grin wavered on her lips when she worked the fancy brass key in the lock. Smooth like cream and quiet as snowfall. The door swung open on well-oiled hinges.

Ransacking a place would be a new experience. It began to be a source of amusement after she had let herself into the quiet confines of Nick's place. What to look for? She had no idea and let the rumbling in her stomach lead her into the kitchen. He always had a nice supply of bagels or sweet rolls and a quick search gained her a fragrant banana-nut muffin.

She took it with her and walked straight to his bedroom and to the nightstand. While devouring her food, a plan of action jelled in her mind. Search everything with a drawer and pick locks if necessary. She'd seen it done in movies and figured it could be done with a nail file.

With the confidence of a professional cat burglar, she opened each drawer and rummaged the contents. Nothing but the usual stuff except for a cellophane wrapped fun condom that featured bumps for extra oomph left over from their last party time and a piece of bubble gum that she popped into her mouth. She chewed furiously while working

over his personal phone book and frowned after discovering nothing but business numbers.

The apartment held no secrets since she already knew what lay in every drawer and on every shelf in the place after having spent a lot of time there. But, this time she deliberately searched for incriminating evidence. For all her trouble, she found nothing.

His massive bed the one thing in the room she had not touched. But, it beckoned her like a sinfully rich dessert. What the hell? One last romp for old time's sake. Stepping out of her shoes, she walked to the bed and sank down on it. Oh, the comfort and memories. She rolled back and forth across the firm mattress until the mammoth walnut wardrobe caught her eye.

She knew the contents had been neatly hung on wooden hangers and the shoetrees had actual shoes on them. When it came to his personal grooming and his apartment, the man was no slob. The place had a sensual yet clean scent, a place where she could go to sleep if she didn't stop daydreaming.

After a moment of letting familiar sounds and scents deter her from pillaging, she got up and opened the heavy doors of the wardrobe, swinging them wide. Fingering the fine cloth of a shirt, she thought of Nick's smiling face.

Fun time came to an abrupt end if she'd heard correctly. She'd heard a door opening and closing. Her head swiveled like an owl's to look behind her. That sound had come from the living room. Nick had come back.

She dove into the wardrobe and pulled the doors closed behind her. While she choked on her gum and cursed herself for being a coward, new panic set in. What should she do if he wasn't alone? He wouldn't dare drag a woman to his apartment so soon after their breakup. The interior of the wardrobe heated like an oven. She was furious over the possibility and barely got her anger under control before she heard him coming into the bedroom.



Scuffing sounds outside her lair meant Nick had her trapped. Her skin prickled. He was too quiet and she squeezed back a sneeze and her bladder screamed for relief. To make matters worse, the doors of her hiding place slowly opened.

Everything happened at once. She let go a healthy sneeze and crossed her legs. The tension in her throat burst out in a shrill scream when the doors flew open and she found herself looking at a Colt .45.

“Shel!” His voice broke, but his eyes flashed fire from Hades. “What the hell? I could have hurt you!”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond before pulling her from the safety of the wardrobe. She didn’t need for him to voice his thoughts. His expression of pure contempt said clearly he considered her an idiot.

With her thighs squeezed tight against a threatening embarrassment, she blinked against the light. In a display of maddening arrogance, he herded her back against the wardrobe and stared at her. She may as well have been wearing a clown suit, complete with bulbous red nose.

“So.” He set the safety on the gleaming weapon, handling it like a pro. “You’re robbing me? Again?”

Her mind went blank, except for the flight button that blinked red. Grasping for a safety net, Shelby answered in a rush. “I remembered some things I left here and I...”

Did he believe her? Not if his lip curling up in a sneer meant anything. And now, he placed the Colt on top of the wardrobe, making a tsking sound of repudiation. He had obviously been changing clothes when he figured out he wasn’t alone. The light blue shirt he wore hung open and she eyed his muscled chest, waiting for his next question.

“Un-uh. You don’t give a damn about a pair of panties and a toothbrush.” His smile was sardonic. “What were you really looking for?”

“Oh, all right. I need money.” The lie slipped off her tongue with ease, and she gave him a benign smile.

Imitating his power stance, Shelby crossed her arms over her breasts and gazed at him with no obvious regret over being caught like an unskilled criminal.

His laugh came quick and cynical. “Why did I ask? You lie too damned well to bother.” He pressed forward, stealing her oxygen, his gaze fusing with hers. “Did you rifle my shorts drawer?”

“Move away from me, Nick.” His scent penetrated her senses, rendering her wobbly kneed and excited. Spices from faraway islands intermingled with a sultry hint of myrrh. It all made her crazy. She closed her eyes and turned her face away from temptation.

“Shel.” He breathed her name like a big cat purring and brushed his chest against hers. “So, you want me bad enough to break into my place?”

Waves of shameless want rolled over her and her lips parted to let it spill free. A pulse in her tongue slowed her answer and she regained a modicum of dignity. “Your self-importance far overshadows your desirability.”

He shook his head and braced his hands on the wardrobe, framing her face. “What’s that? Should I pat you down or are we just going to jump right in the sack?”

“I took holy vows not to sleep with you again.”

He moved forward until his hips touched hers. “Come on now, Shel. I’m a nice guy. You’re a nice girl. We can discuss this.”

Time for her to leave before this hawk ate her for lunch. Time to stop the game and save herself some embarrassment. He made fun of her and she, being a weakling, would wind up giving in to anything he wanted before much more time passed. “There’s nothing to discuss except I need to use the bathroom.”

He looked at the ceiling for a split second before locking his gaze on hers. “Just as I suspected. You’re here to take something. Care to tell me what it is that made you sneak into my house.”

“Well, since we can’t agree on anything, I’ll use the bathroom and get my shoes.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“I said I have to use the bathroom.”

“Go ahead. I’ve heard you pee before.”

After a calculating glance, Nick stepped aside and she scurried into the marble and chrome bathroom. He tapped on the door before she had finished.

“Nick, I’ll be out in a second.”

“I’ll be in to help you if it takes any longer than that.”

Her hands were still wet when she pushed the door open and tried to rush by him. His wide hand caught her elbow and he ushered her into the living room and toward the door.

“I’ll just walk you to the door, Ms. Rand, since you have sticky fingers. I’d hate to lose my wallet.”

“Once again, Nick. You have nothing I want.”

“And you’re here uninvited, hiding in my apartment. You’re still pleading innocence?”

She found it useless to struggle against his vise grip on her arm. “Even you can’t blame me for avoiding you while I search for my things.”

He huffed with scorn. “Your things, again?”

She managed to free his key from the jangling ring in her hand. “Here. Take your key.”

He laughed aloud and shook his head. “No way in hell, lady. It’s going to be too much fun catching you in the act of plundering the place.”

Her face flushed with anger. “It will never happen again.”

“You can’t help yourself.”

“Okay. I’m leaving now.”

“I’ll open the door.”

“You’re too considerate.”

“And you’re too much.”

When her feet sank into the plush Chinese rug in his living room, Shelby dug her heels in. “My shoes.”

“What about your shoes?”

She eyed him with exasperation and jerked her arm against his controlling hand. “I left them in the bedroom.”

Nick maneuvered her across the living room floor and to the door, ignoring her gasp of indignation. “The door, Madame.” He pushed the brass handle down and the door swung open. “Goodbye.”

Her cry of outrage bounced off the walls of the hallway. “My shoes. Damn you, Nick.”

She stared at the solid barrier of mahogany until it re-opened and he passed her shoes out to her. His smile would have better suited a prowling lion.

“This could be an unending source of amusement. You won’t disappoint me now, will you?”

With as much majesty as she had left, Shelby stepped into her shoes and brushed at her hair.

“Nothing will ever get me back in that den of iniquity.”

“It has been on occasion, thanks to you.”

He gestured toward the elevator and she wanted to explode in his superior face. It sickened her, knowing she would always be crazy for the devil who knew every one of her favorite sins.

## Chapter 4

The first of June arrived on clear skies and intense heat. Shelby wouldn't let Nick see it, but he clearly wore her down with constant demands for re-measurements and re-counts of everything from paint to floor tiles. To hold up under his daily inspections, she took time each day to go back to her apartment for a quick shower and fresh clothing. The maddening routine sent her looking for places out of his line of vision where she could swallow aspirin.

Conditions worsened when he found out about the extra craftsmen she hired. He ran a background check on everyone having anything to do with his complex, quizzing her endlessly about the new hires.

The only thing he didn't mention was her being in his apartment. She didn't have to be reminded of her dumb trick or how much she regretted not tumbling into bed with him. Maybe she wouldn't miss making love so much if she didn't know how good it had been with Nick.

On more than one occasion, she considered spilling her guts to her father, but she knew he would be furious with Nick and the situation would only get more ugly. It remained her secret. When her father finally forced the issue and asked where Nick had been keeping himself, she had said he had business in Sedona, working on something new. His wry grin told her he didn't buy her story, but Thomas Rand had never imposed on her privacy.

Shelby groaned softly and chewed the last bit of eraser from her pencil. Her gaze took in the mountainous heap of printouts on her desk. Every business associate had been crossed off her list as possible thieves. A pang of guilt hit her in the stomach. She had no

associate that could ever be considered capable of such low dealings. She was guilt ridden for having questioned these decent men's reputations. The answer wasn't in her office. Maybe someone out in the field had heard something. Disgusted with herself, she shoved the printouts off her desk and into the wastebasket.

A snippet of murmured conversation wafting into her office from the reception area caught her attention. Shelby welcomed the diversion. Grabbing her cup, she went to the door and surveyed the scene unfolding at Kate's desk.

A slow burn ignited in Shelby's stomach, her displeasure riveted on the lanky man with razor sharp cheekbones leaning over Kate. Her normally sane secretary rummaged in her purse and pulled out several bills, which he yanked from his benefactor's hand. Kate had always been an excellent secretary, but the woman a real wimp when it came to Mark Allworth, the man she handed her paycheck to.

Not wanting the pair to know she had witnessed what had transpired, Shelby walked straight to the coffee station and poured a cup. She heard the couple whispering, but didn't turn around to look at them until Kate's fiancé spoke to her.

"Morning, Ms. Rand." He stuffed the bills Kate gave him into his pants pocket. "How's tricks?"

"I wouldn't know about that, Mark." Shelby considered his words as offensive as the man himself. She stirred her coffee. "I see nothing has changed with you."

He laughed a wheezing kind of laugh and patted Kate on top of her head as if she were a puppy. "Nope. I got me a real sweet deal going now. Won't be long before Kate here can quit this job. You'll have to do your own typing."

Keeping the contempt from her voice took maximum effort, but she managed to speak civilly to the man she saw as a gutter rat. "I would hate to lose Kate, but while she works for me, that's what I want her doing."

A moment of tension brewed between Mark and Shelby. She locked her gaze on his face and refused to look away. His nostrils flared and his beady eyes narrowed. He didn't like it when a woman stood up for herself and the glitter in his small eyes sent a message to her. Hate. Pure and simple. Kate stirred beside her, gripping the arms of her chair, but Shelby didn't break the stare down with Mark. He looked away when Kate ended the stony silence.

"Mark, you should leave." Kate flushed red and motioned toward the door. "I have a ton of work to finish."

"Okay, doll. I'm going." He sauntered toward the door; hands jammed in his pants pockets, holding the excess material out to make them look like a pair of Dutch breeches on his skinny frame. He turned to leer at her. "I know when I'm not wanted. See you tonight, Kate. I'll buy you dinner."

"Sure," Shelby grumbled under her breath. With her money. Kate's talking penetrated her dark thoughts.

"He's really a sweet guy."

Shelby gave her a skeptical smile, but she listened to Kate's pitiful description of the man.

"He's having a rough time right now." Kate fidgeted, fussing with a loose thread on her skirt.

Shelby sipped her coffee, enjoying the quiet time that seldom came in her office.

"Have you set a date yet?" She knew what to give Kate for a wedding gift. Money, a much better choice than a chrome toaster.

"Just as soon as his business gets off the ground. He had a bad start, but it's going to get better." Kate gripped her coffee mug, and averted her gaze.

"Business? I didn't know he had started one. What's his line of work?"

She didn't hear Kate's answer. The telephones sprang to life and the incessant ring and blinking switchboard took Kate back to her tasks. Back in her private office, Shelby sank into her comfortable

chair and thumbed through the day planner. The phone rang and she punched the speaker button. The monotone voice of Nick's personal secretary flowed over the line.

"Ms. Rand, I am calling to remind you of the interview scheduled for tomorrow morning at 6:00 A.M. at Channel Five."

Shelby had not forgotten the appointment. The fact Nick's super efficient girl Friday had been used to jog her memory infuriated her. He used outsiders to communicate with her.

After the call concluded, she walked calmly into her powder room and closed the door. With cold deliberation, she turned both faucets on full blast in the washbasin and flushed the toilet, then screamed to ease the growing rage that ate away at her stomach lining. Nicely recovered with the release of several teeth clenched choice curse words, she washed her hands and went back to her desk.

The idle indecision stopped and she began to lock up her personal files. "Okay." She pushed a button on the intercom and leaned back in her chair. The soft affirmation of her idea accompanied by several new tasks she issued to Kate. "I'm going to be gone for the rest of the day, Kate. I don't want to hear from or be found by anyone except the contractors. Is that clear?"

There followed a second of silence before Kate answered. "I understand, but Mister Gualdoni is on line two."

"Let him wait until I'm out of the building. Then you can see what he wants." Shelby had her keys in her hand and pretended not to see her secretary's worried expression. "I'll be in at the regular time tomorrow. After the interview."

Twenty minutes later and several miles away from the churning of downtown, Shelby lay in luxurious state of bliss in her mud bath and herbal facial mask at her favorite spa and beauty salon. After the mud treatment, she had scheduled a little touch-up to the streaks in her hair. The stylist had promised a surprising change for her to enjoy. Somehow, those words hadn't worried her.



Whatever she came out of the spa looking like was immaterial. Her desire to make Nick squirm quelled any fear she may have had. He would be the one wanting to scream at 6:00 A.M. tomorrow morning.

\* \* \* \*

Nick hadn't gotten over the shock of holding a gun on Shelby or the cold terror he had put in her eyes. Damn. The woman made him nuts. And now, he worried about what her next move might be or how it would affect his sanity. Another scare like that and he would leave the Midwest a broken, old man.

At the moment, a new situation loomed in the form of an interview with a local television station. Public interest crap. Worse, it had to be a dual interview shared with Shelby. His shoulders bunched in dread of the half hour they would be in the same room with witnesses.

Maybe she wouldn't show up. Sure, just like India ink didn't show up on a white shirt. She'd be there if for no other reason than to make him regret his insensitive treatment of her. He still had visions of her staring at him in wide-eyed fascination while he held the Colt. Christ. His suspicions would be proven true and she would probably make him look like either a brute or a fool.

Knowing all that, he would keep the appointment. It meant publicity and a chance to promote the desirability of his complex of luxury apartments and prima shopping. Lord. The damned thing couldn't be finished fast enough to suit him.

He yawned and steered his car into the television station's parking lot. Damn. Only 5:45 in the morning and he was sweating the ferocious battle of emotions Shelby always set off in his gut.

If he had any luck, she wouldn't show and he could get the hell out of town for a long weekend with a couple of buddies for some serious fishing in Colorado.

His sixth-sense kicked in the moment he walked inside the television station. The hair above his collar bristled. She must be near. The air super charged with her presence and he could smell her. That soft sensuous scent, like a wild spring storm.

“Mr. Gualdoni.”

The woman striding in his direction didn't seem to notice the pre-dawn and smiled at him with her porcelain caps and collagen lips. How the hell could she do that to herself? He grinned when she gripped his hand and pumped with amazing strength. He read off her nametag.

“Ms. Tangier.”

She looked him over without coy lash fluttering. “I've been looking forward to meeting you. Your photos don't do you justice.”

He heard it in her voice and saw it in her heavily coaled gray eyes, an invitation. Of course he was randy as a goat or he wouldn't have noticed. He yanked himself back to the moment when he realized Ms. Tangier had him under hard scrutiny.

A party-like commotion down the hall drew Nick's attention to where a vision in a crimson suit strode toward him. The expression on Shelby's face reminded him of a queen on her morning walkabout for the commoners. Hell fire, what a looker. His groan ached for release, but remained deep and silent, borne of his feeling of inadequacy, at his inability to rise above his physical desires.

He started from his musing when Ms. Tangier grabbed his arm and tugged him toward a set of doublewide glass doors. The melodic symphony of female laughter followed after him and his possessive escort. He turned his head to look back at the lovely scene of women being soft and just being women. She must have felt his hot stare and turned to look his way.

Shelby shook her healthy mane of pale blonde hair over her shoulder and gave him a gaze of challenge. She looked like a fine, sleek young lioness, bent on a romp and he could feel the sting of his ears being swatted. It had begun. Whatever she had planned was

about to unfold and he would be her victim. What the hell? He looked forward to being mauled by Shelby.

After a brief session of being stuffed into a makeup chair meant for a much smaller man, Nick, eager to get on with the damned interview, caught the sleepy-eyed makeup girl's arm to avoid a plop of powder being applied to his face.

"But, Mr. Gualdoni, your face will shine."

"Let it." He smiled at her. "I'll go natural."

He followed her to the set where the interview would be taped and found Shelby already seated and being amused by the camera crew that played court jester to her majesty. The two buffoons fussed with her mike and the lights while she smiled indulgently at their fumbling.

Bracing himself against the urge to kick the asses of both jerks hovering over her, Nick slipped into the chair next to Shelby. What had she done to herself? She looked totally relaxed and obviously getting plenty of refreshing sleep.

He could be wrong, but her breasts looked several inches higher and her waist a hand span smaller. The pale pink glow of her skin grabbed his attention. He wanted to lick the soft skin beneath her ear and gnaw on her sweet neck. He drew in a ragged breath and laughed at his reaction to her.

He was saved the discomfort of asking Shelby how she intended to chop him up by a brisk bit of direction.

"Mr. Gualdoni, would you not lean so near Ms. Rand? You're throwing a shadow."

Nick rubbed his jaw and shielded his grin. "Wouldn't want that." He leaned back and sat with his legs in a comfortable spread. He gave thought to crossing them after he noticed Ms. Tangier looking at him with a smile and licking her lips before her gaze dove to the front of his pants again. He had to know. With little pretense of doing something else, he lay his hand on his crotch to reassure himself his fly wasn't open. He caught Shelby's sidelong glare and grinned.

Like he figured she would, Shelby smiled over her insult. “You don’t have to advertise. I believe she knows where it is.”

Nick prodded her anger further with his knowing grin. “The least I can do. How about you?”

“How about you don’t speak to me again? And by the way, don’t ever try to converse with me through that ramrod secretary of yours.”

She whispered, yet the words ping-ponged around the set with bull horn clarity. He brushed her shoulder with his and murmured near her ear.

“Jesus, what a grouch.”

They ended their hushed conversation and sat back in their chairs, leaning away from each other.

The hostess settled into the chair behind a small glass topped desk and put on a smile that Nick swore would rival a chipmunk’s. He had enough time to thank God for man-sized furniture and solid wood before the director hissed from somewhere in the shadows.

“Three, two, one and we’re taping.”

On it droned and he wondered if this son-of-a-bitch interview had an end.

He’d been pelted with questions and then ignored. Nick leaned back and observed the animated exchange between Shelby and the effervescent Ms. Tangier. He would have given a good-sized reward for another cup of coffee and looked around for the carafe that emitted the magical aroma of hot java.

“Do you agree, Mr. Gualdoni?”

“Me?” Oh hell, they now included him in their tea party. “Yes, ma’am, I agree.”

The two women laughed in apparent glee at his admission.

“Ms. Rand is a well-respected architect. You will surely be contracting her to design for you in the future.”

Nick fairly snarled his reply. “The likelihood of that is small to none.”

Shelby sat forward and worked her shoulders in the manner of a stripper dropping the straps of her gown. “What Nick means is, I no longer have time to waste...I mean, time to spare on such small scale projects.”

“Ms. Rand probably meant to say, it’s too much responsibility for her fledgling corporation to handle and meet the extra security required if she ever got her mitts on new plans of mine again.”

The outburst of laughter in the background alerted Nick to the fact he traded insults with a woman on syndicated television and his parents as well as her father would most assuredly view the segment. Too late to smooth it over. Shelby appeared ready to explode.

Nick grazed his knuckles along his jaw and posed a quiet question to Ms. Tangier. “I don’t suppose there is any chance you would erase that film and forget this entire incident?”

Ms. Tangier dropped her jaw in a look of stunned disbelief. “That’s impossible. This is the next thing we air and there is nothing to replace it. That will be all, thank you.” With a final scornful look in their direction, she walked away to confer with her cameramen, grumbling under her breath. “We’ll have to fill in with extra fluff pieces.”

More muffled laughter from the group down the hall. Shelby leaned over him to stare into his eyes, whispering her comment. “I hope you’re happy. You really have a knack for looking like an idiot. I wouldn’t care how big an ass you make of yourself, but this time you dragged me along behind you.”

Nick’s brows lifted with his bemused smile. “You pretty much led the parade, lady.” He stood up to glare at her. “I knew this had to be a mistake.”

“You’re the biggest mistake I’ve had the misfortune of making. God, I can’t tell you how much I detest you. And I noticed you had a good time with Ms. Tangier. The way she drooled over your zipper was sickening.” She stood up and sliced everyone present with her glacial blue glower.

“Another cute one, Ms. Rand. You with your skirts up to your ass.” He leaned over to stare into her glaring eyes. “I didn’t say a word about those two bozos playing touchy feely with you and you wriggling like a fish in hot oil. Crap.” His whispered curse came out in a painful rasp.

He tore the mike from his lapel and threw it on the chair. She shook out her hair in his face and yanked on the hem of her skirt before shouldering past him.

“Anything is preferable to you. You’re nothing but a savage.”

They didn’t stay for the scheduled after filming chitchat with the hostess. Shelby walked away with Nick bringing up the rear and they took turns slamming the doors behind them.

## Chapter 5

Shelby gripped the steering wheel and glanced in the rearview mirror. Nick's black tank of a car gained on her. She compressed her lips, and leaned over the steering wheel, pushing the accelerator to the floor. Ahead a traffic light still blinked caution yellow.

She could either fly through the intersection or slow down. Fear of dying loomed stronger than the desire to get away from Nick and she hit the brakes. The grating sound of screeching tires to her left got little more than a glance of reaction from her.

Nick motioned for her to lower her window. His mouth worked furiously over the curse words he let fly, most of which she knew he favored. She lowered her window to catch the last few syllables and glared back at him. He had parked at an angle and sat eyeing her with poorly contained outrage. If it had been rush hour, he would have done the exact same thing to stop her.

"Get off my ass, Nick, or I'll call the cops."

"I'm too pissed right now to laugh at that." He pointed at her. "You just missed rolling that bucket you call a car at that last curve."

"So? I'm serious, Nick. Back off, or we're going to have real trouble."

"Oh come on, Shel. I'm trying to talk sense to you, though God only knows why."

She glanced at the passenger seat next to her and wanted to scream. The clipboard taking up room belonged to the Gualdoni project, a list of things she wanted to check out this morning. More of his stuff. In desperation she came up with a solution to the mess she was in. "Nick."

He ran his hand around the steering wheel and grimaced. “Yes, Shel.”

“To get you off my back, I’ll buy your project.”

If only she could call her words back, his startled grin wouldn’t have become a roaring laugh. He shook his head and bumped his forehead on the steering wheel, apparently trying to stop his laughter.

“Now really, Shel. Save yourself ten million bucks and tell me the truth. It’s that simple.” His narrowed gaze flicked over her. “I’d get off your tail if you told me the truth.” He opened his door and got out to lean against her door.

“Nick. I can’t believe what a bastard you are.” Tears wouldn’t be denied and she’d taken all she could to continue playing the stone maiden. “Your bumper is in my way. Move.”

He looked at her with a hint of a smile. “I followed you to apologize for what happened back there.”

She didn’t know why his apology hurt her so deeply. Her confusion boiled to the surface and she began to cry.

“I hate you, Nick.” The simple statement echoed in the quiet morning air and they gazed at each other while all their lovely memories dissolved before their eyes. “I really do.”

She maneuvered around his car, driving away before he could react.

Getting to the complex site didn’t take long at that early hour. Shelby pulled into the empty parking area, stopping next to the golf cart the men used to get around the huge area in a hurry. She got out, taking the heavy clipboard with her. The sun had barely risen but the heat forced her to shrug off her jacket. She carried it over her arm and walked up the hill toward the courtyard.

Concern for her safety struck her. Being a woman alone at a construction site where more stuff vanished than anyone knew hadn’t been a wise decision. No telling who might be hanging around the place.



Shrugging against her worry, she skirted the piles of gravel and bags of concrete mix to sit in the half finished courtyard.

She sat down on a stone bench and took several deep breaths, listening to the birds that hung around the site. The sound of footsteps on the gravel set her nerves on end. Someone was coming and she had been stupid to come here alone.

“Shel.”

She forced herself to stay where she sat and not run into Nick’s arms. But, her heart thumped with relief to hear his voice and the idea he’d been worried about her.

He sprinted to the center of the courtyard and stopped when he saw her. Jamming his hands on his hips, he turned in a circle, looking up at the generator a crane held above the ground. “Shel. You know you shouldn’t be here when the crew is gone.” He ran a hand over his hair.

“Go away.”

She still hated him, but she could breathe again, just seeing him instead of someone bent on hurting her. He moved closer to the half finished rock wall.

He approached her carefully, his gaze taking in the sight of her bare feet and sheer cotton blouse. She knew her appearance was deplorable. No shoes and she’d twisted her long hair up in a knot at the crown of her head. To him, she probably looked a complete mess.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

She hugged the clipboard to her breasts. “Why would you want to?” Her gaze darted away from him and she got to her feet.

“It’s not safe for you to be here alone, Shel.” He took several steps toward her, but stopped when she bent over to slip her shoes on.

“I have to keep reminding you, what I do is none of your business, Nick.” She grabbed up her jacket and hurried off to the outside freight elevator the craftsmen used.

“Shelby. Wait, please.” He caught up with her. “Let me say something before you run away.”

“I’d rather you never spoke to me again.”

“I’ll honor your wishes later, but not until I tell you how much I regret what happened this morning. Shel, I’m sorry.”

“Nick...” Her hand trembled against her hair and she turned away to unlock the door to the wire cage, and press the up button on the panel. She bit her lip when it didn’t respond, kicking a piece of cardboard aside.

Nick leaned around her shoulder to look at her. He crossed his arms over his chest, watching her punch buttons. “Maybe we shouldn’t use it.”

Her eyes widened in outrage. “We? I’m going up to the top floor to check on something.” She hit the panel hard. “Why are you going?”

He hesitated in answering and grinned wryly. “To see why you are. Must be a hell of a mess up there for you to be so damned determined.”

He tried to grab her arm before she could enter the elevator. She dodged his grasp and stepped inside the wire-enclosed cage, trying to close the gate before he could follow her.

“You shouldn’t be going up there, Shel.” He shouldered his way inside with her. “Not before the men get here.”

She scowled his way. “What’s wrong? Afraid you won’t look macho?”

“Never happen.” He flicked his fingers in agitation at the panel of buttons she continued to slug. “I remember Matt saying this thing isn’t working as it should. Now, let’s get the hell off.” He reached for the door.

“And I think you’re lying. Matt said no such thing.” She brushed his hand away with a warning. “Keep your paws off that gate. I’m serious.”

“Okay. I’m damn well not letting you go alone.” He inclined his head toward her in a gesture of yielding and went to the back of the

cage to lounge against the heavy wire wall. He looked up and whistled softly as if he might be waiting in line at a movie.

Shelby cast several wary glances his way while willing the damn elevator to hurry. She wished he hadn't followed her. Her resistance had been minimal and he looked especially male this morning. The fact she hated him had little to do with the sweet, languorous need that brewed in her soul.

The elevator's motor groaned and the slight tremor under her feet startled her, making her seek safety with Nick. She turned to look at him. He smiled at her and she became self-conscious. His dark gaze stroked her body and set little fires in her blood and she knew her will to be celibate had flown off with a pair of cardinals that nested in a nearby cedar tree.

Her mouth softened when he moved away from the wall and held his arms out, just a hint, nothing demanding. Her body quickened and her pulse raced with desire for union with this man. He didn't try to hide the fact he became aroused. She would have known, sensing the same rush of heat that swept over her consumed him. Her jacket slipped from her fingers and dropped to the floor.

The cage shook and gears ground, throwing her against him. It was forbidden, someplace between heaven and hell. She pulled back, gesturing toward the blinking panel.

"Do something, Nick," she demanded.

He drew her back, pressing her close to his body. "Shel, be still. I'll take care of you."

"I don't ... I'm not..." She gave her clipboard a toss and scant consideration to the papers that fluttered in the breeze. Nick held her tight and she slowly melted against him. The delicious way his arms held her secure and the intent in his gaze met her every expectation. With each beat of her heart, she hurried toward the euphoria he could offer. Her lashes lowered in reaction to the hypnotic sound of his voice cloaking her.

"Hello, baby. What are you doing in a place like this?"

She heard the lure of promised secret delight in his rich laugh.

He flirted with her, apparently trying to ease her concern about possibly falling forty feet. Shelby no longer cared why he did it or the fact he wanted only one thing. If having him meant getting over her anger for ten minutes, she would make the sacrifice. Aflame with her longing, she leaned back and slowly worked her hips against his.

“Just hanging around.” She liked the way his large hands cupped her bottom and held her against his hard sex. The sensation rivaled hot lead and she ignited, gasping with unrestrained appreciation of his endowments. A tiny jolt of shame stabbed her pride, but she kicked the useless emotion aside. Nothing as dull as common sense would interfere with his seduction.

Her gaze played with his mouth and the nice size of his nose until the buttons of his shirt caught her attention and she set to work, releasing them all before pulling his shirt free. His buff upper body laid bare for her viewing, making her dry lips demand moisture. She licked them and ignored the satisfied little smile working over her mouth.

Her lips stilled to let his press a lingering kiss and allow his tongue to slip into her mouth and claim her as his own. She accepted his invasion and loved the warm firm texture of his mouth against hers. The emotions he wrung from her were too strong to be touched by the ordinary.

If the sky fell, Shelby knew she would have asked it to wait until Nick had satisfied her yearning. The heat couldn't end, not while he nibbled her throat and her breast swelled in his hands. The freedom of being high above the earth and with him made it all so sensuous, the cool sensation of her blouse being freed to let the breeze whisper over her bare skin, the slide of her skirt being pushed up to her hips seconds before her panties slipped down to lay about her feet. The moment she stepped out of them, the wisp of white lace lifted in the breeze and skittered off to join the papers fluttering in the corner of the cage.

Slowly, deliciously, Nick drew her to his chest, holding her fast to cover her mouth with a hard, hungry kiss, lifting her up to press her to the cool mesh wire. Urgently she found his belt buckle and zipper.

His dark gaze touched every point of her face and settled on her eyes before he smiled in his wolfish way. "I like my women hot and mean."

Her purr muffled against his chest. "Then you should be pleased as punch."

He made a soft growling sound that worked its way up from his chest. "Are you hot?"

"Like July."

"And mean?" He chuckled.

"You'll be wearing scratches on your back." Her fingers traced a circle around his nipple.

"And you'll be wearing a smile."

He claimed her lips and kissed her greedily, holding her to his tense body, pressing her to the makeshift wall.

"My God, Nick," she mildly protested. "You're crushing me."

"Sorry, babe." He caressed her back and massaged her rear. "I'm so hot for you I can't wait."

She heard her own sultry laugh and teased him one more time. "It's going to cost you."

He buried his face in the curve on her neck and groaned. "Name it."

"You stay away from the site until it's finished."

"Never."

His answer had been blunt but not unexpected. She shrugged and dismissed her plan to make him suffer. Making him suffer wasn't what she wanted, not while his mouth hovered above hers in delicious enticement.

His exploration briefly ended when the elevator came to a jarring halt. "Let's be the first to have sex in this place."

He picked her up and released the side door latch. It opened into a half finished apartment where carpeting had been stored. He let her down, and following her to the plush carpeting, winked at her.

“Where did we leave off?” He took several deep breaths and smiled as if he had slain a dragon for her. He caught her face in his hands and brushed his lips over hers, picking up the foreplay talk they always indulged in. “How do you want it?”

She quickened, bumping her hips up against his. “What do you do best?” Her body ached with sweet desire, knowing well his varied and wonderful ability to please her.

“Everything.” He looked at her with the appetite of a healthy, hungry man glinting in his eyes.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” The hot and hard ridge he proudly pressed to her the only recommendation she needed.

“Get ready to pick from a gourmet menu, lady.”

“Well then,” she whispered. “I’ll have some of everything.”

“This restaurant is open twenty-four hours a day.”

“Um-hum. Then let's not rush the cook.” She ran her hand over the solid contours of his back and fought away a sob that could have been of pleasure or regret. Didn't matter. Love for him thundered through her veins and demanded freedom.

He touched the inside of her thigh and she smiled into his eyes, arching her back in response to his exploration. Her hips convulsed up to capture the heaven his fingers created between her legs. The sweet, aching devil-ridden agony of joy grew with each stroke. She caught his hand to hold him firm against her, helping him slide his fingers inside to drive her wild with desire.

“Nick.”

“You’ve chosen something from the menu?” He skillfully freed the snap of her demi-bra. “Mind if I sample these lovely stuffed squab?” He squeezed his fingers around her breast and drew the nipple into his mouth, sucking until she laughed breathlessly.

“I want to compliment the chef.” She delighted in his rigid length, running her finger up the hot smooth underside of his sex. “This ram must be perfectly aged for the horn to be so large and perfectly formed.”

“This ram is at your command.”

Nick caught her butt in his hands and lifted her to tease her pulsing center with his hard shaft, holding back until she raised her arms to hug his neck.

The sob she had suppressed earlier bubbled free as he dropped down to the rough surface, carrying her with him. She smiled at his look of dismay.

“You having second thoughts or just thought of something you want, ma’am?”

She made her request against his mouth. “Do you by chance serve the delicacy of tongue?”

Nick’s laughter, rich and dark like espresso, poured into her ears. She loved him for denying himself, the way he slid down to bend to her desire, his tongue tasting and inciting golden fire through her body with teasing nips of his teeth until she lifted her legs to squeeze her knees against his shoulders.

“Mercy, kind sir, mercy,” she gasped, falling back to hold her arms out to welcome him into her embrace.

“Ready to cook now, baby?”

“Fill the oven before I go up in smoke.”

An ugly whirring sound intruded in the sweet, thick morning air and they recognized it at the same time. Their garden of erotica had been invaded by the thunder of a dozen Ram truck engines and someone’s car radio blaring country music. The serpent entered their Eden in the form of the demon elevator reviving in the long golden slashes of sunlight pouring into the building. Her euphoria and quest for sexual relief ended with the grinding whine of the evil freight elevator as it descended to earth, leaving them stranded.

“Damn.” Nick’s comment seemed perfect for their situation.

“Damn is right.” This embarrassing mess would haunt her and she’d allowed to happen. “We’re stuck up here.”

He got to his feet and gazed down at the rising dust cloud. He turned back to her and gave her a wicked grin. “Not only that. It must be later than we thought.”

His meaning penetrated her brain and she struggled to her knees to peer down at the parking area. “My God. The crew is here.” She sprang to her feet and clung to the wire, her fingers curling about the mesh. She whirled on him when he leaned against her. “You get back. Try to act decent for once.”

“Calm down.” Nick tried to draw her away from the open area where the elevator had been. “They don’t know we’re up here.”

“Sure. Easy for you to say.” She looked for her panties and remembered they had blown to the back wall of the cage. Same for her jacket. She wanted to crumple in humiliation. “And don’t tell me to relax. All you have to do is zip your pants.”

She held her hand out, signaling that she wanted his handkerchief. He had been well trained, digging it from his rumpled slack pocket to press into her hand.

He ran his hands through his damp hair and tucked his shirttail in. When he started to look down at the scene below them, she hissed at him.

“For Pete’s sake. Will you help me? This is all your fault.” She yanked her skirt into a semblance of order. With a cry of anguish, her hands flew to her bird’s nest hairdo and back to the buttons of her blouse.

“Here.” Nick caught her hands and grinned while snapping her bra and fastening her buttons. “You worry about your hair. I’ll do this.”

She tried to control her hair, but it was useless. Most of her hairpins had been scattered over the upper floor of the damned building. She jabbed the few she could find into her hair and gave up, leaving a large swatch flopping at the back of her head.



“Hell with it.” She took in a shaky breath and closed her eyes. “I look like a tramp and now I have to face Matt and the crew in this condition.”

“You look great, Shel.” Nick rubbed her back and grinned. “Look, I’m pretty sure Matt knows we have sex. He wouldn’t say anything to embarrass you.”

“He also knows we are no longer having anything together and especially not out in the open like a couple of diddling squirrels.”

She wanted to cry when Matt’s booming voice rose up to issue a gruff question.

“Hey, up there.” A moment of silence passed before he shouted again. “Who are you and how in the name of God Almighty did you get up there?”

Shelby walked slowly to the opening where the cage had been and called down to him. “Matt, it’s me.” She bunched her shoulders in dread of his reaction to her foolishness. “Me and...Nick.”

“How the... What the... Never mind.” He scuffed his boot in the dust and waved at her before shouting orders to several of the crew. “Get that elevator back up there pronto.” After an animated conversation with one of the men, Matt craned his neck to yell up at them again. “Uh, Shel. My man says the elevator’s generator burnt out. We’re sending up the crane’s bucket.”

While Shelby waited for her escape from the rooftop and demoralization, she considered her dilemma. The fact she wore no underwear or shoes shouldn’t be any reason for the crew see her as a floozy. Like so much baloney. She jumped when the crane’s engine started and the boom began to swing toward their lofty perch.

“Nick.” She wanted to pinch his hard rear for not being nervous or at the very least pretending to care that she might be having a mini stroke.

“Yes, my love.” He stood with his hands in his pockets, absently watching the crane several yards from the ledge.

“Thanks for your consideration, you heathen.” She had to blame someone and it may as well be Nick. “I wouldn’t be in this mess if you had kept it in your pants.”

The wry smile on his face spoke volumes about his thoughts on the subject. “Tell the truth now, Shel. You would’ve been pissed if I’d done that.”

The nasty comment reserved just for him had to wait. The bucket arrived and waited. She shrugged his hand away and climbed in, turning away from him, despising his grin.

“Take a break, Shel. You look fantastic.”

“I don’t care what you think. Just because I look like I spent the night in the backseat with you is no reason for me to be upset.” She clenched her jaw and thrust his handkerchief toward him. “At least have the courtesy to take this with you Thank god I didn’t need it.”

“Who cares what they think?” Nick stretched and yawned, smiling at her. “I’m the one you should worry about. Men die with erections like this one.”

Shelby leaned against him and punched her fist against his hard belly. “Thank you for the support, Nick. One thing is certain, it will never happen again. It wasn’t even sex.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t even sex all the way.” He touched her ruffled hair. “Don’t worry, Shel. I’ll respect your wishes. Satisfied?”

Satisfied? Oh hell. Her legs turned to the consistency of Jell-O. And she wanted sex. If she rubbed her thighs together, she would explode on the spot. Nick hadn’t been wrong. She’d simply been starving for sex. Any man would do. She gazed at him, knowing that wasn’t true. There would never be anyone but Nick.

She allowed him to help her from the bucket, but jerked her arm away when Matt approached them. He carried her shoes, jacket and clipboard in one big hand. She dug way down deep and salvaged one of her enigmatic businesswoman’s smiles that gave away no true emotion.

“You all right, Shelby?” He handed her the bundle, leaving Nick to his own devices. “I’m sorry as hell that happened. We’ll have that fixed before you know it.”

“I’m fine, Matt.” Casting a look of warning in Nick’s direction, she lied. “We thought it would be a good time to check on the carpeting before the heat set in.”

Matt shook his head affirmatively. “Sure is, Shel. Hotter than Hades already, by golly.” He hooked his thumbs in his back pockets and looked at the ground.

She tried to appear confident but stumbled over Nick’s foot. He reached out to stop her fall, his hand closing over her breast.

“Take your hand off my breast.” She had never heard herself hiss before.

“Excuse me, ma’am, for trying to keep you from falling on your puss, and by the way, your hands roved all over my privates a few minutes ago.”

“You egotistical blowhard. Nothing happened as far as I’m concerned.”

Matt beat a retreat in the direction of several cement trucks that had just rolled in to park near the courtyard.

The hint of a grin on Nick’s face added to her list of humiliations. She clutched the paltry bundle close, trying to set him ablaze with her glare. When he walked away, she ran for her car.

She sat looking at the things Matt had handed her. A pained grimace worked over her mouth when her panties popped out of the middle of the pile. Matt would never mention the incident, but she knew Nick would remind her before much time passed.

A plan to distance herself from Nick would be her most urgent project. How that would be accomplished had yet to be decided. She groaned softly and tossed the wrinkled clothing into the back seat. Nick acted cocky now, probably thinking she’d be hot to trot anytime he wanted. He had a life changing experience waiting in his future. In the future, he wouldn’t find her so easy. Right now, she still smelled

him on her skin—hot, aroused and all man. The very thought made her raise her butt to ease the pressure at the highly sensitized fork of her legs.

## Chapter 6

Shelby thought about her handling of the embarrassing moment. When he came into her life, she'd no longer had any control over her actions. That thought rated a belly laugh. Shelby ripped the wrapper from a stick of gum and snorted in derision.

It hadn't seemed unreasonable that first night he arrived in Kansas City for her to pick him up at the airport. And of course, being a sophisticated and gracious businesswoman, she had driven him to his apartment. Of course she spent the night with him in his new apartment. Lord. What an eager and easy mark she'd been.

While she blew a bubble and popped it noisily, she pondered the course she should take to handle her outrageous behavior and wimpy submissive attitude toward Nick. The answer would come later, but right now, she had to get to the comfort of her apartment and scrub his scent away in the shower. She hated herself for lifting her arm to sniff her skin. Like a drunken sot to wine, she buried her nose in the aroma and let her body quicken. What the hell, she couldn't help it. Nick arrived in town like an orgasm, lush, dark and long lasting.

A blast from the horn of a passing car alerted her to the fact she had arrived at the garage entrance of her apartment building. The underground place seemed cool, quiet and free of questioning eyes. She got out of the car and trotted to the stairwell instead of going to the lobby. She didn't want to make small talk with Alfred, the doorman. She liked the fussy man immensely, but he could be a pain in the butt with his inquisitive nature.

The climb up three flights of stairs zapped her strength and she slumped against the door while working her key in the lock. She

walked into her apartment and began stripping her clothes off, letting them fall where they may.

The crackle under her feet reminded her to clean up the graham cracker she had dropped that morning. It seemed a week ago, not hours. That damned man dominated her thoughts so much that time meant little to her anymore. Dropping her skirt on the bathroom floor, she turned the shower on and grabbed a stack of towels from the linen closet. It would probably take several launderings to rid herself of all things associated with Nick.

Armed with a bottle of her favorite body wash and a lush puffy nylon ball, she stood in the spray with her eyes closed. The scent of Spanish Geranium bloomed in the sauna-like heat, taking her to a calmer plain that had eluded her earlier in the day. Realizing the shower did nothing to ease her self-disgust, she shut the water off.

Wrapped in a plush bath towel, she padded off to the kitchen in search of nourishment. Dang. Nick had always seen to it that she had food in the house and now she had reverted back to scrounging as she had before he blasted into her life.

Missing a few meals probably wouldn't hurt her and she could get her own groceries. If she wanted to. Her search turned up nothing but a box of dated Twinkies that fell from a shelf above her head. Most likely a trap Nick had set for her, but she couldn't be picky at the moment. Luck wasn't with her. Only a half pack left and she began to wolf down the dried out confection while walking back to the bedroom.

The ringing of the phone filled her with a mixed bag of emotions. What if it was Nick? Her heart hummed in her chest with sweet expectation. She crossed the polar bear white carpet with trepidation, afraid, but hopeful and peered at the ID display. The caller turned out to be her college roommate who happened to also be her best friend. She picked the receiver up.

"Hello, Mary Claire." The cheerful tone of her voice disguised the pain of heartbreak she felt, but her gabby and self-centered friend

wouldn't have noticed that she had a problem anyway. Mary Claire had majored in nothing but dating and had snagged herself a brilliant attorney. "How are the twins?"

And what had she expected to hear? Of course both perfect in every way according to their mother. "I have been wondering why you hadn't called me about your wedding plans. I have so many wonderful ideas."

Shelby loved her friend like a sister, but right now the questions about her marriage plans stung. "To tell you the truth, Mary. It's on hold for a while."

"You're not getting cold feet are you, Shel?"

How would she ever be able to tell her tradition-crazy friend the wedding had been blown sky high and that she planned to be single for the rest of her life? Shelby slid to the floor, resting against the sofa.

"No. Not cold feet. Work is so backed up and clients don't care if you want to get married. They want their work finished."

There came an exasperated sigh on the line before her friend spoke again. "Well for heavens sakes, Shel. Let's have a really big blowout for your thirty-second birthday when it rolls around."

"Let's not worry about that, Mary." At that reminder of her age, Shelby tossed the last bite of cake into an empty candy dish on the coffee table. "We'll work something out if I get the free time then. Okay?"

After her friend had hung up, Shelby buried her face in her hands and groaned aloud, taking quick stock of her life.

Lifting her head to look around, she noted the lovely white carpet and fine upholstery of her furniture. The cream walls would never have crayon pictures on them because the only man she wanted children with didn't love her. Nope, there would never be jelly stains on her furniture or potty smells in the bathroom. She may as well be sterile.

A wave of regret rolled over her, helping in her decision to get out of her apartment for a while. Maybe she would stop at one of those high dollar children's shops and buy Mary Claire's perfect darlings something pretty. She scrambled to her feet, quickly dressing, in a hurry to hear voices that didn't question her or make demands.

On her way out, Alfred spotted her getting off the elevator and called to her with his usual wealth of salutations.

"Ms. Rand. How nice. I didn't see you come in."

Shelby smiled and walked backwards toward the stairs to the garage. "I didn't want to bother you, so I used the stairs."

He snapped his fingers and looked around the lobby as if he didn't want to be overheard. "Ms. Rand, I hope I'm not being overly concerned, but earlier this morning I noticed a young man across the street and he seemed to be gazing at your balcony for an awfully long time. When I stepped out to stand under the portico, he left in rather a hurry."

Poor Alfred, always looking for a new rumor to spread. "I'm sure it was nothing. People walk along Brush Creek all the time and look up at the apartments. As long as he left, I wouldn't worry."

He looked disappointed and hurried to open the stairwell door for her. "I'll keep a close watch out for him, just the same. Have a good day, Ms. Rand."

Shelby left him with a reassuring smile.

Spending several hundred dollars on children's toys and clothing didn't take long. Shelby felt lost and disorganized, similar to the one time she played hooky from school. She decided to drop in to see her father and invite him for dinner next week.

Thomas Rand, or Tom as most people called him, was filling a birdbath when Shelby pulled into the circle drive of the house she had grown up in. Her soul was burdened and her hug to his neck fierce.

"What brings my girl home at this time of day? Want to talk about it or should I keep minding my own business?" Tom followed Shelby into the house, closing the door after them. "What's going on?"



She gave him her best expression of surprise. “What makes you ask that, Dad?”

He scowled a little and his voice gruff with fatherly concern. “Well, by God, I can tell your heart’s beating a thousand times a second. Still say everything’s swell?”

Her laugh sounded like a weak sounding mewl and her hands shook. “It’ll work itself out, Dad.” She looked around the room and let her gaze rest on the family portraits on the mantel. “I still think I have the best looking dad in the world.”

“Un-huh. You and Nick having problems?”

“Something like that.” She clasped her hands and grinned at him. “How about fixing me something good to drink?”

“Okay. I’ll be quiet, but if he does anything to hurt you, I won’t take it kindly.”

“Oh now, Dad. You know Nick would never do anything to hurt me.”

Tom smiled at her, stood and motioned for her to follow him. “I taped something you might want to see.”

Her heart hammered faster in her cowardly chest. By the time her plodding footsteps took her into the family room, the DVD ran the footage of the interview with Nick. They couldn’t wait to run that laugh a minute tape.

She couldn’t shake the ridiculous, horrid things they’d said to each other in front of strangers and now her father wanted answers.

She jumped when her father spoke to her.

“Unless that was planned, I didn’t find it funny, hearing my daughter being called a shyster by the man she’s going to marry.”

“I can’t tell you all the details, Dad. You can see we’re having a problem. That’s all I can say.” She shrugged and looked at her bare ring finger.

“I don’t accept that, but I know when I’ve been told to mind my own business.” Tom turned off the VCR and shook his head. “Let’s go have a glass of tea. You hungry?”

“Nope.” Shelby took two large tumblers from the cabinet and filled them with ice. “Dad, if you had plans to go somewhere, I have things I could be doing.”

“Just thought I might go to the club to hit some golf balls.” He poured the tea and handed her a napkin. “Want to come along with me? We can talk while we walk.”

The chilled drink went down hard and the stale Twinkie still knotted in her nervous stomach. She wanted to blab the whole story to her father. That’s what he expected, but this wasn’t something she knew how to tell him about.

“Thanks for the offer, Dad. But I think I’ll go back to the office and finalize some contract details.” She laughed and patted his stomach. “Too many beers with the boys. Come over this weekend and I’ll cook you a low-cal dinner.”

“That’s a date, honey. Call me later?”

“Yep. I don’t think I’ll be busy for a while.” The word ever loomed hugely in her thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

She had shut the door to her office, laid her head on her desk and slept until Kate’s voice on the intercom jerked her awake. “I’m going home now, Shelby. Will you be okay?”

Rubbing her eyes and straining to see clearly, Shelby gave a raspy answer. “Yeah, fine, Kate. Go ahead and have a good weekend.”

When she heard the outer office door close, Shelby got up to stretch and stare out the window. A glance back at her desk reassured her the contracts she had been drawing up had been finished, and she could go home. She figured her clouded thoughts had cost her a pretty penny on the deals. Hell with it, she had to stop by the supermarket before calling it a night. Why had she agreed to go to that picnic? Matt would be hurt if she didn’t show up.

She washed her face and winced at the puffy faced reflection in the mirror. Her descent into being a ragged-looking hag gained momentum. Rolling her eyes in disgust, she grabbed her car keys and left the office. The market might be closing soon and she wasn't going to creep out of bed early in the morning to get ingredients for a cheese ball.

The sound of her heels on the concrete floor of the garage reverberated around the dimly lit area. Something in the shadows moved and she gasped, freezing where she stood to listen and gazed into that dark corner. Her heartbeat boomed in her ears and the air in her lungs ballooned until she swayed in a near faint. "Who's there?"

She figured her ahoy had been courageous but stupid. No, she hadn't been wrong. The shadow moved and it came toward her. Turning sharply, she raced for her car and screamed in terror seconds before headlights from a passing car lit up the entire level. Her key refused to work until she screamed again in frustration and fear. As if an unseen benefactor stood at her elbow, the key slid in the lock and the door swung open without resistance.

She threw herself into the seat and slammed the door, pressing the auto-lock until she could be positive they would hold the frightening thing at bay. The car started with no stalling and the gears slipped smoothly into place. She drove out of the garage without looking back and sped away, convinced she had over-reacted badly to nothing.

By the time Shelby walked into the supermarket, her hands had stopped shaking and she could almost laugh at her ridiculous actions in the garage. Screaming at shadows would have been a good laugh for Nick. To hell with Nick. She had a cheese ball to make.

\* \* \* \*

Smoke from several barbeque pits hung over the park like a blue-gray umbrella in the afternoon heat. Shelby sat in her car and looked over the throng of people gathered there. Matt wasn't difficult to spot.

He wore a pink ruffled apron and a regulation chef's hat. He never turned down a reasonable dare and worked hard to keep his crew in a good mood.

Several girls wearing super-short shorts and tube tops walked by her car. They made her sage-green walking shorts seem matronly. Before she got out to join them, she pulled the tail of her Tee shirt out and knotted it at her waist. No use letting them see her as an old maid with no prospects.

While getting her food from the trunk, Shelby groaned in disgust. She noticed the deep scratches around the trunk lock and more on the passenger's side. An image of a crawly rat came to mind and she shuddered in the ninety-degree heat. Just a car burglar and nothing to worry about. She gathered her things and started to cross the sun-baked expanse of dry grass, grateful for thick-soled sneakers. Her feeling of elation evaporated when her gaze touched a familiar tall frame. "No way."

The sight of him sent a quake through her that would have sent the seismic scale off the screen. After hearing several of the crew talking, she had been sure Nick would be out of town and this would be just the crew and their families. Her legs stiffened and her ponytail swung to and fro while she stomped off in Matt's direction.

"Why did you invite him?" She jerked her thumb in Nick's general vicinity and put her platter on a table next to the cooking pit.

"Who? You mean Nick?" Matt grinned and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "Well, I just about had to, Shel. He overheard us yakking about it and, well, I really couldn't not ask him. He's a nice guy most of the time and he does pay the bills."

"All right. I see your point. But, don't expect me to stay a minute longer than is absolutely necessary." She turned to look at the action on the ball field, anywhere to avoid eye contact with Nick.

"Hey. Don't run off. These guys eat a lot and fast." He slopped barbeque sauce on the dozen steaks that sizzled on the huge grill. "I

guess you can tell some of these folks have had a cocktail or two before lunch.”

She tugged on his apron strings, laughing at the antics of the men involved in a game of touch football. “I just assumed they always fell on their butts and rolled around like puppies.”

Matt grinned and pointed to the group of players out in the sun. “You think they let loose at a picnic, wait until we all go to that hockey game.”

She could hardly hear Matt’s voice as Nick strode toward her, confident, sexy and tempting. She couldn’t forget the permanent tingle his hands had left on every sensitive part of her body. “I’m sorry, Matt. What did you say?”

“That’s okay, Shel. Why don’t you find a shady place until I holler it’s ready?”

Her lips felt lopsided and her eyes were probably glazed. Where could she hide to be safe from her own drooling condition? Every bench had been taken and all the lawn chairs now turned over to create tents for the kids to play under. A sun-bronzed young man stopped next to her and pressed an ice-cold beer into her hand.

“You want to bat next, Ms. Rand? I think Al’s too full to take his turn.” He gave her a crooked grin.

“Thanks, Hank.” She sipped the beer and smiled at him. “I might take my turn later.”

“Okay. We’ll put you in the rotation.” He jogged off to join his friends.

Matt forked several of the steaks onto plates and handed one to her. “Wait a minute and I’ll give you potato salad.”

“Oh no, Matt. I’ll get some of that nice salad and a cookie.” Shelby tried to avoid the mountain of potato salad he dumped onto her plate but moved too slow. “Okay, I’ll just sit over there under that tree and enjoy this.”

“Hold on a minute and I’ll go with you.” Nick didn’t back away from the boxcar-sized cut of meat and took extra slaw and baked beans with his. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Matt gave her an apologetic grin and paid particularly close attention to the coals in the pit. “There’s a nice shade over there under that elm, Shel.”

“Thank you so much, Matt.” She tried to stop him, but Nick took her plate and carried it to the tree Matt had pointed out. “I guess you know I really don’t want to eat lunch with you.”

“I figured that out already. Sit.” He handed her the plate and sat down beside her. “I thought in the interest of looking like competent people after what’s happened at the site and at the TV station, I should play the part of a man thoroughly flogged for his sins. Appease the women and give the guys a chuckle. So, what did you bring?”

“Cheese ball.” She wanted to dump her food in his lap and go home.

He coughed and laughed, taking a sip of his beer before commenting. “I should have known. Of all things a person doesn’t want at a barbeque....”

“Just shut up, Nick.” She stabbed her fork into a fry and raised it to her mouth. “I don’t want bug bites around my panty line either, but they’ll be there when I get home. I’ll ignore you as much as possible to avoid letting everyone know you’re a two-faced idiot. So shut up for the duration.”

He chuckled when Hank’s wife walked over to them and set her huge radio down by Shelby. The energetic Rita giggled and yelled out toward the ball diamond.

“Hank, don’t skin nothing.” Her dark eyes sparkled and she leaned down and spoke to Shelby. “Hank always talks about how nice you are. I felt jealous at first, but he said you and Nick had a thing going on. So, I’m glad you’re nice to my man.”

Shelby smiled at her, not missing the real adoration for Hank in Rita's eyes. She hated the twist of jealousy in her heart over the couple's good fortune. "It's not hard to be nice to decent and reliable men." Shelby hoped her reference to decent men struck home in Nick's rear end. It hadn't. He seemed to be deeply absorbed in scraping mud off his sneakers.

Rita held her hand out to Shelby. "Come on. We're up. And Nick, you're catching now."

Shelby choked on her beer and wanted to scream when she caught Nick's half smile. He rubbed his finger over her chin and eyed the bottle she held.

"You're dribbling a little bit there." He took the mitt Rita handed him and worked it onto his hand. "Not accustomed to drinking out of a bottle?"

She made another bad decision, but Shelby tipped the bottle up, quickly drinking half its contents. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, giving Nick her most inane smile. "Want me to burp?"

Rita bounced up and down, squealing with delight at Shelby's show of barbarism. "That's so funny."

"Wait until you see her bat. You'll really get a good laugh." Nick touched the glove to the top of Shelby's head and trotted off to wait for her behind home plate.

Shelby plodded along behind Rita to wait her turn at bat. She'd gotten into another fine mess and the man to blame stood several feet away, working his muscles under a white T-shirt. He twisted at the waist and looked back at her with what had to be his most sexy and inviting grin. Damnation, his faded Levi's pointed out all the places she wanted to squeeze and cuddle, like his strong thighs and hard butt cheeks. She tried to stop the tremble in her arms and legs when he squatted and the strength of his back and arms drew her greedy gaze like neon arrows.

When Rita fanned out, Shelby balked for a second in dread of doing the same thing. Drinking hemlock would have been preferable to letting Nick see her fail at anything. Inhaling hard, she picked the bat up and looked at it.

Hank yelled at her. "You going to bat or what?"

She gave him a weak grin and stepped to the plate.

Rita chimed in. "Shut up, Hank. She's going to hit a home run."

The soft laughter behind her angered Shelby. She looked back at Nick and tapped the bat on the ground like she'd seen the pros do. She set her feet and waggled her hips from side to side. Hefting the heavy bat up on her shoulder, she tensed her legs in preparation to run. The ball flew toward her and she swung.

"Strike one," Nick informed her in a bored manner.

She ignored him and kept her eye on the ball, swinging with all her might when the ball came sizzling toward her again. The solid crack of the ball meeting the bat surprised her.

"You did it," Rita screamed at her. "Run, Shelby. Run."

Nick stood up and whispered in her ringing ear. "You had better take off, Shel. When you get back here, I'm going to tag your ass out."

Was she dizzy from victory or the brush of his chest against her back? There wasn't time to figure it out. She dropped the bat, following Hank's lead. She felt lighter than air as her feet slapped the hot chat of the diamond. First base had been easy and Hank yelled for her to haul it. When her foot hit second base, she looked at home plate and saw Nick standing with his hands on his hips, grinning as if he enjoyed the show. Rita's shrill screams followed her to third base and on to the home stretch. Ahead of her lay home plate and Nick. She could see him, waiting for the ball to tag her out. "Over my dead body." The base lay a few yards away when Hank yelled slide.

She followed instructions, falling on her stomach and reaching for that ragged bag of dirt. It looked like gold to Shelby. The thud of hitting a solid object was her last lucid memory before swimming out



of a pleasant nirvana. A familiar voice called her name and strong hands cradled her head. “Shel, baby. It’s me, Nick. Look at me.”

When she opened her eyes, she saw a circle of worried faces peering down at her.

“What happened?” Still groggy, she tried to stand, but promptly gave up the idea.

“We kind of collided.” Nick gazed intently into her eyes. “I’m sorry as hell I didn’t move, honey.” He pulled her into his arms and hugged her close. “I’m taking you home.”

“I can drive myself.” She quickly let her head fall back to his shoulder, giving in to the reeling sensation. She pushed on his chest. “Oh, my God. I’m going to be sick.”

He carried her to the tree line and let her stand, holding her steady until she shuddered in revulsion and staggered in the aftermath.

“Come on.” Nick swept her up in his arms again.

“Where are we going?”

“The nearest emergency room.”

## Chapter 7

Nick ignored her mumbled arguments and loaded her into his car. A large crowd gathered around and tried to comfort Shelby with jokes about her being a ringer. Matt shooed everyone back while Nick belted into her seat and Nick drove away with her toward the hospital a few blocks away. Shelby leaned against him and scowled when he questioned her.

“You going to stay awake, babe?”

“Of course....” She slumped against him and smacked her lips. “I’m thirsty.”

He broke a few laws, exceeded the speed limit and didn’t flinch at the screech of tires when he pulled into the emergency entrance of the hospital. He couldn’t wait for the staff to come out to help and ignored Shelby’s loud complaints about being taken from the car and carried into the antiseptic-smelling building.

The place was crowded with the garden variety of sprains, bites, and one woman in labor. Nick figured he looked pretty desperate when a young intern met him in the hallway, leading him to an examination cubicle. Nick reluctantly laid Shelby on a gurney. He stood by her side while the intern checked her over. The scrubbed faced kid questioned Nick.

“Car accident?”

“No. Beaned by a baseball. Or rather, she slid into me at home plate....” Nick imagined he knew what a wife beater underwent. The disbelieving stare and shake of the intern’s head could only mean he thought she had been beaten. “It was an accident. Is she okay? She has a goose egg on her forehead.”

The intern grinned. “Yep, and I’ll bet she has a real shiner in the morning.”

Nick lightened up, reassured by the doctor’s attitude. That level of calm didn’t last long, the good doctor throwing him a curve ball from left field while making notations on her chart.

“Is Shelby pregnant?” Nick’s stunned expression seemed to amuse the young physician. “We always ask that. It is a precaution if we administer drugs or do x-rays. A safety check.”

“I can see that.” Nick breathed easier. “No, she’s not pregnant.” Now, why did he feel disappointment? Christ. That’s all he needed. A child with the woman that hated him.

“She’s had a light sedative to ease the pain that will hit her later. And a prescription to take home.”

When the intern finally left them alone, Nick could see Shelby felt no pain and grinned sweetly at him. She had to be high as a kite. His heart jostled him to be tender with her. “Want me to carry you to the car?”

Her lashes fluttered and her rose colored lips smiled. “Want to make out again?”

“What a question.” The urge to kiss her wouldn’t go away, but he resisted. “Let’s go home.”

She hugged his neck and snuggled against him, sighing and shaking his nerves. The situation already presented problems. He couldn’t go through another session of having his balls boiled in hot water and not let the volcano blow. “Lord, have mercy.”

\* \* \* \*

The moment they walked into his place, Nick had reason to question his sanity. It had been dumb bringing her to his apartment instead of her own, or even better, her dad’s place. His complete annihilation had only begun. She waged a fresh siege on his manhood as well as his temper.

“I don’t want to wear that.” Her bottom lip pouted and her cat eyes narrowed in open distaste of the T-shirt he offered her.

“Shel, I don’t happen to have a supply of nighties. I do have a bunch of T-shirts and that toothbrush you pretended to look for.” He reached into a drawer and pulled out a swatch of ice blue silk. “Look here. You have clean under pants.”

“I’m dirty. There’s mud in my hair and I’m sweaty.” She tossed the T-shirt aside and began to systematically drive him nuts. After whipping her shirt off, she dropped her modest walking shorts to the floor and moved toward his bathroom.

“Hey.” Nick tried to change her direction. She sidled by him and staggered into the room he called his private lair, skinning her panties off to flip them back at him. “Aw, damn it, Shel.”

The fact she was high didn’t alter her sense of direction. She got the shower going and slid into the tub to frolic on her back like a young otter. He gazed at the sea nymph lying in his tub, water splashing on her and running off the curves and down the hollows of her lush body.

“Hey.” Nick reached in the shower to grab her arm when she stood up and grinned at him. He could see this as a trial to be endured. “Sit down.”

“I need soap.” She went through the motions of washing her breasts, looking pleased with what she felt beneath her hands.

Telling himself he did this only to save her butt, Nick undressed and stepped in the shower with the beautiful witch. “You don’t play fair, Shel.” He chuckled, reaching for the shower gel and a sponge. “Stand still and we’ll play carwash.”

Engrossed in his job of shampooing her hair and gently washing her face, Nick almost jumped out of his skin when she gripped his cock in her soapy hand.

“Shel.” He couldn’t help his wimpy plea. “Don’t do that if you don’t mean it.”

“I almost fell.”

He groaned and checked out her smile twice, suspicious she wasn't quite as dopey as she acted. "Well, I have news for you, lady. That isn't a safety bar."

She squealed in protest when he switched the water to cold. He laughed and held her tight, soaking in her sweet warmth and the lush tender curves of her body. He liked the way her arms clung to his waist and the way she mouthed his nipple like a kitten bent on a good meal. "Lord have mercy."

Her next move shot him to the moon. He shuddered helplessly while her hands slithered like two velvet mittens over his butt, fingers pressing and pinching. "Having fun, Shel?" His voice deepened an octave for every degree hotter he became. She didn't answer, but sucked harder on his nipple. "Okay. Enough."

He snagged a towel that hung over the shower door and wrapped her in it. Her dreamy gaze flicked over him as if she didn't give a frig who dried her juicy little body. Damn. He was jealous of himself. His chuckle earned him a soft glance from his houseguest. "Innocent as a lamb," he grumbled, looking at her with an agonized groan.

"Nick. Are you staying all night?"

"Damn straight, lady." He made a turban from a towel for her wet hair and patted her rear. "Why? You want me to leave?"

"No. Not until we make love."

A soft sigh combined with her husky laugh slid from her mouth, over his pounding heart, past the knots of tension in his belly and jumped down to grip his balls.

"You're not being a nice girl anymore." He buried his face in the fragrant curve of her neck and nibbled her earlobe. "I'm going to stick your cute ass into bed and get the hell out of your way. Okay?"

She sighed and ran her hand down the crack between his butt cheeks. "I love your big hard rump, Nick. Do you like mine?"

"My rump isn't the only thing hard right now."

She had the nerve to laugh.

"I know."

It was all too much for him to digest. His dick would probably fall off his body in frustration and there she laid it out on a silver platter. No, he wouldn't screw a woman that didn't know how much he enjoyed it.

"Get your fine ass into the bedroom, Shel. I'm serious."

She pouted, and then chortled in her teasing way. "Oh goody, the mean old man is pissed. Bet he wouldn't give you sex even if he could." She skipped off to his room and flopped on the bed, spreading her legs like Cleopatra entertaining Anthony. Her hair spread over his pillows like something wild and mysterious. She bent her leg and stroked the creamy length of her inner thigh, working her hand down to touch the delicious looking pale blonde curls between her legs.

Nick stood in the doorway, mentally licking his way up her lovely limbs and gorging on her flower nectar. The beauty on his bed drew him like a magnet, holding him captive.

"Nick." The queen beckoned her slave. "Lie down with me and I'll let you touch me."

His limit of self-denial had been reached. She sighed and crooked her finger, lifting her hips in invitation. Hell with celibacy. He didn't much like it and his woman waited, warm, wet and.... He leaned over the bed and stared at her flat stomach. It had taken him a while to pinpoint the thing that had changed, but it finally hit him between the eyes.

"Where's the patch?"

She laughed and flung her arms about his neck, forcing him to fall on top of her. "Forget the patch, my stallion. I need it now." Her legs twined with his and she fused her mouth to his, plunging her tongue into his mouth, sucking his lips until he caught her face in his hands and managed a rational comment.

"Either you've stopped using the patch or you're on your period." He couldn't resist and covered her parted lips in a deep kiss, tasting the sweet perfume of her mouth, and hearing her soft breaths in his

ear. She arched her hips up against his convulsing hard-on and smiled at him.

“Neither. It probably washed off in the shower.” Her small hand snaked down to close around his cock and slid back and forth until he captured her wrist.

“Mind if I go check the shower?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

He looked into her eyes and hated the lingering signs of sedative that tinted her eyes a spectacular lavender color. She touched him, but drifted light years away in her mind. A knot of emotions churned in his gut, sending a charge of fiery need to every cell of his body, demanding he have sex with the hot number sprawled under him. Nothing in his life had prepared him for the pain of trying to quiet the rage in his balls. But, he wouldn’t take the risk she had stopped using birth control. He pressed his hand to her curly nest and whispered against her lips.

“Lie back, baby, and I’ll give you Nick’s special.”

“Don’t you want sex with me?”

“Sure I do, but you look so damn good, I have to dip my tongue in your honey jar first.”

The temptress opened her legs with no hesitation, locked her fingers in his hair and drew his seeking mouth to her. He tasted the first drop of Shangri-La, the mist that waited for his tongue. The quivering of her thighs pleased Nick, urging him to take what the sweet-tasting beauty wanted to give him. Her exotic scent went straight to his crotch, putting a tremble in his hands as he opened her to expose her blooming clit. He closed his mouth over the delicacy in an erotic kiss.

She arched her back and pumped her hips against his face, gripping his hair in her passion. The pain was worth it to Nick when her moans became gasping demands for more. Catching her butt in his hands to hold her still, he made quick swirls over her throbbing center until she tried to sit up.

“Damn you, Nick. You know how I like it.”

He raised his head to flash a wolfish smile before slowly licking the outside of her pussy. “As you wish, baby.” He knew what she wanted and did her bidding, sliding his tongue over her and deep inside before catching her in his teeth to bite playfully then sucking her into his mouth. He nibbled and nursed while she moved her hips sensuously and laughed with pleasure. Her climax came on a wave of gasping laughs and moans of extreme delight while she clasped her thighs to his face. Her final burst of passion erupted in a laughing sob and dissipated with heavy sighs. For long moments he held her fast to lick the last tremors into his mouth and swallow the pleasure she allowed to spill over to him.

The sound of her sweet sigh and her relaxed pose let him know she had been sated and ready for a nap. He moved off the bed and stood looking down at the lush sexpot that tormented him. She stretched and rolled onto her side, sighing a couple times before her soft snoring took over.

Well, he could be proud of his woman pleasing skills, but his cock stood at attention. He dragged the sheet and comforter up from the foot of the bed and covered her legs. What a fool. Hard as rock when she would have been willing to go at it all night. He’d worried about pleasing the little crook lying on his bed. Why did he worry about getting her pregnant when she obviously didn’t care? What did it matter whether she knew it was him that made her come?

She made a sound of discontent and kicked the comforter away from her feet. Nick couldn’t resist leaning over to kiss her cheek and brush her wild-child hair from her face.

He groaned under the weight of a fresh load of guilt over the lump on her forehead. Sure, it wasn’t huge, but something like that didn’t belong on her sweet little mug. His gut tightened when he got a look at the darkening smudge under her eye. “Jesus. A real mouse.”

Maybe if he didn’t mention it, she wouldn’t raise hell. Nick chuckled and shook his head. No matter what he said or did, she



would see it differently. Stranger yet the burning desire to cuddle her close and tell her how deeply he loved her. The lonely days and nights that set in the moment their relationship ended hadn't surprised him. He had expected the unbearable longing to talk with her and sleep with her. And, it didn't show any signs of going away. He was a miserable man without her, but that couldn't be changed. In time, somewhere down the road, he would forget her.

“Like hell you will, you pitiful bastard.” He had to get control of his emotions before he found himself on his knees kissing her ass. Moving away from temptation, he worked at not waking her, going so far as to drag a pair of lounge pants from the laundry bag instead of opening the closet to get a fresh pair or turning on another light. A rustling on the bed made him turn his head to look at her. Big mistake. Whether by design or accident, she had pulled a pillow under her hips and her fine ass was elevated up as if it dared him to start something.

He groaned and yanked the comforter from the bed, leaving her the sheet. Christ. He had to be an idiot of the highest order. Still crazy for the woman he had become her eunuch. He should leave her naked as a jaybird, not cover her up. Or made her sleep on the couch.

Sure. Big talk. But, first he had to quit worrying about her and accept the fact they were through. Damn it to hell. No more soft and fuzzy moments with her. It was getting too easy and she had the ability to make him act like a hen-pecked clown. Oh yeah, the sex would have been out-of-this-world hot, but he had his pride. She had zonked out anyway.

\* \* \* \*

The sound she had heard hundreds of times, deep melodic tones came from the grandfather clock in the entry hall. Seven in the morning and she lay in Nick's bed. Alone. The ache in her ribs jolted her memory back to the collision with Nick. She sat up and winced

after touching her forehead. Her fingertips pressed against a lump that felt as large as a golf ball.

Where the hell were her clothes? Instinctively, she felt between her legs for telltale signs of having had sex. Nothing more than the usual moist feeling. She was confused. What had she done in those hours that were a blank? “Nick?”

She crawled out of bed and narrowed her eyes against the sunlight pouring in through the balcony doors. A Kimono style bathrobe had been draped over the side chair and she grabbed it to wrap around herself.

She found him in the bathroom, just finishing his shave and looking sensational even through her squinting eyes. He wore a pair of fresh Levi’s and a light blue cotton shirt, which he hadn’t buttoned yet. As usual, he smelled divine. “Nick.”

“Shel.”

Now why did he have that snarl in his voice and a detached expression in his eyes? A sniggle of a memory involving messing around played enticingly in her head. Of course. He had probably wanted sex and she had refused. Being drugged had its advantages at times. She hadn’t humiliated herself evidently. When his gaze finally met hers, she offered a show of gratitude.

“Listen. I want to thank you for...taking care of me.” She reached for his brush and swiped at her storm lashed hair.

“No problem. I had the choice of bringing you here, or let you run wild in the streets.”

Her smug feeling of self-confidence slunk away. “And, what does that mean?”

“Nothing.” He slapped aftershave on his face and eyed her briefly. “Nothing except you were too eager to please and couldn’t be on your own.”

Blood heated by rage pounded in her ears. “You had sex with me? While I slept?”

“Pshaw. You’re the only one that had sex and you sure as hell weren’t asleep.”

“Pervert. I suppose you took pictures, too.”

He flashed a smile. “Sure. Lots of them.”

“I can’t think of a name low enough to call you.”

He touched his fingertip to her shoulder. “How about stopping the show of indignation. Nothing happened that you didn’t want.”

“How about you going to hell?” She held her hand out. “I’ll take the car keys now.”

“You’ll wait until I’m ready to drive you home.” He flicked the sleeve of the robe she wore. “Put my stuff back where you found it.”

She whipped the robe off her shoulders and glared at him. “Gladly, if it gets me away from you any faster.”

She stalked off to his bedroom. Several minutes passed before she yelled at him again.

“I have a black eye!” She stared at her reflection, the puffy eye half closed and startling. He wasn’t going to tell her. How could she have been fool enough to think he cared about her? She yelled at him again. “Where are my clothes?”

“I burned them.”

He seemed to be taking devilish delight in harassing her. That came to an end when she began tossing his neatly placed shoes against the wall.

“Your things are hanging in the wardrobe, your highness.”

His shirt had been buttoned and his pants zipped when he came into the bedroom to watch her pillage the place. He propped himself against the door frame and followed her angry movements. “How fitting. Sunday morning with the little ball and chain. Count your blessings, man. This would be served every day if you had married her.”

“Nick.”

“Yes, dear.”

“I’m ready, smart-ass.”

“Of course, dear.”

She counted to ten and took control of her blazing anger. “What is all the mumbling about?”

“Just testing the waters of the state of bliss called matrimony.”

“Don’t bother.” She was in no mood for his brand of humor. “You’ll never marry. No woman can compete with the love affair you have going on with yourself.”

He nodded in agreement and smiled at her. “Cup of coffee before we go?”

“No thanks.” Why must he stare at her? Oh Lord. Of course he found her disheveled appearance amusing. “If you have any decency left, take me home. That’s all I want from you.”

He looked down at her muddy sneakers and mumbled. “That’s not what you said last night.”

His grin, no matter how fetching, infuriated her. “What did you say?” He made it plain there had been sex. Of what nature she wasn’t sure. Not remembering added fuel to the self-doubt in her mind. “I’m calling a cab. Give me money for the fare.”

He smacked her upturned palm as if she wanted to high five him. “Not on your life. Wouldn’t give you the satisfaction of playing the injured martyr.”

Conversation during the short drive to her apartment had been sparse. Nick insisted she wear a pair of his sunglasses. After catching his grin of amusement, she looked in the mirror and saw her owlish reflection. She whipped the oversized glasses off and stuffed them in the glove box.

The saying there’s no place like home had never been more true for Shelby when he drove into the apartment garage and parked beside her car. She clenched her teeth in resentment when he ran to help her from the car.

“Don’t be a jackass, Nick.” She swung her hand to and fro to avoid him taking it in his. “You can leave now.”

He didn't answer, apparently interested in her car as he walked slowly around the sporty model. He ran his hand over the trunk and shook his head over the scratches around the door lock.

"How long those been there?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I just noticed them yesterday."

He grabbed her hand and guided her closer to the car. "See, those deep marks had to be made by someone wanting in real bad. Not just a kid with a beer opener."

She wasn't expecting his loud reaction. "It could have been that guy I saw in the garage the other night."

"What guy?" Nick's booming voice and piercing stare startled her.

She wasn't expecting his loud reaction. "How do I know? I'm not even sure it was a guy."

"Did you tell anyone? The police? Alfred, if nobody else for Christ's sake?"

"Nick." She wrestled her hand from his grip. "I don't know that the scratching thing happened here. I do go other places."

He thumped the window and gave her a sardonic glance. "Yeah, I guess you do go where you want to." He took her arm despite her scowl. "Come on. You're supposed to stay out of the sun and rest for a couple days."

Shelby huffed in retaliation to his forcibly walking her to the elevator. "I know the way to the lobby and Alfred will have a key to let me in."

Nick snorted over a laugh. "Maybe old Alfred's the one working your car over. Ever think about that?"

They stepped in the elevator and Nick still held onto her arm. In the warm, close interior of the car, Shelby became intensely aware of his presence, his height and scent. His dark gaze had to be traveling over her at a leisurely pace. Nothing else could have caused the little trail of fire skittering over her breasts and cheeks.

“Shel.” He pulled her close to rock her gently for a moment, then let her go. “I meant it when I apologized about the eye. Okay?”

She wanted to lean against him and bury herself in his embrace, but she wouldn’t. “I accept that, but not the innuendos of consensual sex.”

“What?”

The elevator doors opened. The familiar scene of home rushed in to greet Shelby, and a glance at Nick the determining factor that made her grateful for her own space. He smiled while eyeing her battle-scarred face.

He draped his arm over her shoulders and walked her out of the elevator. “It wasn’t consensual at all. You wanted it, I didn’t.”

“I don’t suppose I’ll ever know the truth.” She shrugged and gasped when pain shot from her waist to her ribcage. She had forgotten her attempt at playing baseball.

Nick turned her away from the curious stare of a woman leading a yapping poodle through the lobby. “Take it easy.” He rubbed her back and offered a final observation to spark her anger. “You’ll just have to wait until those pictures come back from Ditzzy Developing.”

Getting the key to her apartment posed yet another ordeal, one Shelby attributed to Nick.

“I’m so sorry about your accident, Ms. Rand. I was terribly upset when Mr. Gualdoni called with the news and that someone else would be bringing your car into the garage. I’ll be here all day to run errands for you if necessary.”

“Thank you, Alfred, but I’ll be fine. It’s really nothing.” She wanted to slap Nick for the bored expression on his face. “Nick has volunteered to do all that for me.”

Once out of Alfred’s hearing range, she gave Nick a scathing glare.

“He’s only interested in my welfare. I hope you were nice when you spoke with him last night.” She got into the elevator and automatically waited for Nick to follow her.

He took up the subject with a soft laugh. “I was extra nice to him after telling him about your trip to the hospital. He sounded like a worried mother.” He stepped back and glanced at the smudge under her eye. “I won’t be seeing you at the site for a few days, so if you want me for anything, just call my secretary.”

“I think I can handle my needs, Nick.” His slow grin made her skin tingle, and her vivid imagination had his hands sliding into her panties. She jumped when he spoke to her.

“Sure you can, but you’d rather let me do it.” Nick leaned over to place a quick kiss on her forehead. “I’ll send copies of the pictures.”

## Chapter 8

Whoever had coined the phrase *I want my space* obviously hadn't thought it over. Being solo sure as hell wasn't fun. How could she be dumb enough to keep reminiscing over the man that never missed a chance to kick her in the teeth?

A dozen nice looking, healthy men standing around in that group, but only one demanded her attention. He read the material's supply report Matt handed him, unaware of her presence. She narrowed her eyes and let her gaze play over him. He'd gotten a haircut recently and a cute little rooster tail popped up at the crown of his head. She loved that willful dark hair.

She'd had trouble remembering the impromptu meeting being held in the courtyard of Nick's project and the reason for its formation. Ordinary, mundane things, like material shortages. Important as they were, she couldn't seem to control her mental wandering.

Her mind drifted and from some hidden corner, an erotic image flashed through her mind. A memory of being naked and telling him how she liked it. The quickening of her body shook Shelby from head to toe. Raw desire flared through her blood. Of its own volition, her hand went to the small, fading hickey at the base of her throat. A love bite from her last night with Nick. What had they done? She wanted to remember every detail, to hear him say he still loved her.

She managed to tip her coffee cup and douse her shoe before rousing from her reverie. She scuffed some dirt over the coffee and straightened her shoulders. If no one had seen her idiotic expression,



she would be okay. Her attention went back to the men carrying on a lively conversation a few yards from where she stood.

She had separated herself from the group with the intention of staring at Nick. He could only be described as awesome. The strength of his forearms captivated her. Beautiful sun-touched skin over muscle and sinew roused a hunger to feel his hands on her.

"And, if Shelby hasn't got any questions, we can all go home." Matt grinned at her and waved to get her attention.

"Oh. Sure, Matt." For several seconds, she couldn't grasp the situation, the reason they all stood around and the crew headed out in different directions. Oh yes. She remembered. "Sheet rock. Yes. Okay. When the shipment comes in, we'll get back to work."

Her cheeks burned with a fire of humiliation. Somewhere, there had to be something to end her fascination with Nick. He looked her way and flashed one of his "I-know-what-you're-thinking" smiles. She should have ignored him but couldn't.

"Come with me for a minute." As if they still cared for each other, he pulled her close to his side and walked a few steps before shaking his head at her glower of disdain. "Ever figure out how you used me while I tended your injury?"

His murmured question deserved an insult to his beloved package. "Yes, and it seems I got shortchanged if you get my meaning." Her chilly glance stabbed at the front of his pants. "What do you really want?"

He laughed and squeezed her arm. "I haven't seen you in a week. Your bulldog secretary stops me at the door."

"She has her orders. No lowlifes."

"Okay. I'm scum." His brows quirked at her sudden laughter.

"How've you been, Shel?"

"I'm a healthy woman, Nick. You know that."

"Indeed I do." He glanced at her breasts poorly hidden under the silk cream of her tank top.

“Do you have to keep touching me?” The shrug to free herself came off feeble at best.

“Of course I don’t mind touching you.” He grinned at her. “Oh, you said, ‘have to’.”

Shelby handed him her empty Styrofoam cup. “You’re not cute. What do you really want?”

“My, my. Aren’t we hostile?”

“The crew is gone. You don’t have to pretend to be a human now.”

He glanced in the direction of departing pickup trucks. “Yeah. Right. I really did want to see how you are doing since I am more or less responsible for the great black eye.”

She ached to smack his grinning mouth. “The nice yellow and purple colors will fade in time.” She didn’t want to meet his gaze or look at his damned wonderful face. She would be lost. She chose to look at her watch. “I have a client waiting.”

He leaned so near his chin brushed the top of her head. She was sure he had moaned. But no, he smiled at her with a certain tease in those damned dark-as-night eyes.

“So, Shel. I’m taking the long weekend to get in that fishing trip you cost me.”

“Nick. You’re making small talk. So unlike you. What is it you’re having problems saying?” Why couldn’t he lean against her again? She wanted to feel the press of his shoulder and the warmth of his body.

“No problem, Shel. Did you get your car to a body shop?”

“Something tells me you know I didn’t.”

“It’s going to start rusting.”

“I don’t have time to fix crap like that.”

He flicked at a wisp of hair that played around her ear. “You have now.” His dark lashes shuttered his eyes and his voice deepened into a husky caress. “You okay? No more headaches or anything?”

Her heart quivered and every nerve crackled. “No. You’re off the hook.” She could smell the intoxicating mixture of his soap and aftershave perking over the scent of clean clothing he wore. He made her drunk with pleasure.

His grip on her arm tightened a little and his smile softened. “Okay, Ms. Independence. I’ll see you in a few days.”

He walked away, picking up speed after glancing at his watch. She wanted to run after him, make him late for whatever he’d planned. After he had driven out of sight, the urge for a chocolate fix hit Shelby like a tornado. Her destination had been set for a trip to the Russell Stover Candy Shop.

\* \* \* \*

Shelby steered with one hand while digging deep into the bag of double-dipped chocolate-covered peanuts and stuffed her mouth full. She bobbed her head in time to the rock music blaring from her CD player. She felt good now. Good music, good food and—Good lord! The car behind her looked as if it were about to barrel up her tail pipes.

She tapped her brakes to alert the driver he might be too close. His speed didn’t alter. Using her turn signals didn’t seem to help either. Nervous now, she pulled over into the right lane to let him pass. That stretch of roadway had always been allowed to grow wild for the migratory birds and ducks and had no street lights for several blocks. Pitch black at night, the weed choked ravine on her right dropped off sharply into a creek, and could be dangerous if a motorist got careless. She shivered in apprehension of the other driver’s intent.

A warning came back to haunt her. Don’t drive alone late at night. Her father had nagged her plenty of times about it. Now, she was alone and afraid. The other car pulled up so close the headlights blinded her. Her head snapped upon the impact of the car hitting her

bumper. She gasped in surprise and gripped the steering wheel. The driver obviously had been drinking and she had to get away.

Her foot tromped the gas pedal and her sports car jumped into high gear, quickly speeding away. Her heart missed several beats when she looked in the rearview mirror and saw him still on her tail. He hit her bumper again and this time, she skidded against the retaining wall separating her from the long fall down into the gully.

She screamed, but she barely heard it. Not over the loud hammering of her heart. Her survival instinct kicked in and she pushed the pedal to the floor. Looking from side to side for another car or a lit up building, she got back into the left lane. Her eyes misted up and she couldn't see well enough to be driving so fast. She shuddered in pure relief when off in the distance the flashing lights of a patrol car came into view in her rearview mirror. The other car rammed her bumper a final time, then sped around her and out of sight. After what seemed an eternity, a patrol car pulled in front of her and stopped.

Shelby buried her face in her hands and sobbed. When the officer shined his spotlight on her, she had stopped crying. Her shoulders still shook when he approached the car and tapped on her window.

"Ma'am, are you all right?" He carried on a conversation with both her and a dispatcher. "We got a call from another driver that had witnessed your car being rammed. Trouble is he didn't call soon enough for us to catch them in the act. Are you okay?"

With the window down, she gave him a weak smile and switched off the key. "Yes. Thanks. I can't believe that drunk didn't see me." She wanted to cry again. "I gave him all kinds of room."

The officer asked to see her license and radioed in the information while taking a look at her car. After taking a deep breath, Shelby got out to see the damage for herself.

"I can't believe this. Why would he do that?"

What a mess. The rear end of her car looked like an accordion. The back window had spider web cracks that looked like a large sunburst.

While he wrote down her information, he took time to give his opinion. "Looks like he wanted your car. There have several car jackings in this area." He directed the beam of his flashlight on her face. "You need an ambulance, ma'am? I'll call for a wrecker if you need it."

"No. If my car still runs, I'll go home." When she got behind the wheel, her hands shook and her lips felt numb. She turned the key and the motor responded instantly. After what seemed like hours, the officer said she could leave. Seeing him follow behind for most of the way to her apartment seemed like having her own guardian angel. She would never bad-mouth the police again. The man didn't know how close she had come to kissing him.

She glanced up in time to see the little salute he sent her way when he passed her.

Home had never looked better to her tear reddened eyes. Thankfully, she didn't have to take time to talk with Alfred. He was wrapped up in dog walking duties at the moment. The service elevator moved quickly up to her floor without the usual stops.

The moment she got inside her apartment, Shelby realized the seriousness of what had happened. For the first time in her life, she had known what it meant to fear another human being.

She immediately dialed Nick's cell phone number. The hollow ring brought home the fact she couldn't run to him with her problems anymore. She cancelled the call.

It hurt her deeply to have to admit he probably wouldn't want to hear her sorry excuses for getting herself in a mess like that. She had been out on a shopping spree and using a road that she had always avoided at night. The imaginary repudiation sent her into a wave of sobbing. Nick. She needed him.

Flopping onto her couch, Shelby cried herself out, hating the fact she'd become a weeping basket case lately. And whose fault had that been? Sniffing and wiping her eyes, she got up and walked to the bathroom to wash her face. After several minutes of glaring at the red-nosed image in the mirror, she grumbled. "Okay, lady. That's it. There are going to be some changes around here."

\* \* \* \*

Nick was tired of the river and tired of the smell of fish. Three days of climbing mountain stream riverbanks and slapping at mosquitoes had lost its appeal. He decided to go home. "Hey, Savage." He whistled and waved at his childhood friend, Jack Savage. "Let's pack it in and go back to civilization."

Jack grinned and reeled in his line. "I wondered when you would get tired of playing wilderness man. Let's hit the trail, buddy."

Nick released the trout he had caught and washed his hands in the icy water. "It isn't as much fun as I recall it being when we were twenty."

"That's not it, Nick. You're just anxious to get back home to your woman."

Nick stumbled, almost falling into the swift stream. Jack didn't know the stolen plans involved Shelby. It was too personal to bring her into the spotlight, and to Jack, nothing legal could be too personal. It had been Jack who'd convinced him to build in Kansas City since he lived there and Jack had suggested the S. Rand Architectural Company design the place. Thanks to Jack, he had all this worry on his mind. Nick didn't want to discuss it. "Yeah. You're right, my woman."

Back in their cabin, Nick packed in a hurry, and listened to his fun-loving companion talk on the phone. He wondered at his reluctance to lay the whole thing out on the table for Jack from the first. After all, Jack was his best friend and attorney. There wasn't

anything he couldn't tell him. Nick rolled a shirt up in a ball and dumped it into his weekender. *Truth is, old boy, you're afraid of looking less than a man by admitting she took you.* Most of all, and to his great shame, he didn't want to lose touch with Shelby.

At that moment, Nick didn't care how big a pushover he looked like. He wanted to see Shelby, to hear her voice and to touch her. Screw the macho pride. He was still crazy for his blue-eyed witch.

\* \* \* \*

Nick dropped Savage off at his place and then drove straight to his favorite steak house in south Kansas City. He couldn't understand Jack not wanting a good hunk of beef after all that camp cooked fish.

The parking lot of Jess and Jim's Place was packed, but he lucked out and found a space. His stomach growled and his mouth watered in anticipation of a good meal. He stepped inside the crowded place and smiled at the hostess.

She gave him a second and third look before seating him. He wondered what she saw that warranted such close scrutiny. His khaki shirt and Levi's were clean and he wore shoes. She handed him a menu and glanced away.

"I'll have a K.C. Strip with a baked potato. And, I'd like a cup of coffee, please." He rubbed his jaw. No wonder she wore that stunned expression. He sported a three day growth of beard. It was a tradition. They didn't shave until they got home from a fishing trip. He probably looked like an ape to her.

While he waited, the antics of a little girl at the next table amused Nick. She looked beautiful, blond and spoiled rotten. His thoughts went to Ms. Rand. Her father had spoken about Shelby's tantrums with some pride it seemed to him. It didn't surprise Nick. Always beautiful, blond and spoiled.

He ordered a scotch and water to take the edge off his hunger and helped the little girl up when she fell over his feet. Of course, she

crawled under his table where she shouldn't have been. He just hoped she didn't decide to stab him with the fork she carried.

Her parents took control of the child and he got to eat his meal. After he finished, the idea of dessert was appealing, but he decided to forgo the sweets and give up his table. While he waited for the check, his gaze moved over the crowd, not focusing on any face in particular until one bloomed in his line of vision. Blond, beautiful and with another man.

Of all the places he could have had dinner, he'd chosen this place. He considered making an exit before Shelby spotted him and assumed he stalked her. What the hell had come over him? Nothing new, just the need to let her know he wasn't buying her attempt at deception.

He took his cell phone from his belt and dialed her number. Her warm cognac voice licked over his ear when she answered. His hand shook. "Hi. Shel. Just checking in." *So smooth, you fool.*

"Nick?"

"Everything okay, Shel?" *Okay, just ask who that jerk is.*

"Perfect. And yourself?"

"Tired and ready to get back to work." Had she rubbed her forehead in irritation?

"That should be in several days according to Matt."

"Sounds good to me. Where are you?" He knew it invaded her privacy to ask, but his life hung on her answer.

"On my way home."

The icy pain that gripped his gut shocked him. "You're already driving? Be careful."

In the brief silence, he knew pure agony, wanting to know what she was thinking, feeling. "Shel?"

"Sure, Nick. You do the same."

He shut down his cell and leaned back in his chair. What was that guy to her? Nick studied the man seated across from Shelby with a critical eye. Blond, tan and muscle bound. Nick guessed the guy to be a lot older and hot for her. He kept touching her hand and smiling into



her face. She laughed at something the guy said and then wrote in her notebook. Giving him her private cell phone number? Hell, he'd have that already.

It hit him like a brick. This might be her partner, the man he'd been hunting, the rat Savage had been trying to root out into the light.

Nick got to his feet and walked the few feet to where Shelby sat. He smiled at her when he took the chair next to hers. "Hello, Shelby. What a surprise seeing you here."

"Nick."

Much to his chagrin, she didn't look guilty or remorseful. Only irritated and beautiful in her white suit.

"You look great." He gave her companion a cursory glance. "Aren't you going to introduce me?"

She leaned toward him and murmured. "What are you trying to prove? Leave now."

"Have a drink? Why, sure." Nick thrust his hand out to the man seated across the table from him. "Nick Gualdoni. And you're...?"

A big grin livened up the guy's tanned face. "William Wallace."

For a split second, Nick couldn't find his tongue. A priest for God's sake. He compensated with a full smile. "William Wallace. How are you?"

Shelby nudged him hard under the table and glowered. "William and I are trying to have our dinner and finish up some business."

"Go ahead. I'll have my drink while you two hatch a plot." Nick wanted to shoot a right cross to William's nose. "So, Wallace. What's your game?"

"I'm a priest. Shelby's designing a new daycare center and cafeteria for Saint Peter's school."

Shelby gave him a knowing smile. "Yes, William's a good friend of Dad's. And mine."

She took her hands off the table and put them in her lap in an obvious attempt to show him the blueprints for the new facility.

“I see.” Nick shook William's hand again and stood up. “The waitress is looking for me. Better go pay my tab.”

He leaned over to kiss Shelby's cheek and whispered against her ear. “I'll order a big helping of crow to-go on my way out.”

Nick wanted nothing more than to leave, but managed to walk back to his table and toss a couple of bills on it first.

## Chapter 9

Her period was late. Not days, but three and a half weeks late. That coincided with her last night with Nick. Had she been fertile then? The situation had no place in her plans and definitely not in his. She couldn't stand not knowing for certain. "Great," she mumbled. There was only one way to be sure without a trip to her gynecologist. She picked up her purse and hurried out to the reception area of her office.

"Kate, I'm going out for a few minutes." Shelby punched the lobby button of the elevator. "I'm stopping at the drugstore. Need anything?"

Kate glanced up and shook her head. "No thanks. I'm fine." She smiled and went back to the busy switchboard.

The chain drugstore was several blocks away and Shelby's heart thumped with anticipation during the short trip. What had she been thinking, stopping her birth control just because Nick had dumped her? Well, she sure hadn't planned to have sex with anyone else and it had become just one more aggravation.

Inside the crowded drugstore, Shelby checked the overhead signs for the feminine products section. Of course they would be jammed in the middle of the tobacco and liquor where lots of men hung out. She tucked her chin and cut a path through the male populace picking out their pleasures.

The condom packages glistened under the overhead lights like a dance hall strippers. The pregnancy test kits had been tucked between sanitary napkins and douche products. How fitting. And yes, the half

dozen rows of condoms to remind you that if you had bought them, you wouldn't be hunched over the pregnancy test kits.

Someone shouldered her and she winced. She finally reached tentatively toward the kits. But, which one? They all looked the same. A young male clerk smiled at her and she yanked her hand back as if it had touched a hot coal. Guilty. Of what? Her blood hammered in her ears while she made her choice. Clutching it in her hand, she turned to leave and ran straight into Nick.

"What are you doing here?" She couldn't help it if her head swiveled like a screech owl's when she heard his voice. His grin was sweet, not accusatory, but she shivered with desire to sink through the floor. He tried to see what she had in her hand and she hid it behind her back in a gesture reminiscent of a guilty child.

"Loading up for the weekend?" He tried to catch her hand. "What's that?"

"My God, Nick." She dropped the kit in the bin behind her and grabbed a box of tampons. "Have some decency."

"I thought you might be getting rubbers." His grin spoke volumes of his devilry. "Extra large for me, remember?"

She wanted to lean against him because her knees began to feel like a wet sponge. To cover her former appearance of guilt, she took half dozen packages of condoms from the display. His stunned expression well worth the long stares she got from every man in the vicinity. She handed them to Nick and smiled angelically.

"Is that enough, or will you be needing more?"

He jumped on the moment with a loud guffaw. "You know I always leave that up to you, sugar." He took her in his arms and planted a noisy kiss on her mouth. "Let's get out of here and go start having fun."

Her mouth set in a deep grimace as he walked her to a quieter corner of the humming store. "Nick, you have to learn I am not a toy to play with whenever the urge hits you. I have things to buy and then I'm going back to work."

His gaze paused on her lips, then swept quickly over her face and body before coming back to meet her steady appraisal "You didn't ask what I shopped for."

"I don't care."

"It was for you." He held on to her arm and caressed it with his thumb.

"Oh please, don't feel you have to include me in your condom and sensitive jump-start lubricant shopping." She rolled her eyes in a show of disgust.

His laugh tickled from her nipples to her stomach and down to the cotton crotch of her panties.

"Shel, baby. You never needed lubricants if memory serves me right." He made a soft growling sound in his throat and drew her closer. "Kate told me where she thought you would be. There's a little thing we need to settle."

Her nerves crackled. She had a few things to say to Ms. Kate when she got back to the office. What new agony did he have to spring on her now? Now that she might be carrying his child. Little Nick. "What little thing would that be? We've settled everything as far as I'm concerned."

He tilted his head and put his arm around her waist, turning her away from interested bystanders. "It's time we sold River House. I'm going back to Sedona when this complex is finished. I can't be running back and forth because of some little cabin by a creek."

Why did everything have to be so damned complicated? All she had wanted had been to find out if she could be pregnant and now he made it clear he wanted to sever the final tie with her.

"Do you need money? I'll swing a loan for you." Her insulting jab about loaning him money hadn't pleased him judging by the scowl on his face. She shrugged. "I don't care what you do with River House." He needn't know how dearly she loved the cozy cottage in the Ozarks. But, because they owned it jointly, she had to care.

"All right. You bring the papers and I'll sign them and be done with it."

"No. It can't be done that way. We both have to sign with witnesses, and the deed is in a lockbox in the bank. Remember?"

"That's your fault. Leaving before the paperwork could be finished." She glanced around his shoulder at the test kits and wished he would move on with his aggravating self. "Just sell it. I don't care."

He tilted his head to look in her eyes. "Come with me to River House. It's only an overnight trip. Isn't it worth it to be finished with everything?"

She gave in, more to get him out of the store than because of interest in the sale of property. "Okay. I'll meet you down there."

"Forget that. I won't have to stop to fix your flats if we travel together. Pick you up at seven?"

She thought about the times he had said those words to her in the past and could hardly bring himself to walk away. Now he directed her away from the condom aisle and looked for the exit. He must be seeing another woman. Why else would he be so indifferent to the fact she obviously appeared ready to scream in frustration? She inhaled sharply and tried to sound unconcerned.

"Sure. There are some things I want to bring home." Shelby sighed, thinking of the sweet house perched on a hill above a clear stream. She had known complete happiness there. "Don't be late. I want to get this over with."

When he leaned down to kiss her mouth, she shook like a leaf in the wind. The kiss meant nothing to him, but her heart sang every time he touched her. Damn it. Doomed to spinsterhood because there was no other man for her besides Nick.

By the time Nick had finished with his convincing reasoning and left, everyone for six aisles around had tuned into their conversation. No way would she pick up one of those test kits now. Time enough for that when she got back home. She grabbed a box of assorted bandages and hurried to the cashier to pay for them.

\* \* \* \*

The next evening a few minutes before midnight, Nick drove through the small town that sat a few miles from their property. The streets were deserted except for the lone beagle that trotted along the side of the road. Nick checked the gas gauge and signaled to turn off the highway into a brightly lit service station.

Shelby had been sleeping for the last fifty miles and leaned heavily against him. She made a sleepy protest about the bright lights. He touched her ear with the tip of his finger and smiled.

"Want to use the ladies room or get something to eat or drink?"

She squinted into the visor mirror and groaned at her reflection. "I think I'll visit the ladies room." She unbuckled herself and opened the door, sliding out of the seat. "I would like some coffee. The new walnut honey crème and two sugars and three creams."

Nick knew how she liked her java. Lots of everything but coffee. "You got it." He frowned when he noticed the attendant gawking at her. "Hey, buddy. Mind checking the radiator?"

The attendant bobbed his head and seemed to have gotten his mind back on his job. "Sure thing."

Shelby had turned to look back at him and gestured toward the small store inside the service station. "Nick. Be sure to get some coffee and sweet rolls for in the morning."

"I won't forget." Nick finished filling the tank and went inside the little convenience store to settle up.

The attendant took his credit card and questioned Nick. "You folks from around here?"

"We're here on business."

"Won't be no business here till Saturday."

Should he ask, or wait for the bomb to drop? "And why is that?"

"Town's shut down for Founder's Day. Nothin' open but some grocers and eating places."

Nick figured his timing couldn't have been worse, but he wouldn't cave for fear of what Shelby had to say to him. "That's just great," Nick muttered. "You sure about that? Half day, maybe?"

"Nope. All day."

Nick weighed his options. Tell her now and be forced to drive a screaming woman back to Kansas City that night. Don't tell her and suffer the consequences later. What difference did it make when he told her? It wasn't his fault. And he damned well would rather be at home watching a movie and crawling into his big bed. Alone.

Bullshit. This had to be the happiest he'd been since the night he took care of Shelby and her black eye.

Nick walked out to the van, balancing her highness's cup of hot walnut honey crème and a bag filled with things she liked.

"Here you are, Shel." He handed her the cup of coffee, then tossed the bag of groceries into the back seat. She slid a long glance his way and wore a hint of a smile. He recognized her gaze of suspicion. He climbed into the van and met her cool blue gaze. "The guy inside says this burg of a town is closed down all day tomorrow."

She sipped her coffee and shrugged. "Really?"

"You must still be asleep. Did you hear what I said?" He grinned and prepared for the storm. "That's all day. Tomorrow."

She dabbed a napkin to her chin, looking slightly pissed. "I heard you. It can't be helped."

He got the van moving toward their cozy nest before looking at Shelby several times as a barometer of her true feelings. The five miles to the cottage seemed like fifty to him.

What the hell could she be thinking? He had just told her she would be in his company a lot longer than she had planned. His sidelong glance collided with her open cool appraisal of him. Sure, that was it. She pretended to be all right with it, but he knew she still fumed. He would do well to steer clear of her until Saturday morning. He received a warning glance when his hand brushed her thigh. Yeah, it would be a bumpy night in River House.



He switched the radio on, instantly reversing his action when her expression of distaste made it clear she was in no mood for music. Damn. He wanted that woman and she laughed up her short skirts over his forgiving nature. He scoffed at himself. *Instead of driving her to River House, you should be taking her to court.*

"Nick, I think we missed our turnoff."

"Oh, yeah. It's been a while."

The screech of brakes and smell of hot rubber on the asphalt shattered the lovely country night silence. He backed up and quickly made the turn into their graveled driveway.

Shelby lowered her window and took a deep breath of the fragrant air. "Still looks the same at night." She smiled at him. "So lovely. Such a shame to let it go."

Nick didn't reply. He was too wrapped up in wondering what had gotten into her. He pulled up in front of the cottage and popped the cargo door. "Let's get the luggage."

She hopped out of the van and stood at the front door before he had finished his sentence. He began gathering up the various weekenders and garment bags she had brought along. He compared the excess to the lone duffle he had packed. "Want to help here, Shel?"

"No."

He shook his head and grinned at her impertinence. "Gotcha."

Two trips later, he tested the water in the kitchen. It still had the taste of iron and minerals. His ladyship would never drink it. He brought in the case of spring water from the van before she ventured into the kitchen. He jumped with a start when she spoke.

"It smells like a Christmas tree in here." She eyed the bottles of water on the counter. "Water still nasty?"

"It wouldn't be up to your standards." He noticed she had changed into a pair of white cotton pajamas and fashioned her long hair into one chunky, gleaming braid. He wondered if she knew her nipples were visible through the thin material. "Are you cold?"

“Not at all. What makes you ask?”

Damn. She'd turned it around on him and now he looked stupid for mentioning the condition of her nipples. *Stupid man should be quiet.*

While he opened the window over the double sink, he could feel her gaze burning into him. He turned around and leaned against the counter. "What can I get you? Food, drink or entertainment?"

Her tongue tip darted out and flicked at the corner of her mouth. Her yawn appeared pretty damned phony to him.

“I'm going to sit outside on the patio for a few minutes.”

Nick caught her braid and flipped it playfully. “Okay. I'm off to the shower.”

She took a bottle of water from the refrigerator and walked to the back door. “If I'm not outside when you finish, I'll be in bed.”

Had she been teasing him? Rubbing his forehead, he walked out of the kitchen and down the hall to the bathroom. He turned the shower on to cold and frowned at his image in the vanity mirror. *Get a grip. She's not horny. She's sleepy.*

A few minutes later, Nick stepped outside, glad as hell she remained sitting on the stairs in the moonlight. “There you are.” He wore comfortable lounge pants and no shirt. His gaze touched her elegant profile and kissed the soft pink curve of her cheek.

She yawned again and stood up to stretch her arms over her head, letting that cute little shirt creep up high enough to expose her dainty ribcage. He figured she silently dared him to slip his hand under that shirt, but he resisted to keep his sanity. He stood up to lay his arm over her shoulders and asked the question that burned in his mind.

“It's come down to the moment. Where do you want to sleep?”

## Chapter 10

This sure wasn't her apartment. Her gaze traveled over the cottage's flounced ruffled curtains at the triple windows and waxed hardwood floors. Shelby sat up and sniffed. The aroma of good coffee meant she hadn't been dreaming, that Nick was there and already out of bed.

The grumble of hunger in her stomach roused her from the comfortable mattress. She washed, brushed her teeth and smoothed her hair from her face, re-winding the rubber band that held her hair in a heavy braid. This would be her first morning with Nick in a long while that didn't include being drugged and cranky. Before she left the bathroom, Shelby checked out her side view, pressing on her belly to gauge its bulge. Nothing. There wouldn't be any changes yet. Not enough time had passed.

With a small sigh of ridiculous disappointment, she sauntered into the kitchen and found the stainless steel coffee pot full of fresh brew. She licked her lips and selected a pastry from the platter Nick had laid out on the counter.

She took several big bites of the cherry Danish and sipped her coffee. A flopping paper taped onto the refrigerator caught her attention. Love note from Nick maybe? She grinned and read his scrawl. *Gone to town for more food. Oh, and don't eat all the Danish. Nick.*

She thumped the note with her fingers and helped herself to another pastry. To kill time, she walked through the house and poked around in drawers and closets. There was no way she could clear her

personal things out on this trip. Damn it. What could be his reason to be in such a rush?

The sale could have waited. Something she didn't want to wait on was getting a pregnancy test kit. She leaned around the doorway of the master bedroom where Nick had slept last night. Their room. The wedding ring quilt lay folded at the foot of the sleigh bed and the sheets pulled tight, military style. Four plumped pillows leaned invitingly against the sturdy headboard.

Curiosity drew her deeper into the room she should have slept in last night. The bed sure wouldn't be looking like a pristine snowfield if she had. The tall cherry stack chest took her attention and she began rummaging through the drawers. She found nothing of great interest until the bottom drawer revealed its contents.

She laughed aloud, delighting in her discovery. "My dress." The heavily beaded flapper dress had been found in a steamer trunk in the storage shed. How could she have forgotten about the beautiful creation? A red silk-fringed parasol lay next to the dress.

Shelby lifted the claret red dress from its tissue paper. Why not? She quickly stripped naked, and then slid the decadent little garment up her body, working her arms into the sheer sleeves. She shivered when the weighty fabric kissed her bare skin.

She hummed the stripper's tune while unfurling the parasol into a pale pink, gauzy spread of elegance. In a burst of exhibitionism, she worked her shoulders in a hard shimmy, walking across the floor to check out her look in the full-length pier mirror. Not bad, but she needed music.

She switched on the MP3 player on the nightstand. The hot rock made her want to dance and she laughed with pleasure when the beads and fringe jiggled madly with every bump and grind, just like her braless breasts did.

Knees bent, rear jutting out behind her and eyes closed, she gyrated to the music. A wolf-whistle from the doorway startled her

and she opened her eyes. Nick's laughter outweighed her momentary confusion.

He leaned against the doorjamb, taking in her impromptu show. "Don't stop now. You were just getting warmed up."

She twirled the parasol over her shoulder, shading her sultry gaze with her lashes. "You'll have to wait for the matinee."

He grinned, his gaze wandering up from her bare feet to the top of her head. "That dress is you, baby. Sexy as hell."

She looked over her shoulder at him and rubbed the material covering her hips. "Glad you approve." She knew entering into suggestive banter with him might be crazy. "What offering did you bring me from town?" *Don't do it. Change the tone now. Get mad at him before he gets you on your back.*

"Sweets, fine enough for a goddess." He walked over to her, and leaned against her shoulder to sniff her neck. "Nothing that smells good as you."

"Now, now. You're probably just hungry." She skirted around his lean frame and sauntered out the door.

He followed, brushing his hand over the beaded shoulder of her dress. She glanced back over her shoulder at him and smiled to see him imitating her hip gyrating walk. She chose to play with him instead of trading insults. This would be their last time alone and she wanted to make it the best memory she could.

She flounced her shoulder and laughed. "You're not putting enough swing in your butt, Nick."

He laughed and put his arms about her waist. "I'd rather watch your swing, baby." He kissed her neck and hugged her tight. "Hungry? Check out the great fattening junk I brought back for you." He let her go feed her addiction to snooping into things. He smiled wryly, waiting for her to finish poking around in the bags and baskets he had loaded onto the table. "Why don't I get the canoe out of the garage?"

She shook her head and scowled a little. "Are you nuts? I haven't forgotten the infected chigger bites in my belly button from our last roll in the woods."

"Okay." Nick's grin delivered an open dare. He held his hands up in a defensive gesture while ogling her bare legs. "I'll carry you to the river and even set your fine rear in the canoe. Your feet will not touch the ground."

Her gaze settled on the strong column of his neck and the spot she loved to lick. She couldn't even sound hesitant when she answered.

"Since you're being so thoughtful, I agree to go for a float on your royal barge."

He rubbed his hands over the cool material of her sleeve and winked at her, whistling when he went out the door. Little ripples of excitement welled in her stomach and she shivered. What would he be doing later when she finished with him? Swear he was dying a happy man if she could keep up with him?

Five minutes later, he stood on the patio, waving his arms and pointing toward the river. He must have taken that damned canoe down to the river while she had been asleep, cock-sure she would give in. Oh well, too late to be standoffish now. He knew her too well. He even had the balls to whistle for her like she was a cheap date.

"I have to change my clothes." She smiled and waited for him to grouse over the delay.

"You don't need to change, Shel. That get-up's perfect."

"If you say so." The dress might be ruined, but she didn't want to change. "Give me ten minutes."

"Shel. Now. That barge won't wait forever." He teased her. "The tides turning on us." He stalked into the kitchen and grabbed her hand. "Come on, baby."

"Okay. In a second." She broke away from his grasp to hurry around and fill a brown paper bag with several peaches, nectarines and grapes. A handful of cherries had been thrown in for good

measure. Bottled water completed her bag of treats and she took his hand. "Get my parasol."

Nick handed her the frivolous looking item and took her hand, leading her out onto the patio. "Lady, you're going to enjoy this."

She shivered when he lifted her up into his arms and started down the shady pathway to the river.

"What the hell's in that bag?"

"My lunch."

"I notice you didn't say *our* lunch."

"Today I'm royalty. I worry about no one but me." She laughed at his playful growl in her ear. He purposely jostled her the last few steps to the sandbar where the canoe waited. He let her down slowly, gazing at her all the while she slid over his hard belly and thighs. He touched her cheek and played with her earlobe before gesturing in a courtly fashion.

"Your conveyance, madam."

"Nick. How elegant." Could she help it if plain old love for the man turned her into a hand puppet?

He held the small craft steady while she climbed in and settled down against the pillows he had piled at one end of the canoe.

"Lay back, your highness." Nick paddled away from the quiet sandbar and looked back at her. "You will be still, won't you?"

"Quiet as a mouse." The devil seemed to take up residence in her body when he continued to gaze at her. She parted her legs wide enough for him to see Canada before she plopped them on the seat next to him.

His smile said everything. He wanted her and was thinking about getting in her bed. She smiled secretively and lolled her head back, laughing softly. Movement at the helm of the canoe made her sit up and take notice. Nick pulled his shirt over his head and ignoring her while she licked her lips. She thought the situation damned ironic, the best day of her life in months and it was to be her last. Well, it wasn't over yet.

While he worked his shoulders and cast out over the water, she mentally licked the golden olive flesh of his strong back. She worked her way over his lean rib cage and hard pecs. She imagined her teeth toying with them and she smiled when he rubbed his chest. He sat so near she could have touched him. Her tongue knew the texture of his skin, the way it tasted, the scent of it. Six foot three of more sexual pleasure than one woman had a right to enjoy. But, she always wanted to let him add more to his repertoire of excitement and driving passion.

She drew the parasol down to conceal her grin in case he turned around. If she had become pregnant, one more night of ecstasy would do no harm. In fact, she needed it so badly she ached.

The idea she would never share joy or intimacy with Nick, ever again took her breath. The thought of such terrible loss struck in a wave painful as grief. The awful emptiness in her soul stilled the beat of her heart.

The true warmth of her life sat in the bow of her barge, beckoning her to feast on his wonderful beauty. The only desirable place to be was in Nick's world and she didn't want to miss a second of it.

Her gaze touched his strong jaw with a kiss. She grew quiet, listening to the soft splash of the oars, lounging much as Cleopatra must have, trailing her fingers in the cool water. She knew the weight of being under siege and not even Cleopatra could have withstood the agony.

The source of her misery looked absolutely native, leanly muscled, with a trim waist and skin bronzed from his heritage and the sun. While his long fingers worked the rod and reel, her plan cemented. Nick the savage would be hers.

She jumped in her guilty pleasure of ogling him, and veiled her thoughts with the parasol lace when he turned to look at her.

“Shel, you're having dirty thoughts, aren't you?”

“I don't deny it. Must be the company.”



His smile went straight to the pale gold triangle of curls in the fork of her legs. “So, what’s the remedy for your nasty girl thoughts?”

“Best worry about your own dirty secrets, Mister Fisherman.”

He clamped his fingers around her ankle and gazed intently at her. “You know every secret I’ve ever had. Do I know all of yours?”

What was he hinting at now? Oh, hell. The plans again. She threw a cherry at him and harrumphed. “No, you do not. Do you really want to know all my secrets?”

He ran his palm up her calf and squeezed firmly. “I don’t think so. It might hurt.”

With a calm she didn’t feel, Shelby lifted her foot to press it against his warm chest. “Good boy.” She let him hold her foot in his wide hand. “By the way. What kind of little boy were you, Nick?”

“Mean. Very mean.” He stroked the bottom of her foot. “Why are you so damned gorgeous? Must be that hot dress.”

She held down the squirm of desire that worked its way up her leg directly to her crotch. She smiled in her most coquettish way. “You noticed.”

“Yeah. I also noticed that you’re not wearing anything but skin underneath that dress.” His brows raised a fraction.

Her heart thundered like a storm while she slowly pulled her foot from the protection of his broad hand.

“We’re not discussing me. So, you became a devil early in life?”

“Born with a pitch fork in my fist. I probably got more ass warming’s in a week than you had in your entire life.”

“Remarkable.”

“Yeah. Remarkable.” He traced her kneecap with his finger. “And I can only guess you had to be mean as hell.”

“Heavens no. I was the model of decorum until my thirteenth birthday.” She laughed and shook her head. “Poor Dad.”

“Um-hmm. I knew it. Badass and started early.”

Her gaze kissed his firm mouth that smiled at her. “I still am.”

“I know.” He turned back to his fishing, tossing a second warning back over his shoulder. “Stop squirming around or you’ll tip this tub.”

“Yes, sir.” She quieted for as long as she could stand it before spotting a wild grape vine hanging overhead. “Oh, got to have those,” she mumbled and stood up.

The canoe tilted to the left, then the right. Nick shot her a look of warning, then reached for her.

“Christ’s sake, Shel. Sit down.”

He stared in mute fascination while she ignored him to yank on a bunch of grapes that dangled above her head, just out of her reach. She tried to steady herself, but only succeeded in capsizing the canoe.

Her shrill scream echoed up and down the river before she plunged backwards into the water. She surfaced, sputtering and laughing. Her eyes widened with dismay when she spotted Nick sitting on his rear, neck deep in water.

He got to his feet and grinned at her before running after his fishing gear. When it floated out of sight, he turned his attention on her. She smiled sweetly at him and wrung water from her sodden braid. “It’s just as well. I’ll bet they’re sour.”

He stood looking at her for several minutes before lifting his hands in a show of defeat. “Okay. Fishing is out and your barge is in the deep six.” He slogged toward her wearing a wicked grin. “You’ll just have to entertain me.”

## Chapter 11

“Now, Nick. You can’t be serious. Remember the float trip people that caught us last year?” She lifted the hem of her dress. “I really should be ticked at you.”

He stood within arm’s reach, looking her over like a hungry tiger eyeing a prime piece of steak. He smiled, the color of his eyes like blue fire and the teasing glint had flared in raw passion in their depths. Oh God, whatever he desired, she wanted him to hurry.

He moved swift as lightning, lifting her from the water and plastering himself against her. She lost her footing and clung to him, moving closer to straddle his leg. She moved against him, not caring if a cruise ship might float by. *To hell with the world.* She neared climax just straining against his hard thigh.

He crushed her to his hard body, covering her mouth in a demanding, deep, sexually charged kiss. She lost her footing again on the moss-covered stones. His arms drew her back against him and his mouth scorched her lips with its searching kiss. She trembled with excitement while his hand slipped under the dress and lifted it to her waist. She made a sound that swirled eerily around them when he slipped his finger inside her, tantalizing her to the brink insanity. She moved against his hand while he stroked her gently, separating her to ignite the nub in the golden nest. She pushed against his hand to take in every volt of the hot fire traveling from his hand to her pulsing flesh. Her body sagged against him when a liquid pain of hot flame licked at her crotch, daring her to chase it to the edge of a fiery explosion.

Had that been her that cried out? She trembled uncontrollably while he kissed her into a rapidly approaching dead faint. Pleasure deep and wild coursed through her until she believed her heart had stopped beating. He kissed her, lifting her up and running through the shallows and along the gravel bar.

“Nick.” She gasped when he tossed her over his shoulder and sprinted over the sandbar and up the path toward the cottage. “Nick.” Branches smacked her rump as he ran through the deep musky smelling undergrowth of small dogwood and laurel trees. “Nick.”

He skirted the corner of the house and dashed across the patio before he answered her. “Don’t talk.”

She heard the slam of the screen door after they rushed into the house. He slid her down from his shoulder to hold her against his chest. He breathed hard and shook his head while looking into her eyes.

“Don’t talk. You’ll stop this sure as hell.” He groaned and licked her mouth, nipping her lips. “Please don’t talk.”

She laughed and caught his face in her hands. “I have to go pee.”

“What?” He groaned with frustration. “Why didn’t you pee in the woods like everyone else?” He wore a pained expression.

“I’ll be back in three minutes, but...”

Pressing his fingers to her lips, he whispered a plea. “Please shut up.” He let her go, but with a firm statement. “Five seconds.”

His gaze torched her blood with its dark intensity.

“I’m hurrying, darling.” She hurried down the hall to the bathroom. For a moment, guilt consumed her. Could she be wrong to use trickery on her beloved? Or was she just incredibly in need and in love? “Doesn’t matter,” she mumbled. “I love him and he doesn’t need to know anything else right now.”

The contents of her purse had been strewn over the vanity. Patch bandages lay scattered over the floor. She pressed one of the patches to her stomach before hurrying through the bathroom door and into Nick’s arms.

"What took you so long?" Her question echoed the smoldering warmth of her gaze. "I've wanted you so much," he groaned against her mouth.

His voice, dark and smooth melted her heart like sweet hot chocolate and put a tremble in her legs. She gasped in delight as he brought his hips to hers, pressing her to the wall, taking her breath with his kiss.

Her arms clung to his neck, bringing his mouth down to hers. She licked his lips and whispered into his mouth. "Don't think you're going to stop anytime soon."

He dragged the dress off her shoulders and pulled her back into his arms before the wet finery even hit the floor.

His mouth slid from hers. "I stripped you naked to have hours of rock-hard sex and repeated climaxes with you."

She laughed softly before releasing the buttons of his soggy Levi's. They slid off his hips to fall onto the floor. Her gaze fixed on his erection that hugged tight against his belly, wide and thick.

"What's the hold up?"

"You are," he said through clenched teeth. The glint in his eyes underscored his words. "It's been weeks and I've been hard all that time. No way I'm going to hurry starting or stopping."

It must have been the isolation that made them cling to each other so fiercely. They were free from prying eyes, no one to see the wildness of their kisses and passionate caresses. No shame or thought of tomorrow while his tongue swept the soft interior of her mouth and lips.

She gave herself over to his powerful urges, letting him walk her backwards to the bedroom and not caring that she did a free fall onto the bed with him following her down to the mattress. She was anxious for him to be inside her, but Nick played with her like a cat with a mouse. She moaned in pleasure and the agony of wanting to realize the hot explosion, but he imprisoned her in his embrace, holding her with a new and urgent strength.

He tasted her, probing deep inside, bringing her closer to the brink of ecstasy only to let her slide back into the trembling pool of desire.

Nick, her beloved, holding her, adoring her with all his almost savage tenderness.

When had he said she had become his life and desire? Never had making love been so feverish and desperate between them. His arms held her like steel bands and molded her to his hard body. The kisses he plied her with, endless, almost punishing in their depth and pursuit of pleasure. Sharing the very life in their bodies, they seemed to be caught in a wonderful, sensual storm of emotion.

He filled her with his fingers and stroked her into mindless euphoria countless times before sliding down to lick and tease her pulsing folds, promising her a delicious explosion of joy.

He took possession of her senses while his tongue dipped into her hot pussy. A furious need to come told her to scream as the pressure of climax neared, crying out for him to finish her.

He parted her legs to claim his place between her quivering thighs, taking her quickly with his hard thrusts to bring her to climax repeatedly until they collapsed in drained exhaustion.

He pulled her onto his heaving chest and released the braid in her hair. "You're too damned sweet, Shel. Too beautiful and too damn sexy."

Her answer came with a sigh and a firm grip on his half-hard sex. "I'm not through yet. I need it again."

He eyed her with rejuvenated interest. "You want to play Little Red Riding Hood?" He rolled onto his side and pulled her snugly to his engorged member. "You want to be Little Red or Grandma?"

Sliding her hand over his hip, she massaged his rear, and laughed softly. "You're out of your mind, Nick. I only play if I can be the wolf."

He chuckled and moved his hips against hers, then pulled her leg over his waist. "Hell with that. I'm the only wolf in this scene."

She laughed with delirious happiness, drenched with the sweet honey of being in her true love's arms and feeling him open her as if he had the key to her soul.

\* \* \* \*

The hours slipped by, silent little thieves of life and happiness. Shelby opened her eyes to the startling fact the sun had set and she hadn't touched her hair with a brush. What the hell? Her lover didn't seem to notice her hair that tumbled over the pillows in a frizzy gnarled mess.

"What are you thinking, beautiful woman?"

She turned onto her side to press against his warmth. "Just how much...how much I want to make love to you."

"Well, hey." He brushed his palm over her cheek and his fingers combed at her hair. "I think I'm up for it."

She smiled into his eyes and pushed him onto his back. "Nick, you're a glutton for punishment."

"I just can't get enough of you, that's all."

She loved the way his gaze followed her in hot admiration while she got to her feet and stood over him. Catching her ankles, he laughed over a grunt when she plopped onto his legs.

"Hey, take it easy, baby. You almost removed my balls."

"Let me check." She moved back on his thighs to peer at his lengthening penis and full sac. "Oh, sweetie, your balls are still nice and fat." She pressed her fingers to his full sack. "I'm going to make you a happy man, Mister Fisherman."

"I don't think it could be any better, but you can give it a try."

The sound of his deep, sexy laugh and his relaxed way of lounging back with his hands clasped behind his head to smile at her, gave Shelby a huge measure of happiness.

She lifted her arms over her head to stretch, slowly rocking against his erect penis and flouncing her hair about her shoulders. Her

fingers teased his thighs, moving slowly to his belly. She gripped his ridged cock in her fingers, and stroked the velvety head with her fingertips and smiled into his midnight gaze.

She laughed deep in her throat when his stomach muscles jumped spasmodically under her exploring. She wanted to share the erotic pleasure that burned inside her.

Sliding down his legs, she nuzzled his balls, flicked her tongue out to taste him. Hard as steel, his dick laid tight against his belly, his cock jerking as she took him in her mouth to nibble and lick his hot length.

He groaned and bucked against her, reaching down to grasp her shoulders. He quickly put her on her back.

"I want to be inside you again, Shel, giving you every inch I've got. Coming with you is all I want."

She opened her arms and hugged him hard, kissing his lips with loving tenderness.

Afterwards, Nick left the bed to fetch things for her. He returned to the bedroom with a basin of warm soapy water and towels. She accepted his care, reaching out to stroke his member with a familiar touch.

He put the towels aside and lay down beside her, squeezing her breasts and kissing her stomach. "Unbelievable, but it gets better every time."

She sighed, knowing it would come to an end tomorrow. She fully expected to have a mini heart attack for fear he would want to end it before morning. For a few hours she had forgotten all the pain of yesterday.

She shut the door on everything ugly and stayed in her nest of pillows. Right now, she would steal every drop of happiness this night offered.

Nick got out of bed and playfully threw the quilt over her face. "You take it easy until I get back."



"Back?" She slapped the quilt away. "Where are you going?" Had she sounded like a stupid, scheming woman? Why not? That described her perfectly.

"Listen, I need fuel." He touched his stomach. "Sex is great, but it won't fill my belly."

She laughed with relief, waving her hand in a nonchalant motion. "Fine. I'll be here when you get back."

"I'm counting on that." He knotted a sheet about his hips and sauntered off to the kitchen.

She dozed until he returned, carrying a tray.

"Sinful stuff for a sinfully wicked woman."

The scent of warm chocolate and sweet, ripe strawberries made her sit up, licking her lips hungrily. "Nick, you wonderful man. Where's my champagne?"

He stepped out of the room, but returned in seconds, holding out a chilled bottle of Chardonnay and two fluted glasses.

"Time to celebrate the best sex ever." He uncorked the wine and filled the glasses, handing her the first one. "I'm trying to get you loaded."

She laughed at the irony of his comment, the needless effort to gain access to her body. "Whatever for? I'm easy." Yes, so damned easy for him. And now she had a headache. She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. Nothing unusual, a frequent annoyance after an especially powerful climax.

He tipped his glass up and took a long drink, eyeing her over the rim. "What's wrong? The wine too warm?"

"The wine is wonderful. Just maybe a little headache coming."

"These juicy plump fruits will ease your tension." He dipped a fat berry in the warm chocolate and drew it over her lips.

She bit into the succulent fruit, and then dipped her finger in the fragrant chocolate before sliding it into his mouth. While she wiped his lips with her thumb, he dipped a berry in the sweet coating before dabbing it to her nipple, and then sucked it clean. His seduction

ceased after finding her trying to hide a frown with her hand. He touched her forehead.

"I'll get that aspirin." He patted her stomach and started to leave.

"Nick. In my handbag." She added hesitantly, "In my bathroom."

A whisper of worry touched her heart. But, what could there be to worry about? She knew the answer the moment he came back into the bedroom, sensing his mood change before he spoke.

"Shel." His voice flicked out like a whip, cutting her ear with its frigid tone.

"Nick?"

He went to the bed and handed her several aspirin and a glass of water. She met his steady gaze and then almost choked when he held his hand out to her, palm up.

Taking the moment of reprieve to swallow her aspirin, Shelby set the water glass on the night stand, then moved the tray of goodies off the bed and smoothed the pillow case before meeting him in verbal war.

"New kind of birth control, Shel?" Sarcasm etched his words and disgust flared in his eyes.

She glanced at the tan square he held and inhaled roughly. "No. It's a square bandage, just like the one on my belly."

He tore the patch of soft plastic from her skin and threw it behind him. "At least you didn't bother to lie about this."

She took hot exception to his superior attitude. "Don't talk down to me as if you're something special."

"Special, my tired ass." He caught her wrists and pulled her from the bed. "I thought you to be damned special, once. What happened to you, Shel? Why would you pull a dirty trick like this? I don't want bastards."

"I wanted sex, you arrogant clod." She yanked her hands free and scooped up a handful of strawberries. "You wouldn't have to worry about child support because you'd never know."

He glared down at her, hands clenched at his side. "Now, what's that supposed to mean? God damn it."

She flung the berries at him and screamed in heart breaking disappointment.

"Go to hell, Nick. I made a mistake today, but that wasn't the worst of the lot."

His brow furrowed and he held his hands out to her before she ran past him to her bathroom. His final word on the subject was a clenched-jawed, "Son of a bitch."

Down the hall in her bathroom, Shelby crumpled to the floor, clutching her stomach and weeping scalding tears of disappointment. Her overdue period had started and she hated the crimson that heralded its triumphant return. Bitter tears of failure burnt her cheeks and scarred her emotions. At the moment, she didn't want to take her next breath. She couldn't even get pregnant.

## Chapter 12

This wasn't like Shelby, running off to sob in the bathroom. The real Shelby would have laughed in his face and shook her ass at him. Damn. What kind of woman thing had hit her now? One thing for sure, he wasn't going to sleep tonight. Not with her throwing things against the wall and being in the vicinity of the kitchen knives.

Nick leaned against her bedroom door and pressed his forehead to the cool walnut panel for a time. He couldn't stand being shut out of whatever she felt or did. But, he knew her signals—this one said all men stay away.

The slamming of drawers and closet doors spoke clearly of her mood. He walked away from her door, knowing it wouldn't be wise to invade her space.

At five the next morning, Shelby emerged from her hiding place to grace him with a scalding glare.

"I have done a lot of thinking, Nick." She threw something in his direction. The keys bounced and skittered off behind him. "I won't need those anymore. And, I don't give a damn what you do with this place."

She flung her makeup kit towards the entry door. Nick saw her nose testing the air for the scent of coffee. He picked her kit up and smiled at her.

"I've been waiting for you to get up. Coffee's ready and the vans loaded." The look she gave him would have stunned an elephant with its powerful stab of disgust.

“I’ll get coffee in Kansas City.” She walked a few steps back in the direction of her room, but whirled on him. “Did you have the decency to throw all that garbage you brought here out to the birds?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Nick had seen Shelby angry before, but never so completely iced over. “Yes, I tossed everything and the kitchen is clean. The windows are down and all the doors are locked. I’m ready.”

He shook his head when she gave him a sarcastic glance and headed back to her bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, they pulled onto the highway and leaving the painful episode behind. Much to his chagrin at every rest stop Shelby refused his repeated offers of food and drink. She went so far as to demand separate tables while they ate lunch in a crowded steak house. Nick wanted to hide under his table while she carried on a conversation with her waitress and they both glared his way. The woman treated him like a hired driver, not speaking to him or looking directly at him. While she pretended to sleep, he could feel her damning gaze burn his skin through her dark sunglasses.

During the final rest stop, Nick began to worry about Shelby and her frequent extensive restroom visits. Thinking she had been gone too long, he went to find her, shrinking from six foot three to ground level when he found her sobbing outside the women's restroom door.

She sobbed, burying her face in her hands and shivering even though the temperature soared.

“My God, Shel.” He tried to pull her into his arms, but she turned her shoulder to ward him off. “This isn't about what happened at the cottage, is it?” He stroked her hair, ignoring her freezing stare. He could swear she had hissed at him.

She pressed a hand full of tissue to her red nose and answered between sobs. “Go away. I don't want to look at you. And don't flatter yourself. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Then, why—?”

“I don't want to hear your voice.”

She cut him off and hurried to the van, slamming the door hard enough to make people look for the source of the sonic boom.

\* \* \* \*

After what had been the longest, most grueling trip of his life, Nick drove into Shelby's parking garage, wondering what to say to her next. He parked the van behind a car sitting in the space where her little Jag usually sat. At last, a reason to break the long cold silence.

"Where's your car?"

"Not that it's any of your concern, but that is my car. At least for several weeks while mine is being repaired."

He gave her a look of shocked disbelief. "Hell, woman. Where did you take your car? Those few scratches shouldn't take more than a couple days to iron out."

"Scratches? The trunk is pleated and the bumper is gone along with my rear window." She harrumphed on her last word.

"What did I miss here? When I last saw your car, there were only a few scratches on it. What else happened?"

"Oh, nothing. A car rammed me."

His hackles stood up and his heart galloped. "All that damage from one bump?" He took her arm and moved her toward the elevator. "Come over here and tell me about it."

Her soft brows arched prettily over a look of impatience. "Okay." Her voice held contempt for his ignorance. "A car followed me for a while one night and then rammed the rear of my car a couple times. He quit when a police officer came along."

Nick's blood coursed through his veins on a rampage. Some son-of-a-bitch had tried to hurt his woman. He wouldn't stand for it. "Talk to me, damn it." He gripped her upper arm, paying no heed to her attempts to get away. "Did you know the driver?"

She straightened her slumping shoulders and took on a regal appearance with nothing more than her inner fire. She huffed with

indignation. “Know him? Why would you say something so crazy? Of course I didn’t know him.”

He stared at the woman who stirred his emotions with a pitchfork and set fire to his soul with her little ways of black magic and Jezebel tricks. He was beside himself with worry and scared to death she would be hurt. God, he loved her so damned much and she acted so damned indifferent. He could only guess at the danger she might be in. Damn it to hell. She had to take the situation seriously.

“Listen to me, lady.” Nick squeezed her arm to emphasize his meaning. “The kinds of people you’ve been dealing with aren’t impressed with the fact you’re a damned good-looking woman. What happened? Did you back out on a deal? Ask too much money for the plans?”

The pulse in her temple pounded when she met his hard gaze and her lashes glistened with tears. Nick wanted to cry too, to make everything in the world disappear but Shelby. Her voice broke when she spoke to him.

“Nick. Stop yelling at me. He could have killed me.”

“That’s why I’m yelling. I’m worried about you, Shel.” He took several deep breaths and watched the lights on the elevator panel. The doors opened and he tried to reason with her. “Let’s go to the cops and get this guy picked up.”

She shook her head and walked into the elevator, trying to block his way inside. “There’s no word to describe how much I detest you right now.”

He knew she told the truth. He just couldn’t figure out why she had turned on him so completely and without warning. He didn’t know her at all. Made no difference to him. He loved the hellcat and would protect her if possible.

“Don’t pull that betrayed woman crap. I’m serious. You’re in trouble.”

“Horse’s ass.”

“I’m going in the apartment with you.”

“Over my dead body.”

“That’s what I’m trying to prevent.”

The ride up was replete with icy stares and his attempt to avoid being frozen solid by one of her frigid glares. She slapped his hand when he pulled her away from the apartment door and unlocked it for her. He made a thorough search of the quiet apartment before going to the living room where she stood looking at him with a sarcastic smile.

“Wait a second, Nick. I’ll get my revolver.”

“This isn’t funny, Shel. You’re getting in too deep to act like a spoiled brat. I’m making a report if you won’t.”

She threw her sunglasses at him and clenched her hands. “Don’t meddle in my life. Don’t you dare.”

“I care about you.”

“That’s a laugh.” She turned away from him. “Oh, just get out.”

“Do you want your bags brought up?”

“Dump them in the lobby. Alfred will bring them up.”

“Maybe.” Nick opened the door. “Last time I looked, he was checking his lipstick.”

“The door’s open.” She gestured toward him. “There’s nothing to keep you here.”

\* \* \* \*

Two weeks had passed since he had seen Shelby, two weeks of sheer hell. He knew she turned her car around and left the site if she spotted his car. In the back of his mind, he had the suspicion Matt gave her a call to let her know if he had left.

Hell, he must be losing his mind, worrying about seeing her. He didn't need to have the woman make his life any more miserable. As long as the project stayed on schedule going up like it should, it didn't matter. But the time quickly approached that they had to meet for a run through of the place. He could wait.



Nick had just stepped out of the shower when the phone rang. He stood dripping on the carpet. "Damn it, Savage. You pick the worst times to call." He knotted the towel over his hips. "What is it?"

"I have some news, Nick."

"News?" Nick took the phone into the steamy bathroom. "This had better be good."

"I won't ask what's been going on with you." Savage obviously shuffled papers while he talked. "One of my paralegals waded through a ton of files and came up with a building permit. It states the parties intention to build on the site you found."

"Forget my mood, Savage." Nick dropped the towel and leaned on the vanity. "Who is this bastard and how soon am I going to kill him?" He bristled while Savage laughed.

"That's the rub. The guy died in a car accident three weeks ago. Car jacking or something like that. How's that for irony?"

"Irony. Yeah." The ugly sound of a submarine's dive alert horn went off in his brain. Red flags waved in a field of waist high weeds and rusting steel beams. Car jacking. He dragged in a rough breath. "He just saved me from doing some serious time in Leavenworth."

Nick didn't want to drag Shelby into the spotlight. He would handle this alone and no one would be the wiser. He quizzed Savage. "Any idea who'd want to kill the guy?"

"Well, there's one more thing." Savage tapped the mouthpiece after Nick's lengthy silence. "Nick, you still there?"

"Still here and waiting." Nick glanced down at the wet footprints on the bathmat. "Come on, Savage. Spill. I'm standing here buck naked."

"Okay. The deceased guy applied for the permit, but it seems he got it for someone else. So far, we can't determine who that second person is."

"What are you saying? This guy's still running around town building things?" He held the receiver in a steely grip. "And of course, you can't find any of the men that worked for him. Right?"

"We ran background checks on every new permit buyer. They're all on the up and up." The sound of a cigarette lighter being fired came through the line before Savage spoke again. "I don't believe this guy's building anything now. Too broke I would assume."

"Who sold him the steel, the concrete?" Nick lit a cigar and angrily puffed on the expensive tobacco. "Somebody knows who he is. I only know one person who could have got this thing rolling and I..."

Nick's abrupt silence brought a comment from Savage. "You're not telling me the whole story. I can't really find this guy if you hide shit from me."

Nick puffed on his cigar several times and laughed. "Can't tell you, Savage. I still don't believe it."

"Let me guess. Shelby?" Savage wasn't laughing now. "What do you really want me to do, Nick? I can't see sending her up the river."

"She doesn't figure in this part of the situation." Nick snuffed out the cigar in an ashtray. "This guy has cost me everything I care for and he's going to pay."

"Sorry, Nick. Wish I could do more."

"There's one more thing. Hire the best PI you know and keep Shelby out of trouble. Today. Right now."

"You've got it, pal." Savage didn't end the conversation with his usual raw joke, but with a serious comment. "She'll be safe as a baby in her cradle."

Later, while thinking about Savage's words, the urge to see Shelby remained overwhelming. Nick couldn't take a full breath without making sure she was okay. All that damage to her car meant a mad dog trying to hurt her and he had made wise ass comments about it.

He realized now that that he no longer cared about what had brought them to the current situation. He only cared about keeping Shelby safe. Until the crazy bastard that did this was identified and arrested, he would stick to her like a second skin.

He had to resign himself to being lonely the rest of his life, but that didn't mean he had stopped loving her. He would never get Shelby out of his blood.

## Chapter 13

Shelby stared at her toes, wondering why she had bought another pair of summer shoes when Thanksgiving loomed three weeks away. Over in one corner, a helter-skelter pile of shopping bags and boxes reminded her she'd been on another impulse buying spree. A chronic kind of thing with her nowadays.

She wondered idly if she'd ever meet anyone like Nick again. Or, if she could ever date again. No, that was out of the question. Besides, if anyone else knew the facts of the tumultuous relationship she'd shared with Nick, they'd have her committed.

But she didn't have time for confinement, not with six jobs going and dozens of people depending on her. Then there was the Gualdoni project. The beautiful complex now finished only waited for the final walk-through. For all the heartache it had brought her, she saw the beauty of the strong, sprawling elegance built of brick and stucco. Matt and the crew had put in hours of overtime and ignored the open battles of ego between her and Nick.

She had used Matt shamelessly, calling him each time before pulling into the parking area of the site. If he said Nick had arrived there or he expected him anytime soon, she found an excuse to drive on by. Now, the day she had longed for had arrived, the moment she would walk away from the site for the last time.

Thinking far ahead, she had picked up brochures for tropical vacations, but scoffed at herself. Being in those romantic places without Nick would be unbearable. Maybe she would go skiing in Switzerland. No, she needed Nick to keep her warm.

*Bullshit.* She swung her feet off the desk and went to the window to stare out for several minutes. For one thing, she had to find a release for her growing tension other than snapping at slow sales people and balky gas pumps.

Kate had escaped so far by being quiet. Shelby had been half listening to the muffled conversation coming from the reception area, but quickly tuned in to the commotion outside her door.

Curious what the problem might be, she stood and opened the open the door, stopping cold.

Kate and Mark carried on a hot argument which had become physical. Mark leaned over Kate, gripping her hair in his fist while Kate struggled to get free. Shelby saw red and rushed to assist her secretary.

"Get the hell out of here, Mark." She made no attempt to hide her disgust. He straightened and smiled, reminding her of a grinning rat.

Kate jumped to her feet and stood between her man and Shelby. "We were just talking. He didn't mean anything."

Shelby had her hand on the phone, still eyeing Mark with contempt. "When you leave this time, you're not to ever come back."

Mark laughed a wheezing sound and grazed Kate's jaw with his knuckles before stretching his thin lips in a smile aimed at Shelby. "You're tough, ain't you, Ms. Rand?"

"Tough enough. I meant what I said."

"Yeah, I know you did." He grabbed Kate's purse and rifled the contents, pulling out a jumble of bills before tossing it back at her.

Shelby wanted to throw something heavy at his head. She found him disgusting and not the least bit frightening. She didn't flinch when he directed his angry gaze back to her.

He shook his finger at Shelby, and then strolled out of the reception area, taking the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator.

In the following seconds of heavy silence, she wanted to rail at her weak-kneed employee but managed to speak calmly.

"Kate, why do you take the manhandling?"

"I love him, Shelby. You love Nick."

"Not that much." Shelby shuddered. "Never that much." She leaned over to pick up some papers that had fallen from Kate's handbag. "You know Mark can't come back here. I don't like hurting your feelings, but he isn't welcome here."

Kate shook her head and straightened her desk with trembling hands. "I know. He won't be back."

Shelby wanted to hug the abuse victim but kept her hands to herself. "If this is going to be a problem between us, tell me now."

"Not at all." Kate managed a weak smile. "I respect your decision."

Shelby smiled wryly, thinking it deplorable the woman didn't respect herself.

Before sitting down at her desk, she picked up the phone and filed a "No Admittance" report with security, barring Mark from her building. Mark would never be a problem for her again.

While she sat in her office and waited for the time to meet Nick, somber thoughts consumed Shelby. She didn't intend to be one of those women that weep and moan over their man dumping them. Where had it been written that she had to be the one left holding a bleeding heart? Reaching for her lipstick, she determined that when she walked away from him that night, he would be the one hurting.

She ran the rose colored lipstick over her lips a final time and sprayed her breasts with perfume, then removed her panties to drop them into her briefcase. Her phone rang and she ignored it. After the twelfth ring, she pushed the talk button.

Nick had wanted to know where the hell she'd been and had sounded pissed when she yawned. After a lengthy tirade about keeping her appointment for the walk-through and how he waited in the cold damned rain, she had laughed and hung up. He had to be steamed. Too bad. She would make him steam even more before letting him go. Nick would get a send off he'd never forget.

\* \* \* \*

By the time she drove into the parking lot at the complex, Shelby's nerves twisted in a jangled knot, yet her blood hummed with expectation of unspeakable pleasure. Sexual pleasure.

"Shel." Nick walked down the entry hallway toward her, carrying a clipboard fat with pages of checklists. He looked like his temper might be up.

"Nick?" Her gaze swept up his long legs and toyed with his crotch. "I'm here."

After giving her a look of pissed off disgust, he turned and waved at Matt who came in the doorway, swiping at his rain-soaked hair.

"Let's get started, Shel. These men have other places to be and they showed up on time."

She grinned at Matt and hugged his waist. "You pissed at me too, Matt?"

Her longtime friend chuckled and shook his head. "Who, me? Hell no."

"See, Nick? You're the only one with other places to be." She lifted her rain-dampened hair from her shoulders and shook the curls loose. "Let's do it."

She laughed when Nick caught her arm roughly and escorted her down the hall. Oh yes, he pissed at her. That's the way she wanted him. Blood up and emotions running high.

The walk-through began with Nick and Matt in the lead and Shelby strolling behind. Her gaze strayed lovingly over Nick's broad shoulders that couldn't be hidden under a gray suede jacket. She loved his style, the way he wasn't afraid to wear an amethyst colored shirt with his faded Levi's. He had too nice a rear to hide even if the Levi's hugged his gorgeous tight butt like an old friend. She smiled when he glanced over his shoulder as he felt her lingering study.

She waited until Matt seemed involved with a personal phone call before torturing Nick a little. She leaned over to brush at her shoe,

making sure he could see the bare cheeks of her backside. To add emphasis, she wiggled her hips while straightening her mini-skirt.

Nick seemed to have grown armor around his sexuality and she curtailed her seduction as the tour wound down to the verbal acceptance of the job. The finality of it struck when Matt and Nick shook hands and the acceptance had been signed. Matt hugged her and laughed.

"Okay, kiddo. I'll see you at the next job. Stay out of trouble."

She grinned and shrugged. "Don't worry about me, Matt." She lowered her gaze from Nick's Mediterranean features and scuffed her toe on the marble floor. He remained quiet while her heart thundered in her chest. "So, Nick. It's over."

"You think so?" He walked off to get the keys from the watchman.

"Yeah, isn't it?" She swiped at her windblown hair. "No need to walk me to my car."

"Right." He went back to talking to the guard.

"I'll say goodbye now."

"Yeah. So long." He turned away from her and walked the guard to a side door, locked it and looked her way again. "I thought you'd be gone by now. Anything I can do?"

She wanted to scream at the dumbest man on earth. "No, I'm just leaving, saying goodbye."

He shrugged lightly but grinned at her. "Thanks for everything, Shel. Sure there's nothing I can do for you?"

Her scowl deepened when she lifted her hands in a sign of resignation. "No. Absolutely nothing. I'll see you."

Of course. How dumb was she? He hadn't mentioned jail lately, but he probably still thought she belonged behind bars. And her, the biggest fool of all time, stood in the chilly night, wearing no panties for a man that considered her a low down thief. She turned and ran from the entry hall out into the dark cold courtyard. Pure anguish hit when she remembered her clipboard. Damn. She'd left it somewhere



on the second floor. A shiver racked her body when she noticed her breath on the cold damp air. As much as she hated to, Shelby ran back to get her belongings.

She trembled in the chill sweeping in through the courtyard. It was darker than she remembered and she found the gloom unsettling. Well, darn. Being afraid of the dark had always been a never-ending battle for her, one she fought alone. Not even Nick knew about her fear.

When she got to the door, it resisted stubbornly, making her more aware of her vulnerable situation. A woman alone, no coat, no bravery and no panties. God, would she ever learn? At last the door swung open and she ran inside the building.

Walking back through that cavern made her nervous, but that clipboard contained data vital to her records. She hit the elevator buttons and turned to peer into the semidarkness behind her.

She didn't turn around when the soft whoosh of the opening elevator doors broke the silence, but instead backed through the open doors and into a pair of strong arms. Her shrill scream shattered the quiet of the building. The man's arms tightened around her and dragged her to the back of the car. She bucked and kicked in desperation but couldn't break his hold.

Familiar husky tones touched her ear and she struggled to hit him in her fury. "Damn you, Nick." She couldn't believe it when the devil laughed and made a growling sound against her ear. He held her tight, as if he attempted to soothe her frightened heart. "I'm a real jackass, baby. But I never gave a thought to your being scared of me."

She stopped struggling and rested against his warmth and strength and counted her blessings.

He held her tight, nuzzling her neck while warming her with his body. "But not too scared to come back to me."

She saw her opportunity to render him a begging puppy coming back around. Her voice took on a honeyed quality. "I knew sex would

be the appropriate going away gift. You know, the gift that keeps on coming."

He slipped his hand under her sweater and let the weight of her breast bounce in his palm a couple times. "What do you mean, going away gift?"

In the overhead light, his eyes glistened like wet lapis and his lower lip looked especially delicious. She trembled, but this time she shivered with pleasure. "You know. The big adios send-off every man wants but rarely gets."

He didn't say anything for several minutes, but pressed his palm to her flat stomach and moved his hips against her backside. "Hate to tell you this, baby, but you seduced me for nothing. I'm not going anywhere."

"You're not leaving? Why not?"

He nibbled the length of her pulsing throat and then whispered. "Can't leave you, baby. You're in my blood."

She leaned back to smile into his eyes. "And you're a real glutton for punishment."

She wondered which of them should be called glutton while his hand moved under her skirt.

He exhaled roughly against her shoulder. "Now, let's see what's under this cute little skirt."

"Same thing that's always been there. Just better now."

His hand slid between her smooth thighs and pressed to her warm crotch. "Hmmm. Feels like a sweet little fuzzy kitten."

"Yes, I hear it purring."

Pressing her belly with his wide palm, Nick slid several fingers into her silken slit and groaned. "Oh yes, honey. This is better. How did you manage that?"

She laughed. "I told it no one would ever bother it again."

Nick let her skirt down and spun her to face him. "Tell it to get ready for an invasion."

"You tell it. We're not on speaking terms any longer."

He caught her face in his hands to kiss her passionately, holding her to the wall while plundering her mouth. He slid his mouth from hers and suggested, "Let's go to my place and break in the new comforter."

"Then you feel sure I'm willing to flop on my back with no problem?"

He grinned and pulled her between his legs. "Of course."

She smiled and gestured to the opening door. "You're right."

They hurried from the confining elevator and down the dimly lit hallway to the courtyard door. He locked it behind them after they stepped outside. For a brief time, they stood in the rain to kiss and touch, but soon ran for the warmth of his car.

He opened the passenger door and they tumbled inside, laughing and kissing, settling in the wide front seat.

They kissed and touched with frantic hands, tasted eagerly with feverish kisses. She gave in to his silent demand that she surrender, reaching down to release the buttons of his Levi's. He pushed her skirt above her hips and tugged her sweater up over her breasts.

"Damn, Shel. You're the sweetest looking woman I know."

She slid her fingers into the fly of his shorts and pulled his full member out.

"This sweet woman is wanting every inch of this, big boy."

He laughed and slid forward, meeting her up thrusting hips and she took him in completely. She moaned in helpless delight, clamping her tightness about him. She patted his rear and murmured coyly against his lips.

"Nicky, just so you know, I'm not using birth control."

He didn't miss a stroke, driving into her with renewed strength. Not saying a word for a moment, he bit her lip playfully before sliding his mouth from hers, speaking words that seeped into her mouth like sweet wine.

"Fine. I'm ready for a couple of kids."

"A couple? You're planning on a long stay."

"Where else would I want to be?" He looked into her eyes while moving slowly against her. "I have to be where the beautiful lady with the sweet kitten is."

Her laugh had been cut off by a gasp of pleasure when he cupped her rear and thrust into her, holding her close to his heaving chest until her flickering little fire burst over them, igniting her world.

After the earth stopped tumbling, Shelby sighed and stretched under his weight. She knew he was the stuff that made her world and she could do nothing to change the situation. He touched her cheeks and mouth with soft kisses and groaned when she tried to sit up.

"I still think we should go initiate that new comforter on my bed."

A loud rumble of thunder followed his comment and she slapped his rump. "That means you've been evil. Having sex in a car."

"What other kind is there?" He brushed a curly sprig of hair from her cheek.

"Nick." What he had said about children rattled in her mind and she couldn't beat around the bush. "Are you planning on having kids?"

"You mean, by myself?"

"Don't be a jackass. With a woman of course."

"Sure. Aren't you game?"

He had to be yanking her chain again. If so, she wasn't going to play. She sighed and rubbed his butt. "Let's go to my place. The bedroom's warmer."

## Chapter 14

Nick had called himself every gutter name in his extensive vocabulary after his rainy night romp with Shelby. Not that he regretted the time spent with her. Oh no, man she had been a shot in the ass and a transfusion to his anemic life. No, he didn't regret one breath of time he spent with her. But he did hate his weak-kneed way of handling the inevitable. She had done things to him that had proven she cared zip for him. Oh, sure. She liked having sex with him, but that only meant she liked having sex with him.

He thought about her open invitation to spend the night at her place. And he had. Making wild and hot as fire love all night. She'd had no mercy on him, keeping him up until she had used him all she wanted.

They hadn't discussed the kid thing any further. He got a kick out of the fact she had been the butt of her own joke, not using birth control, hell. And he really didn't care. He did want kids and it appeared out of wedlock might be the only way he'd have them. He would have them with no one but Shel.

He sat down on the couch and looked at the plate of pasta he had made for himself. "What a loser," he groaned. When he had finished most of his lonely meal in front of the TV, the phone rang. A tearful voice of a woman came through the line, unnerving him. He thought she had the wrong number until she identified herself.

"Kate?" His fork clattered off his plate and onto the floor when he stood. "What's going on?"

He listened to her while moving around the apartment, gathering up his wallet, keys and a jacket. The call ended and he ran from his

apartment, heading out to meet Shelby's weeping secretary at a popular Westport restaurant. He hadn't fallen apart while Kate hinted something might happen to Shelby. He held it together while driving to the restaurant, but when he found a parking space, he bolted from the car and ran for the door of the dining room. Inside, he scoured the crowd for a familiar face. She wasn't there.

He found an empty booth in the back of the place and slid into the seat. He waited for what seemed like an eternity. He ordered and drank two cups of coffee and smoked several cigars. He'd chosen the smokers section, knowing he'd be wanting a cigar before the meeting was over. The ashtray overflowed and his patience had dried up. He stood when he spotted Kate pushing her way through the crowd. When she approached and stood by the booth, and he reached out to grab her wrist, pulling her into the seat.

"Okay, lady. Start talking and do it now." He couldn't control the warning in his voice.

Kate pulled her coat collar up about her chin and spoke in a hush. "I don't want Shelby to be hurt."

He knew he would be arrested if he didn't keep his anger under control. He tried. "If you don't talk and damned soon, I'm dragging you to the nearest police station. You hear me?" He tapped her shoulder. "Spill it."

She drew back as if he might hit her. "Okay. Mark told me he could do things to Shelby. If you don't give him a half million dollars to leave her alone." She took a sip of water and swallowed hard. "He wants the cash by tomorrow night."

Nick studied the thin young woman in mute fascination for a second. He couldn't believe what he heard. "You're serious? He sent you here to tell me?" The frigging man had a death wish.

She started to weep and her voice broke. "That's not all."

Nick inhaled in exasperation. "Somehow I figured there had to be more." He snapped his fingers in impatience. "Well?"

"Shelby always trusted me, let me be in her office while she opened her computer. I had no problem getting her password to download your plans." She started to squall. "I had to help Mark. He needed a good plan."

Nick gestured in irritation, rubbing his chin while staring at her in disgust. "Okay, so you stole from me and Shel, but for crying out loud, it's not enough to be making a late night confession. You should have told Shel first, a long time ago. You understand me?"

She wiped at her eyes and sobbed. "You don't understand. There's more."

Nick fought to control his fury while he gazed at her through narrowed eyes. "What else?"

"After he got the plans, he borrowed a lot of money. From money-lenders. He can't repay them and they're going to kill him. He has twenty-four hours to get the cash. I did it for him. I love him."

With barely contained anger, he tossed her a wad of napkins. "How could you do this to her? You know of course, you're no better than that piece of scum you hang with."

"I know and I'm not asking for forgiveness. Just don't do anything to hurt Mark. Please."

Nick almost laughed with sarcasm. Not hurt him? He wanted to put a bullet in his head. "Listen, Kate. The only reason I don't have you arrested is your decision to tell me what's going on. Unfortunately, you probably waited until nothing will save my relationship with Shelby." He ground his cigar into the ashtray. "For both your sakes, you'd better pray she's okay."

She covered her face and sobbed louder. Nick ignored the scowls he received from nearby diners. "Kate." He gripped her arm. "You go set it up for tomorrow night. I'll meet him in the West Bottoms. Tell him to wait for me behind the old toy manufacturing building. Nine o'clock and he'd better not be late." She nodded and jerked her arm back. "He'll be there." Her face contorted with a new wave of tears. "I'm so sorry. I'll make him leave town after this is over."

Nick couldn't put a name to what he felt. Rage mostly, and plenty of regret. He had broken his beloved's heart. For all her beautiful brass, Shel was fragile and he had crushed her under his careless foot. He could hardly speak, but gave her final instructions. "I'll have the money, Kate. You just make sure he shows up."

"He will."

Nick waited until Kate left before going to the cashier to pay his tab. He could hardly stand the assault of twisting emotions waging war on him. He wouldn't be deprived of hurting Mark. Getting Savage to watch his back would be no problem. The plan had been set in motion.

After checking in with the PI that watched over Shelby, he drove to Savage's place and roused him out of bed.

"What in the hell are you doing in bed already, man?" Nick more or less shouldered his way into his friend's apartment.

Savage finished snapping up his lounge pants and laughed. "You couldn't have waited five more minutes, pal?"

"I suppose you have a woman in your bedroom. I'll tell you what I want and you can go back to your fun."

The two men nodded in agreement and went into the den to talk. The conversation lasted over an hour and several glasses of Napoleon consumed.

"Okay, Nick. I'm in and ready to be arrested if it comes to that."

"Damn straight, pal. I'm not forgetting the fight after the football game that landed me in the can."

Savage laughed and punched Nick on the shoulder. "Yeah, sure I owe you. Isn't that the night we got the tattoos on our asses?"

Nick rubbed the cheek of his rump and downed the last of his drink. "Yeah, and that Sun Devil kept me out of the seminary."

Savage grinned, pouring himself another drink. "Okay. Tomorrow night. You pick me up and wear dark clothes."

"Why?"

"That's how it's done in the movies."



"I hope you take this a little more seriously tomorrow night. We don't know what that son-of-a-bitch has planned."

"I know what I had planned before you busted in here." Savage walked toward his bedroom, leaving Nick to let himself out. "Later, man."

Nick picked up the bottle of Napoleon and took it with him. His horny attorney would never miss it. He left and got into his car, driving to Shelby's place to park where he could see her terrace.

"Hang on, baby. By this time tomorrow night, we'll be in heaven."

\* \* \* \*

She remembered Nick kissing her and hearing the lock in the living room door click soundly when he closed it on his way out. She pulled the pillows close to sniff in his good scent and dozed for a few minutes. She finally left the bed and sauntered across the floor, stopping when she caught sight of her naked self in the dressing table mirror.

She sighed and touched the triangle of curls between her legs, shivering with pleasure as she remembered his pet name for it. His sweet kitten. Well, this kitten was tired, but she had to make it into the office to see if the temp showed up.

After a quick shower and getting dressed, she grabbed her purse and car keys. In the lobby, she frowned with disappointment. No coffee, again. But, when had she last shopped? She couldn't remember. Maybe Alfred had some going in his station cubicle. Her hair was still in a knot of damp curls from her shower, but she didn't have time to mess with the dryer. Maybe someday, her life would get back in order. She scoffed at herself. That would never happen, especially since Nick apparently decided to stick around. But for how long?

She wasn't kidding herself. He wanted her in the sack, wanted her bad, but that could be temporary. And the comment about them having kids bordered on just plain crazy. No marriage, no kids. So, that meant, no little Shelbys or Nicks in her future. He would want a so-called 'good woman' to have his kids when he got serious about having a family. The thought hurt and she sucked her breath in, leaning against the wall until the elevator arrived.

Inside, she glanced at the huge man that had recently moved in the building. He read the morning paper and drank coffee. He nodded and moved over to make room for her. It seemed odd, she thought. He seemed to have her exact hours, no matter what time she left or arrived home.

The door opened and her new neighbor quickly forgotten when she spotted Alfred. He shared his gourmet caffeine with her and the latest gossip.

"Oh yes, that fellow has a lot of money I would say." Alfred handed her a piece of coffee cake. "He drives a fine sedan and wears only Italian garments and shoes. And I know his cologne costs well into the hundreds."

Shelby chewed and smiled, enjoying the gossip session with her friend. "How many women does he have?"

"Oh, goodness. I have no idea." Alfred refilled her cup. "He signed a short term lease. Special services I hear."

"That sounds interesting." She figured the guy must be a hood. "I've got to go, but you can fill me in on the rest when I get home."

Alfred pressed a Styrofoam cup of coffee into her hand. "Have a good day, Ms. Rand."

She grinned and waved at him before she took the stairs down to get her car. Have a good day? How the hell could she help but have a good day after the night she'd had?

As she climbed into the rental car, it reminded her she had to call about her own wheels. The baby Mercedes was nice, but she liked her Jag. Belting herself in, she checked out the narrow seat. There was no

way she could entertain Nick in here. She couldn't help smiling as she drove out of the garage.

There had been no need for her to concern herself about the temp. Jackie Redman showed up and in her usual good mood. She hadn't even been resentful that Shelby ran late opening the office.

"Oh heck no, Ms. Rand. I read a magazine and talked with that cute security guard."

"To make sure you can get in, take Kate's keys until I find the spare set. I never know what time I'll be getting here." Shelby hid her grin brought on by memories of guilty pleasure and unlocked the door. When she started for her private office, Jackie stopped her.

"The cute little security guard said some guy left this for you." She held out the clipboard in both hands.

"Nick remembered." Shelby smiled and took the heavy paperwork. "Look around and acquaint yourself with the place. I'll be out in a few minutes to answer any questions you might have."

After a quick run-through of where to find everything, Shelby left Jackie, confident the office would hum in its usual manner. She sat at her desk, reading the requests a new client had for a villa in Texas. The family had a half dozen children and she looked forward to designing the home for them.

She couldn't push aside the mental images of the children she would have with Nick. Beautiful, golden babies that never squalled or made messes. She laughed under her breath. If they had a drop of Nick in them, they would terrorize the neighborhood. Enough of that. Work continued to pile up and she needed to get back in the swing.

Remembering it had been a while since she had checked her money situation, she pulled her account up to see if she had any money in the bank. When it flashed on the screen, her eyes rounded. That much, huh? Nick had deposited her fee plus a hefty early finish bonus. She considered being resentful about the extra money, but what the hell. She deserved it after the long months of crap he'd put her through. His conscience apparently began to bother him. It wasn't

smart to think about Nick too much. Expect nothing and life will be much easier.

The big highlight of the day came when Nick entered her office later that afternoon. He closed the door behind him and crossed the floor to her, pulling her from her chair.

"You looked so cute when I left you sleeping this morning, I had to come by and see if it could have been a trick of my imagination."

She pushed his face away and laughed. "I don't think I know you, sir." His gaze secreted fire and exotic pleasures she couldn't deny herself. "But, I can be sweet talked into doing certain things."

He brushed his lips over ears and rubbed her back, hugging her close. "Shel, what would you say to moving in with me?"

She pushed him away, shocked and hurt by his suggestion. "You know how I feel about shacking up. If I wash your shorts, I'll be more than your belly warmer."

His warm laughter played around the room and finally settled on her ears. "I know you'll never wash my dirty shorts, lady. I'll use the same fancy laundry you send stuff to."

"So, what are you up to?" She narrowed her eyes. "You haven't done something to get me evicted, have you?"

"Me? Nothing."

She pinched his butt. "Not long ago, you tossed me out of your place."

"Well, damn. I was just playing with you."

"Oh sure and I just remembered the price of my services just spiked."

"Something tells me I'll be paying the rest of my life." He caught her lip between his teeth and sucked noisily. "You still got your key to my place?"

"Yes, but I don't intend to break in anymore."

"Oh, come on, Shel. Go on over there and get the bed warmed up. I'll be home around midnight or so."

"And where might you be while I'm warming things up?"

"A job starting in Wichita. Have to go line things out for a new project."

"No. I'm going straight home for a real night's sleep."

He frowned lightly but didn't let her go. "Okay. Then I'll see you in the morning and we'll talk about whose laundry we'll use." He patted her rear and kissed her slowly and deeply before releasing her. He started to leave but turned back to smile at her. "Don't take any detours on the way home tonight. Okay?"

She laughed. "Me? Thanks to you, I'm too tired to go anywhere but home."

"Strictly my pleasure."

She stared after him for several minutes. He drove her nutty with his ever changing moods. Something big was in the air and she couldn't help but worry. "Damn you Nick," she mumbled to herself. "What's going on?"

## Chapter 15

There came the time when she had no excuse to not go home. Shelby looked at the fancy Italian clock on her desk, the clock a gift from Nick. Seven-thirty and pitch black outside. Plus, a cold mist began to fall. She went to the window and looked out at the wet street. A car sped by and she figured the streets might be okay. She'd gotten sick of cold weather and it wasn't even winter.

Knowing she would be alone in her apartment and bored to death when she could be in Nick's didn't sit well with her. She grabbed her things and locked up the office, hurrying outside.

Inside the warmth of her car, she yawned and sighed with resignation. She needed to sleep at least one night without working herself into exhaustion with Nick. As she drove by Country Club Plaza, the twinkling lights called to her like a floozy to a drunken sailor, but she resisted and bypassed the posh shopping district.

The security gate had been dropped when she turned into the entrance of her apartment garage. While she waited for the steel barrier to lift, another car pulled in behind her. For a split second her blood pounded in her ears, memories of another car ramming into her own was still fresh in her mind.

She breathed easier when the gate lifted and she could drive into the garage. The other car followed her, but soon pulled into a parking space like any resident would have done. She had to get hold of herself.

The lobby seemed unusually quiet with no sign of Alfred. He probably had already left for the evening. She noticed boxes of Christmas decorations stacked on a chair near his desk. Lord,

decorating started earlier every year. On the way up to her apartment, she decided to buy a tree this year. A real tree, not a plastic one.

Stepping out of the elevator into the hallway, she noticed someone standing near the stairwell door. Startled and then afraid, she fumbled in her pocket for her keys and dropped them on the floor. She knew her heart stopped beating when she leaned over to get them and a hand snaked out to grip her arm.

"Shelby."

"My God." Shelby straightened and grabbed her chest, gasping several times. "Kate? For heaven's sake. You're supposed to be on vacation. Are you alright?"

"I'm here to tell you something." Kate glanced around the hallway.

"Well, come on in so we can get comfortable." Shelby tried to put her key in the lock, but Kate stopped her.

"No, I don't have time and you need to hear this now."

"Okay." She didn't know where the fear and premonition came from, but Shelby sensed it had to be bad news concerning Nick. "Tell me."

"Mark's extorting money from Nick. He got a big loan from an underworld gang and can't pay them back." Kate had begun to cry.

Shelby frowned in confusion. "What's that got to do with Nick?"

"It all started when I stole a copy of Nick's plans for Mark." Kate wrung her hands with apparent impatience. "Mark knows Nick has money and would do anything for you. He came up with the idea of telling Nick he's going to hurt you if he doesn't pay him off."

"That's the nuttiest thing I've ever heard." Shelby eyed the nervous young woman. "You're telling me the truth. You know where Nick is right now, don't you?"

Backing away from Shelby, Kate began walking to the stairway door. "I had to tell you because I have hurt you enough."

Shelby ran after her and grabbed her coat sleeve. "You're not leaving until I hear the rest of your damned story. Where's Nick?"

"He said he would meet Mark in the West Bottoms by the old toy company building to pay him off. He will keep his word, won't he?"

Shelby raised her hand, intent on slugging Kate but changed her mind. "Yeah, he'll keep his word. That's what I'm afraid of."

She pushed Kate aside and ran to the elevator, punishing the buttons in her furious will to get to Nick.

"Let me drive you, Shelby. I know where it is."

"You go to hell, Kate. I'll find Nick."

\* \* \* \*

In the fog shrouded West Bottoms of town, Nick and Savage waited for the action to start.

"You couldn't ask for a better night for this caper." Savage rubbed his hand over his hair. "Fog, deserted buildings, winos." He looked at Nick's stern profile. "All we need are trench coats."

"Funny, Savage. Really funny." Nick lit a cigar, taking a deep draw. "You just keep your eyes peeled for those scumbags."

"Might be a mistake. Lighting that cigar." Savage seemed serious.

"Why's that?" Nick asked.

"You know. They could see that glow a mile away." Savage's caution had been wasted on Nick.

"They know we're here. I could have used a blowtorch and it wouldn't make any difference." Nick pointed his cigar toward the far end of the alley. "Looks like the rats are coming out of their holes."

Mark emerged from the shadows, looking around like an animal testing the wind. Nick suffocated in his intense hatred for Mark, wanting to crush the animal that had all but ruined two lives. He touched the door handle. Savage's hand stayed his movement.

"Wait." Savage ceased the joking. His customary smile faded. "Let's see who else shows up."



"I'm going." Nick got out of the car and walked away to face Mark. He touched the bulge of newspaper next to his chest, bile tearing his gut apart.

It seemed to him a lifetime passed before Kate came running from the shadows, gasping for breath. She had a hard time speaking to him.

"Nick, I just want to say I'm sorry."

"I don't want to talk to you, Kate. It's the gutter rat hiding behind you I want a few words with."

Mark put on a show of bravado. "Stuff it, Gualdoni. Give me the money."

Nick reached inside his jacket, drawing out the thick packet. He looked past Mark, counting four men at the edge of the heavy fog. Whatever happened, he had to do what he had to do.

Mark rasped out a command. "What are you waiting for? Give me the frigging cash or I'll make it twice as rough on your little whore."

Before Mark drew another breath, Nick hit him with a punishing left hook to the mouth and finished him off with a right cross to break his nose. Mark fell back in a spray of blood and broken cartilage, unconscious on the cold brickyard.

"Looks good, doesn't he?" Savage laughed while looking down at the sprawled body of Mark. "You still got it, buddy."

Slinging his hand to ease the pain, Nick laughed. "Damn. I wanted him to stay on his feet until I finished pounding his ass."

The four men in the dark suits looked over the loser of the battle and shrugged in unison, one of them speaking. "Thanks, pal. Saved us the trouble."

Nick nodded, tossing the packet of fake money onto Mark's chest. The men backed away quickly when the outraged scream of a female echoed through the mist.

"Nick! Damn you!"

He couldn't believe it when Shelby ran toward him, her hair catching the breeze as she crossed the dank brick parking lot. He tried to wave her off.

"Get out of here, Shel! Go back!"

She didn't alter her course but ran straight into his arms. "Damn you, Nick. What do you think you're doing? Playing cops and robbers? Are you trying to get yourself killed? I'm not going to let you do it."

He caught her flailing hands and held her fast for a second before shifting her behind himself, trying to shield her from harm.

"Stay back there, Shel. It could get ugly."

She peered around his arm and checked the toughs out. They stared back at her, not blinking or speaking. She leaned against Nick for reassurance. When he moved, she clung to him.

"Are we leaving?"

"Damn straight, if we can."

He held her tight in his arms and whispered gruffly. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Trying to keep you from going to jail."

"Hell, I didn't hurt him." He caught her hand and pulled it to his mouth to kiss her cold fingers. That's all he could do before the light of a spot-light blinded him. "Savage. Christ's sake. Cut that spot."

"Freeze!"

The voice coming from the darkness wasn't Savage being funny.

"This is the Kansas City Police Department. You're all under arrest."

The order sounded authentic enough, especially when he saw Savage cuffed by a burly police officer along with everyone else at the scene. "Christ." Nick mumbled under his breath and tried to shield Shelby in his shadow, placing his hands on top of his head. All to no avail. She soon found herself in the custody of the law, wearing steel bracelets and wearing a stunned expression.

\* \* \* \*

She screamed for Nick to help her, but a burley detective only allowed him to shout a few hasty words of encouragement. She high stepped to keep up with the officer in charge of transporting her downtown.

“Don’t be afraid, Shel.” He stumbled as a detective shoved toward a paddy wagon. He shouted again, as he was being frisked. “Once we get downtown, I’ll straighten this out.”

Not having another choice, Shelby sat in the back and suffered the indignity of being buckled into her seat. Twisting around, she saw Nick and Savage being loaded into the back of the paddy wagon along with the big men in dark overcoats. In the solitude of the patrol car, she understood complete humiliation. Out and out frustration came right after she tugged on the cuffs and realized she had been rendered helpless. Hot tears slipped down her cheeks and she sobbed in misery.

If only she hadn’t gotten lost trying to find the place. All that wasted time could have made the difference in getting him to go home with her instead of going to jail. She wished now she had taken Kate up on her offer to do the driving. Kate had arrived on the scene before her, and now in a freaked out panic, screamed for Nick to leave her man alone. She had sounded like a wildcat after Mark fell back on his unconscious butt. Damn, she wanted to slug that woman.

As the squad car next to her pulled away, she caught a glimpse of Kate bawling her eyes out in the back seat. Shelby grit her teeth, thinking of how that spineless woman had demolished her life, and still had smiled at her every day while she suffered alone.

Her tumbling thoughts swung to Nick and what she might do to him when she did get him alone. She planned to punish him for a long time. He deserved it. How could he be so completely reckless and macho? She burst into a new round of tears.

She pressed back against the seat when the patrol car took off and sped toward the downtown precinct. As much as she disliked being a prisoner in a patrol car, it seemed the ride ended way too soon. It took

only a few minutes to deliver her to the jail. Getting out of the car held no glamour either. No photographers and no good-looking attorneys wanting to save her butt.

Everything took on an ethereal look after being escorted inside the station. Every sound echoed in the marble hallways and the smell of onions nauseatingly strong. The source of the noxious odor oozed from a wastebasket by the elevator door. A sign on the wall said it was the service elevator and posters everywhere reminding officers to check their prisoners for weapons. She underwent a thorough but non-invasive search by a five-foot-three inch female officer and finally, the cuffs came off. Damn. She couldn't believe they were getting on the felon's elevator.

She didn't argue with the officer that took her to the booking desk. She gave a nice mature officer her name, address and drivers license information. As if they had no more use for her, she was shown to a small interrogation room. Shelby didn't quibble over the starkness of the place or the hard chair. She faced the windows to keep an eye on the activity in the hallway and rubbed her wrists. Strange how the cuffs hadn't hurt. She had expected torture.

The end must be near, she thought, her hopes rising when a detective brought her a cup of hot black coffee.

He set it on the table without one word and left. She'd had enough. She couldn't bear not knowing what had happened to Nick.

The officer came back and flipped open a notepad and shattered the silence with an abrupt question.

"Ms. Rand. Do you know Mark Allworth?"

"Yes. He's my secretary's fiancé."

"Has she mentioned him being in financial trouble?"

"Not really."

"Did you know he planned to extort extorting money from your boyfriend ... er, Gualdoni?"

"No, or I mean yes. After Kate told me what might happen tonight, I knew and that's why I followed him. I became afraid he would be killed." She swiped at the tears sliding down her cheeks.

The officer grinned over the top of his notepad. "Okay. Allworth never threatened you? Could he be the one trashing your car?"

She shook her head. "I can't be sure. I didn't see the person doing it. How did you know about that?"

"Gualdoni complained loud and clear on the subject." He put the pen and pad in his coat pocket. "Okay. We have everything we need."

"But, how did you know about the extortion?" Shelby clung to the edge of her chair.

"We didn't. We had a net out for Allworth's money lenders and he just got caught in the bust." He went out of the room, leaving her alone.

The door had a narrow window and she peeked out, hearing the muffled laughter of a couple uniformed officers that passed by her room. She jumped back in fright when a stern-faced detective opened the door, crooking a finger at her.

"We're cutting you loose." He held the door for her. "You got a ride home?"

She didn't know how to answer for sure, but she had to get to Nick. "I want to know where Nick Gualdoni is."

The detective laughed. "Gualdoni?"

"Yes. What have they done to him?"

"Not a thing. They're through with him. I think he's already left along with that wiseass attorney of his."

## Chapter 16

Memories of Nick's wisecracking insults and downright mean as dirt comments pounded against her heart. What made her so anxious to be with a guy that had no trust in her but didn't mind having casual sex with her, even going so far as to say he wanted a couple of kids with her?

And here she stood being kicked loose from a police station all because of him. And he had left her there? Fury, hot and deep coursed through her blood. Shelby stomped toward the booking desk and asked to use the phone.

Her temperature hit explosive levels while she punched in numbers on the phone. Why did it take so long for the dispatcher at the cab company to answer? Shrugging her coat off and letting it fall to the floor, Shelby jerked her head around to look at the person yelling her name from the far end of the hall.

"Shel."

Nick hurried toward her, his dazzling smile a mile wide and waving at her like an eager kid. He hadn't deserted her after all, but it made no difference. She turned her back on him.

"Shel."

She scrunched her shoulders to avoid looking at him and pressed the earpiece closer. Damn him. She didn't want to see or hear him. He could go to hell.

"Shelby."

She could hear his footsteps on the marble floor as he ran in her direction. She could barely grip the phone when he hugged her waist and kissed her cheek.

"Honey, let's go home." He brushed at her windblown hair. "We have the rest of our lives to talk."

"Go to hell, Nick." She put the phone down and glared at him.

He hesitated, then laughed. "Okay, I know you're pissed about being brought in here, but it doesn't matter. Everything is okay now. We can go home and talk it all out."

They moved out to the center aisle and became part of the crowd, surrounded by cursing drunks and sloppy hookers. The insanity of it slapped Shelby in the face.

"Who do you think you are?"

"A fool, Shel. A damned fool."

She slapped at his hands when he touched her. "Stop it. I'm not going anywhere with a crazy person." She turned her face away to avoid his kiss.

"I have a lot of things to make up for, honey. I just know I love you more than life and can't make it without you."

"I'm not sure about that."

"I don't blame you for needing to think about it, but let's do it at home."

"I don't think you deserve me."

"What do you want? I'll kiss your bare ass in the middle of Main Street at high noon if that's what you want."

"Damn it, Nick! Think back a few months. I haven't forgotten you seemed ready to have me put away for stealing from you. You didn't give me a second chance. I'm the same woman and the same distrust hangs over us. I don't think you're ready for the kind of love I want from a man."

"You don't mean that."

"I've never been more serious."

"Aw, damn, Shel. Give me another chance?" He grimaced hard, his worried gaze searching her face. "Will you think about it before you completely freeze me out?"

"I'm going home." She gave his hand a scorching glance when he touched her arm. Grabbing her coat, she headed for the exit, flinging back over her shoulder. "Alone."

"Shel. I'm begging. Please don't do this to us."

"Please don't do this to me, Nick. I need a lot of space and time away from you to get myself straight."

Outside the building, she waited for a cab. When Savage approached her, she wanted to run away from all reminders of Nick. Savage smiled at her and inclined his head toward a limo parked at the curb.

He patted the roof of the long automobile and shrugged. "My spare wheels when I get into trouble. I know your car's still at the warehouse, so would you let me take you home?"

"You can take me to my car." She still worried about the man that had brought her to this humiliation. "Is Nick riding with you?" She sounded like an idiot. She didn't care. He was her life.

Savage opened the limo door for her "One of the dicks ... I mean detectives is giving him a lift to pick up his car."

Shelby sighed and let him help her into his limo. It was better this way. When he got in with her, she thought he and Nick were exactly alike. Both headstrong and hell-bent on getting their own way. The world couldn't handle two Nicks. She bit her knuckle and looked out the window while the big limo moved through the deserted city streets, her heart near bursting with loneliness and regret.

After they got back to the West Bottoms, she and Savage exchanged a few words before leaving. Shelby smiled at Nick's best friend and offered a kind of closure to the sordid mess. "I'm not holding a grudge over any of this. I love him."

He inhaled roughly and shook his head. "It's none of my business, but Nick hates himself a lot more than you ever could. He's a man in pain."

"I know the feeling well."



"The only thing I know for sure is he didn't want to think you were double dealing, Shel."

"The point is I would never have believed that of him. I love Nick so much I would take his place before a firing squad."

"I believe that." He touched her shoulder and grinned at her. "I have a feeling this isn't over." He scowled lightly when he opened the driver's side door to her car. The keys dangled from the ignition. "Ladies like you are hard to find."

She hugged his waist before getting into her car, locking the door like he signaled her to do. He followed her back to her apartment, then drove away.

\* \* \* \*

What had she done? Shelby stood on the terrace and breathed in the crisp night air. It wasn't an act of survival, rather one to stem the sobs that played tag in her heart. She knew she must be the craziest woman in the world, feeling such heartbreak over the guy that had used her for a doormat. She'd never forget being trussed up like a turkey and hauled off to jail.

She went back inside and stood in the center of the living room, out of ideas and out of Nick's arms. The urge to cry battered her heart, telling her to sob and scream. The pain became unbearable, her thirst parching her throat. She went to the kitchen and pulled a bottle of cola from the all but empty refrigerator.

The cola had gone flat. From now on, her life would be like that cola. Without her love, it would never sparkle again. Tossing the bottle into the wastebasket, she walked into her bedroom and sat on the edge of the mattress. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the closet door, she grimaced and removed her shoe and threw it at her reflection.

Christ, what a mess. Her hair once caught up in a dizzying swirl of corkscrew curls and frizzy strands that had pasted themselves to

her cheeks. The little bit of mascara left made nice big smudges under her eyes. "Lovely," she groaned. "Just lovely."

A glint coming from something on her dresser drew her attention and she got up to look at the gleaming item. Tears welled in her eyes in spite of her hard swipe at them. Nick's gold chain. He'd forgotten it after taking it off the last night when he'd stayed with her. He could be so careless with his things. She brought the cool gold to her lips. Her fingers shook as she put the chain over her head and settled it against her breasts.

She almost fainted with the power of the emotion that swept through her. Why did stand here, whining like a schoolgirl?

"Nothing risked, nothing gained." Whatever Nick may be, he would forever be the man in her life.

A surge of nervous excitement warmed her skin while she prepared to go visiting. She must be out of her mind slipping into silk tap pants and matching white bustier. Completing her ensemble of insanity, she strapped on three-inch heeled platforms. "Perfect."

A quick refreshing of makeup and she was ready to go. Getting a long black wool coat from the closet, she glanced out the window. "Great." A heavy snow had begun to fall. "Perfect." She had no time to curse the weather. She had a man to seduce into lifetime submission.

While she drove to Nick's place, she thought how ridiculous she probably would look to him. What she planned rivaled anything a man-crazy floozy ever did in a grade B movie. A touch of worry dimmed her fervor. What would she do if he drove her away? Biting her lip, she decided she wouldn't accept that. Nick simply had to want her.

When she drove away from her building, at this late hour no one she knew would shame her for being a pushover for a cold-hearted beast in wolf's clothing. What the hell? She had raised more than a few eyebrows and had survived. Her heart thumped with joy, a steady reminder that she would soon be holding her love in her arms.

By the time she parked in front of Nick's place, her confidence had eroded somewhat and it melted a bit more in the elevator. The doors opened onto his floor and she stepped out into the hallway. She belted the coat closer about herself, striding toward number 601. The tremble in her hand as she pressed the doorbell re-affirmed her fear he would refuse her.

What was he doing? He may not be home. She would not press that damned button again. In deep dejection, she turned to leave. Her heart leapt in her chest at the sound of the lock being turned to open the door.

\* \* \* \*

Nick swallowed a mouthful of Sangria, and then set the glass on the windowsill. What a fool, losing the woman that had become the driving force of his existence.

He stared out at the falling snow. "Oh, that's really great," he muttered.

It had been snowing the first time he saw Shelby. Dressed in her spiky fur hat and long coat, she could have been mistaken for a Cossack princess.

He needed desperately to stop thinking about her. His nerves jangled and the rhythm of his heart beat out of whack. Riddled with anxiety and guilt, he cursed himself. "She had every right to walk out on you, man."

He'd been enslaved to her from the first moment, and the Gods of fortune had touched him, letting Shelby love him.

He drummed his fingers on the windowpane and followed the antics of a young couple running up the street, throwing snowballs at each other. He smiled with derisive humor. "Ah, sweet uncomplicated love. How soon the roof caves in." He laughed at his lovesick meanderings, taking a final look at the peaceful white scene on the street below.

On the way to his bedroom, he paused to pick up his favorite photo of Shelby. The imp in her sparkled through her eyes and that hair never ceased to wilt all his resistance to anything she wanted. He touched his fingertip to her smiling lips and exhaled tiredly. “Put it down, fool. You had your chance.”

In his bedroom, he lay on the bed, turning onto his back to stare at the ceiling. He wondered if Shelby slept. Savage had called to assure him she had gotten home safe and his comments had been slightly encouraging. She had been pretty pissed but had thought about him. Whatever it took, he had to win her back and he damned well wouldn't settle for anything less. He loved her and she loved him. Case closed. His loud moan of despair bounced around the darkened room.

When the doorbell rang, he sat up, debating if he would answer the damned thing. It had to be the other tenant on the floor, filled with good cheer again from the nearest bar. Damn. There it went again. He got out of bed and followed the ugly sound into the living room.

He didn't bother grabbing a shirt. The guy ringing the bell wouldn't notice if he opened the door stark naked or dressed in a buffalo robe. Prepared to bark at the late night caller, Nick unlocked the door and swung it open.

His heart exploded like a Roman candle and he couldn't speak. How could he when his emotions spun out of orbit and bounced off the moon? Heaven had come to him, pure temptation and looking at him with love and desire. His woman wanted him. When he did find his tongue, the words rang insignificantly and completely incoherent in his ears.

“Shel.” He couldn't believe he'd been given another chance. “Come in, baby. Why didn't you use your key?”

\* \* \* \*

He looked nervous and gazed at her with such sweet tenderness; Shelby knew her heart had morphed into a lacy love letter, bursting with indescribable love for him.

When he held his hands out to her, she moved back one step and smiled at him. "I wasn't sure you'd want me back."

Like a flame out of control, he reached out to pull her into his strong embrace. He cupped her face in his hands to look into her eyes. "That's like saying I don't need to breathe."

Joy flooded her heart while she hugged him with possessive strength. She smiled through a mist of tears and touched her belt. "In that case, I'll come in."

Pulling her into his entryway, Nick shut the door, and wrapped her in a hard embrace. "Come with me, beautiful." He lifted her up to press against his chest and smiled into her eyes. "I'm so glad you dropped by."

She rubbed her nose against his and laughed with a release of soft pleasure. "I'm so happy you want me here, Nick." Happy didn't come close to describing the thrill of delight racing in her body. He held her, touched her and showered her with gentle devotion in his gaze and caress.

Letting her down to stand before him, Nick tilted his head and inhaled roughly. "I'll take your coat."

She shivered with expectancy. "Please do."

Taking her time, she released the knot in her belt and opened her coat wide. The abrupt loss of warmth sent her nipples into rigid peaks. Had he staggered back a step? Had he gulped for extra air? Didn't matter, not when he appeared positively awestruck.

His gaze traveled over her with dark, unspoken promise. "Well, I'll be damned. Angels do make house calls."

"I'm here to make your fondest wish come true." The coat dropped to the floor and she stepped into his arms, knowing she would never be cold again.

He tipped her face up to close his mouth down hard on hers, his kiss almost one of hot desperation. Under his seeking mouth, her lips softened, softly expressing what she felt for him. His tongue tasted of sweet wine and the scent intoxicated her. Breaking the kiss, his gaze flared with desire and passion spun through his words.

"My wish has been granted." His strong arms surrounded her like a force field, shielding her from everything hurtful. The words he spoke were firm, emotion filled, ending her doubt and fear.

"Before I take another breath, I have to tell you that I know what a fool I am. I lost my mind for a while." His mood remained somber when he met her steady gaze. "I'm not fit to crawl behind you, baby. I don't mind begging. I love you and I'm asking for one more chance. Let me try again, Shel?"

Removing his hand from her breast, she shook her head at him. "Not until we get some ground rules for this game set in concrete."

Warm expectation glowed in his eyes. "Lay them out on the table, beautiful."

"I have to know you're sure of me, that you know I love you beyond everything else."

His voice held steady and resonant with conviction. "I love you beyond everything else and past forever. I've never been surer of anything or anyone as I am your love for me. "

"No more guns."

"Not even a cork gun."

"No more handling things on your own."

"I swear." He groaned and released the top hook of her bustier. "Shel, I know you love torturing me, but this is inhumane."

She allowed his fingertips to rest on her breasts. "I think you have been a good boy and can be trusted from now on."

He caught her in a hard embrace and kissed the mounds of sweet warm flesh peeking over the lacy top of her fine undergarment. "Now, I have to know."

"Anything, my darling."

He tilted his head to one side and looked at her breasts with a hungry glint in his eyes. “Do they really taste like Kailua and orchids?”

“Even better, so I’ve been told.”

“I’m jealous of the lucky bastard who told you that.”

Her lips hovered close to his, and her voice wavered a bit. “Don’t be, darling. He is long gone.”

He kissed her roughly and murmured against her mouth. “I don’t want you thinking about him anymore. I’m taking his place. Permanently.”

She laughed and caught his fingers in hers, letting him lead her into the bedroom. She loved his method of flinging pillows far and wide to clear a space for her. He scooped her up to place her on the wine colored velvet and followed her down to the plush comfort.

She hugged his waist and held him tightly when he lay down with her. For a long time, they simply held one another, kissing softly, drawing pleasure from the touch of a hand, a soft caress.

Shelby scooted flush against him and put her arm around his neck, whispering her fondest wish to him.

“Make me the happiest woman in the world, you tiger you.” Her fingers plucked at the string tie in the waist of his lounge pants. “This angel wants her bad man.”

**THE END**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

I have always loved books, reading a passion early in my life. I read everything the famous and not so famous authors wrote. I was a die hard historical romance only fan until I found contemporary to be just as satisfying to read. I began the rocky journey to publication blind to all the rules and terribly afraid of rejection. With the help of patient critique partners and surviving more than a few disappointments, my first full-length novel was accepted for publication.

I live in the Mid-West, and enjoy being near my two adult children and my wonderful wildflower garden. I will never stop being delighted by the notes sent by a reader commenting on my work. Hearing from readers is important to me. I want to write stories that stay with you for a long while. I do it all for you





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