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# *Games People Play*

**Raven Knight**

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*By*

*Raven Knight*

# *Dedication:*

*To my wonderful critique partner, Julie  
Skerven*

*I could not be a writer without you, thank  
you!*



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## Prologue

Cori Mallory pressed her foot hard against the accelerator as she blinked away the film of water covering her eyes. One moment Joe had been hard inside of her on the office rug, convulsing on top of her, proclaiming his love and desire for her. The next moment, Cori had learned just how much of a fool she'd been for the past three years.

Not until he started dressing did he turn away from her, speaking words that she didn't want to accept. "I'm married...sorry, I lied...private investigator...Jenna, my wife...children...Have to fire you, or she'll ruin me...love you, had to have you one last time...we've had problems...please, forgive me, Cori. I can't let you go. I need to be inside of you again..."

Sometime during his monologue, Cori had thrown on her above-the-knee navy skirt and white ribbed crewneck. Her body felt as if shot full of Novocain as she picked up her earth sandals and, in bare feet, headed towards the door.

Joe had called after her, his voice breaking. "I'll contact a friend and get you a job in another factory. I'd never leave you unemployed, and maybe—when things settle down with Jenna—I need to fuck you again."

She'd swallowed back her tears. "I don't want another factory job, and I never want to see you again." She barely remembered slamming out of the building as others stared after her.

Now she pulled her gold Ford Tempo into the parking lot of her favorite pub. Her cousin Adrienne was working today and she needed to talk to her. More than a sympathetic ear, she needed a drink. Maybe several.

## Chapter One

Flannigan's Bar and Pub hopped with Happy Hour activity. Cori pushed her way through the cramped bodies and found her way to the bar; almost weeping with relief as she sat on an empty stool. Sanctuary. She spotted Adrienne right away and felt a little bit better.

Tall, dark chocolate-skinned and plump but curvaceous in just the right places, Adrienne's long black hair hung to mid-waist and her lively dark eyes always sparkled. Although cousins, Adrienne and Cori didn't resemble each other; Cori was tall and slim with shoulder-length, thick golden-highlighted dark hair, almost black eyes, and large breasts that always got her into trouble. She'd cursed them often.

Cori watched as Adrienne leaned on the counter and bantered with a couple of older men in business suits. She always seemed in flirt mode. Of course, she derived large tips from making over-the-hill men feel attractive, and felt no shame using her charms or her body to elicit extra money.

Cori coughed to get her attention and Adrienne lifted her head. Immediately, she broke into a huge grin. She turned back to the men, made excuses, and then rushed over to where Cori was sitting. "What are you doing



here?" she asked in an upbeat voice. "Joe let you leave early? Doesn't sound like Mr. Tyrant. It's only four o'clock. Hey, you want a drink on the house?"

Cori suddenly felt weary, beyond weary, and her entire body sagged. "Thanks. I'll take a very strong drink."

"Straight?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"Anything strong, sistah."

Adrienne left and returned, setting a glass before her. Cori gulped the amber liquid down almost in one swig. It tasted strong and bitter, burning her throat, but she didn't care. Her head reeled...she didn't drink often. The tipsy feeling had already begun, and she wasn't finished yet. Adrienne's smile faded. She leaned an elbow on the counter in front of her.

"What's wrong, hon?"

Cori almost broke into fresh tears as she told her; her voice bitter as the words tumbled out, one on top of the other.

Adrienne's lips thinned. "Bastard! I told you I didn't like him."

Cori used all her strength to stay under control. "Congratulations on being right."

“Aw, I didn’t mean to sound self-righteous.” She patted Cori’s hand. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Cori felt her lips turning slightly upwards. Adrienne sometimes seemed like the caring, strong, mother that she’d never had. Then she thought of Jarrod and once more, her smile faded away, “You can find me a job. Just kidding.” She groaned and shook her head. “Truthfully, the job is a bigger problem than finding out Joe is a complete liar and loser. The landlord is already threatening to evict me because I’m behind a month’s rent. Not like jobs are abundant these days.”

Adrienne nodded. “Yeah. I know what you mean. So much competition.” She settled her gaze on Cori, who felt her gut clenching.

“I’ve only worked in a factory, Adrienne. Dumb me, but I believed Joe the Jerk’s promise that he’d promote me to Supervisor, and it wasn’t because I was sleeping with him either. He always put me in charge. I deserved that promotion.”

“I know.”

“I’m going to try for a better job though. Course that’s easier said than done these days.”

Adrienne patted her hand. “Honey, you can get a job tomorrow, or tonight. You have assets other women only dream about. Use them if you must.” She winked. “Do you think I got this job because of my winning personality?” She dropped her voice. “Matt was rock hard when he hired me. Men are powerless to

their sexual urges. As long as I satisfy Matt, my job status is secure. You may have to do the same, Cuz. If your boss is hot, it can even be fun.”

Cori knew her cousin well and her eyes hit the ceiling. “I slept with a boss and look how that turned out. I’m not about to fuck a man to get a job.” She shook her head. “No way is any man using me again. Not happening.”

Adrienne’s sharp eyes set on hers. “It’s the fastest and best way to get hired in a tight job market, girl.” She leaned forward, elbow on the counter again. “You’d be doing the using, not the other way around.”

“I don’t want to use anyone. Plus, Joe...it turned out so wrong. I loved him, and I stupidly thought he loved me back, that we had a future.” A lump clogged her throat.

Adrienne kept her palm over Cori’s hand. “You got emotionally involved. That did you in. It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there. Do what you have to do to feed and house your little brother, even if you have to use some man to get a job.”

Cori shut her eyes, unable to respond.

A customer called out to Adrienne. “I’ll be back in a few,” Adrienne said with a wink. “It’ll work out. You’ll see.” She brushed her hand over her large tits hidden by a green sweater and winked at her. “Use what you have, Cori.”

Cori sipped her drink, her hand still trembling. Adrienne would never be a Woman’s Libber. Well, she couldn’t do the things that Adrienne could but she

still had to find a job, pronto. She needed to give her brother and herself a secure life. Instead of renting an apartment in a high crime area of Chicago, she wanted to own a house in a safe neighborhood, instead of barely surviving paycheck to paycheck. She wanted some room to breathe. Taking another sip from her glass, she thought about Joe's betrayal and wanted to fling her drink across the room. A shadow fell over her and a strange awareness assailed her, as if a predator had entered her tent during a campout. She took another drink, bracing herself for trouble.

"What's wrong?" A pleasant male voice spoke to her. "You look like a Pit Bull when he's ready to strike."

Cori set her glass down hard. It almost spilled as she looked up at the man standing over her. Shit, he was tall! Tall enough to make her feel small and weak, and she didn't like the way his aqua eyes penetrated right through her. She recognized that predatory stare and had no use for it today. Maybe never again.

"A Pit Bull bares his teeth, the way you just did, when he senses danger." He sounded good-natured and, if Joe hadn't just destroyed her world, she may have tolerated him. After all, she had to admit she found him attractive in a very disturbing way.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I'd rather not tell you."

Yet she couldn't help appraising him. He was undeniably hot and sexy. Dark and delicious, she thought, younger than Joe, maybe late twenties or early thirties. He had well-defined bones in a strong face and a swarthy complexion. Thick, unruly deep chocolate hair curled around his ears. His alluring eyes of aqua-blue danced with animation. A classically chiseled nose and wide, sensual lips softened what may have been too-angular features. A thin scar that began behind his ear and ended mid-cheek made him more attractive, rather than less. Boyishness and sexuality radiated from his powerful, made-for-sports-and-sex frame. She bet women spoiled him in a sickening way. Probably stripped for him. Well, not her. Not now. Not after Joe.

"You look like a Nicole. Or a Julia. Am I close?"

She turned away, feeling uneasy under his hot stare. New tears threatened to spring to her eyes so she took a sip of her drink. She so wouldn't cry.

"You look as if you could use some cheering up."

He had a low but friendly voice, quite a contrast from Joe's loud New York accent.

"I don't need cheering up from you."

He sat on the stool beside her. Apparently, its former occupant had left. Even seated, this man seemed all-encompassing and powerful. His magnetism sucked her in.

“I’m told I’m easy to talk to.” He caressed her with his sensual voice. “Want to leave this noisy, smoky place and talk in my car?”

She spat her drink into her glass and laughed without mirth. “You probably don’t hear this much, but I’m not interested in you. I especially don’t want to sleep with you.” She felt hot fingers grabbing her chin, forcing her to face him. Her skin tingled as her eyes collided with his. Startled, she couldn’t move.

“I didn’t say anything about sleeping with me. You did. Is that a subconscious wish?”

Mischief gleamed in his eyes but she felt her insides swelling with anger. She wasn’t in the mood for this...for him.

“That’s the only thing men ever want,” she said, jerking her head away from him.

“Some.”

“Some?” She laughed.

All her life it seemed as if that’s all males wanted. That was the reason she’d barely dated anyone. She thought of Joe again and felt sick to her stomach. She’d believed him...she’d believed he actually loved her.

“Most men are out for one thing.”

“All right. Most.” He didn’t flinch.

“Go away. I’m not feeling warm and fuzzy about men right now.”

“I can tell.” He grinned, exposing an adorable dimple. “So somebody broke your heart?”

In a minute, she’d be sobbing. She wondered how it would feel to sob in his strong arms...no, no! He rested his elbow on the counter beside her and she noticed the powerful sinews and soft, dark hairs on his arms. He had a musky, earthy smell that appealed to her. His hand dangled off the counter. It looked three times the size of hers. She lowered her eyes and saw what looked like huge male assets. She lifted her gaze. Dangerous. He could be very dangerous, she bet.

“I can’t talk to you right now.”

She heard a click and looked up. He held a pen and business card in his hand.

“This is my phone number. Give me yours and I’ll call you in a few days when you feel better. Please?”

“No!”

She waved her hand and knocked his pen to the floor. His smile started to fade.

“I don’t want to know you,” she said.

“I’m really pretty nice.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you just get lost? Why did you come up to me in the first place, if you noticed my bad mood?”

She saw his eyes harden a little, but didn't care.

"I'm not sure. I watched you from my seat and saw your expression..." He shrugged. "I won't lie. I also find you very appealing. I'm a sap for caramel-skinned, dark eyed, erotic chicks....you're the whole package."

His gaze lowered a little, and then shot back up. He flashed a wicked but playful grin.

"No, really, you drew me to you, and I don't know why."

Cori knew why. Or thought she did. She'd seen him eyeing her breasts.

Joe flickered before her eyes. Memories rushed at her. Watching Joe sleeping peacefully, his arm thrown over her naked back. The flowers he'd presented her, as if she'd been royalty. His busy mouth that he'd used to evoke wild sensations from her most sensitive places. Without thinking, she slapped the man sitting beside her right across the cheek. A loud crack permeated the air.

All conversation stopped and Adrienne came running over to see what had happened. The man rose to his feet, his cheek an angry red. His gaze scanned the room and he faced the crowd.

"You can all go back to whatever you were doing before," he snapped.

Embarrassed heads turned away from them. Cori felt the stinging of her palm. She stared up at him, a wave of guilt washing over her. He hadn't done



anything to warrant that. As if reading her thoughts, he leaned his forearms on the counter, right before her.

She found his lips only inches from hers. Close up, he looked and smelled scrumptious, and she wanted to apologize, but he spoke first.

“I know I shouldn’t have stared at you that way. I’m not one to grovel, but I’d like to get to know you. I love feisty women, when they aren’t slapping me.” His grin lit up the room, sending shivers through her.

“Give me one, just one, chance...and, if you still can’t stand me, I’ll never bother you again.”

Jeez! He attracted her too much...was so irresistible and hot. In spite of hating men at the moment, he caused disturbing sensations in her belly and between her thighs. She had to get rid of him. What could she say that would be so insulting he’d have to leave?

“I’m sure other women find you attractive, but I don’t.”

The lie didn’t come easily, but she spoke with conviction. When he still didn’t budge, she spotted his scar, wondering where it came from, and feeling tenderly towards him because of it. She used it as a weapon.

“That scar ruins your face. Now will you go away so I don’t have to look at you?”

As soon as the words popped out, she wished she could stuff them back down her throat. He straightened up, his scar more pronounced than ever against a darkened countenance. Then, without any warning, he pulled her to her feet. His eyes glimmered with devilish anger. Before she could protest, he pulled her against him and kissed her with hard, urgent lips that shocked her. Heat waves flamed through her entire body, making her to want to kiss him back. When he stuck his tongue in between her teeth, she shuddered and reciprocated, her knees weakening. Must be the booze.

He pulled back, smirking.

“Yeah, I see I’m not your type.”

He spoke in a very soft voice but she heard him clearly. “Not everyone can look as perfect as you do. Sorry for breathing the same air as you, Princess. Oh, and sorry for the kiss...you seemed to hate it.”

His eyes moved towards a shocked looking Adrienne. When he had Adrienne’s attention, he slapped money on the counter.

“That should cover my drinks and a generous tip.”

Without another word, he turned and quickly angled his way out of sight, disappearing in the crowd. The room had stilled, and it took a minute before the murmur of soft voices started up again. Adrienne stared at Cori in shock.

“Cori, he was so hot! The way he kissed you, and the way you responded...not that I blame you.”

“The liquor, I guess.” Right? Suddenly she recalled her cruel words and sobered. “I have to apologize...”

Adrienne grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

“Let it go. I can see the front door from here and he left.”

Cori lowered herself back to the stool and groaned, covering her face with her hands.

“Adrienne, what’s wrong with me? That’s not the way I am.”

“No, it’s not! Plus he’s a man who could make you forget Joe or anybody...”

“No.” Cori dropped her hands to the counter. “No, Adrienne. I don’t need anyone to help me forget Joe. I need somebody to give me a job. I’m finished with men.” Their eyes locked in a gaze.

Adrienne’s eyes softened. “I know how you feel but if that man comes here again, should I tell him who you are and...”

“No, don’t.” She sighed. “Look, I have to leave and talk to Jarrod.” She slid off her stool and smoothed down her skirt.

“I don’t want any more men coming up to me. I’m an ogre today.”

“Not really,” Adrienne said adding a sympathetic smile. “You’re just not yourself right now.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

“I know.”

“But I did.”

“He’s young, arrogant, and hunkier than any one man deserves. He’ll survive your insult and probably be hard inside some other woman later on.” Adrienne flashed an encouraging smile. “At any rate, you can’t do anything about it now.”



For some reason, Cori bristled at the thought of him with another woman. Feeling territorial after one kiss wasn’t like her. She turned and strode away. When Cori opened the door to the bar and stepped into the blinding sunlight, she felt an awareness behind her and turned. He stood with his back pressed against the building, one foot lifted against the bricks and a cell phone at his ear. Staring at the ground, he didn’t see her.

She hesitated, watching as his thick, dark brown hair blew across his forehead in the cool breeze. His dimple flashed as he talked on the phone. Her heart raced. He hung up, stuck his cell in his back pocket, and then spotted her.

She froze. His tall, well-built frame both intimidated and excited her. She watched as he headed towards the parking lot, not glancing back. He had nice, rounded buns and an easy, confident, sexy stride. Suddenly, she ran after him, not sure why. “Hey!” She called out to him, panting as she chased him.

He didn't break stride, even when she almost caught up with him. She didn't reach him completely until he stood at his car, a sharp, yellow mustang. He swung open the door.

"I know I acted like a bitch," she said, still panting. He finally glanced at her, his eyes impassive. The clock ticked. Would he never speak to her?

She tried again. "I just...well, I wanted you to know I..." If he would stop piercing her with those aqua eyes, maybe she could collect her wits and think of something bright to say.

He let go of the door and grabbed her forearm, which shocked her. At the same time, it electrified her. She needed to say something...but what? Confide about Joe to this stranger?

Joe! She swelled with anger, remembering once more how he'd hurt her. If the man wanted her and she wanted him, then why not? Driving a man wild with desire might make her feel whole again. She had no ties anymore. This male slice of heaven was hotter than hell itself. If she wanted to use him, like Joe had used her, as most men used all women, why not? She'd pay him back for her rudeness and enjoy herself at the same time. He certainly assaulted her senses! She felt herself burning where he touched her.

His large, rough hands encircled her entire arm and he quirked an eyebrow. She gave him a nod and, without expression, he pulled her into the car. She found

herself on his hard lap, her arms around his neck. He felt terrific. Her nipples hardened even though he hadn't touched them yet.

"Back seat," he mumbled into her ear, sending prickles down her spine. "The gears will kind of get in the way up here."

He'd hypnotized her. "Back seat? How?"

He let out a slightly exasperated sigh, then grabbed her bottom, which flamed her from the top of her skull to her toenails...his large, hot hands then slipped under her skirt to touch her thong and bare cheeks. He pushed her up and over the seat as if she were a feather. "Climb over," he said. She toppled to her back on the rear seat. He followed right away, landing on top of her, and then set his hot mouth against her lips before she had a chance to think about the wisdom of it.

By the time she did have a chance to think about it, she didn't care. Nobody, nobody, nobody had ever kissed her like this. Something about the way he pressed his lips...light, hard, then feathery on the side of her face, then firm against her mouth again, drove her crazy with desire. His tongue was magic. He certainly knew how to sweep the inside of her mouth and make her sizzle. He tasted delicious, like male and mints and a touch of whiskey. She could get drunk on him...

He rolled slightly to his side and his hand roved down her shirt from the neckline. A thrill shot through her. She could feel his cock bulging against the top

of her thigh. Dare she? He felt huge, far larger than Joe, the only comparison she had. Why did she want to touch it? She desperately wanted, no needed to touch it. She slid one hand under his body, which pressed down on her, and rubbed the large erection that pulsed behind his zipper. "I didn't know it could be so big," she mumbled as he nuzzled her throat with his lips and teeth.

He laughed against her flesh. "I'm well-endowed."

"So am I." She was starting to relax.

His fingers tweaked her nipple and then caressed her breast.

"Yes, you are." She wanted to arch, but his body held her down, controlling her movements. She moaned and gasped. Hadn't she been upset about something? What was it? She didn't care. All she cared about right then was this man and his hold over her body...yet she had to remember...she was the one using him. Even if he thought otherwise.

She felt herself slowly losing control. He slid his hands out of her top and down towards her most intimate spot. Yes, she screamed inside. No way would she say it aloud, and let him know his hands controlled her...

Her body screamed for his touch. Her nipples stood on edge. Her clit stiffened below, and she'd welcome his cock inside of her, once he finished his delicious foreplay. Hell, she was on the pill. What did it matter?

She chuckled with pleasure as his fingers rubbed between her thighs. Then she bit her lip. If not, she'd have screamed. He wiggled her clit and her body tightened on the verge of orgasm. Just a little more, she thought to herself, clinging to him. If it felt that good on top of her skirt, why the hell didn't he undress her? Should she take the initiative? That would keep her in charge of things...

He sat up, shoving her legs out of the way. She lay there for a moment, stunned, staring at him, as he calmly climbed over to the front seat.

"What are you doing?" She sat up and pushed her hair off her face, feeling confused. Her heated body didn't like his withdrawal.

"Stopping, and so are you," he spoke matter-of-factly.

She swallowed hard.

"Get out," he said, his voice calm. "Now."

Her heart pounded. So he'd been trying to get back at her. That's all this seduction meant to him. It had worked. In the space of a kiss, he'd slipped past all her defenses, which only infuriated her again. Men!

She tossed her hair and climbed over the seat, getting out on the door opposite his. Smarting from this latest affront, she stood there, hoping her stare looked smoldering.

"And here I felt bad and believed you were nice!"

"I am, to nice people." His bland mask belied any feelings.



“You really aren’t all that you think you are!” She threw the words at him, even as her body still hummed from their contact.

“You don’t know what I think I am.”

“You obviously think you’re hot stuff. I’m here to tell you, I faked it. I thought I’d been mean to you, so I wanted you to think I found you appealing. I don’t.” What a big lie. If Joe hadn’t just revealed his appalling deception to her, she knew she could have controlled her mouth better. However, Joe had just told her his overwhelming story, and she couldn’t control her mouth. Not today. “You aren’t attractive at all.”

He didn’t say anything and she couldn’t read his expression. Suddenly, the entire day overwhelmed her. She still hadn’t gone home to Jarrod. She’d have to tell her brother that she’d lost her job, and Jarrod would worry, with good reason.

“I...” She stopped. What did she want to say? She needed to leave. Tears in her eyes, she turned and ran from him, heading towards the opposite end of the parking lot. Thank God she’d never see that man again!

She needed to keep away from all men from now on. When she glanced over her shoulder, still running, she saw him staring at her with his inscrutable mask. To think she would have welcomed him inside of her! She shuddered as she finished her jog to the car.

As quickly as she could, she slid behind the wheel and screeched out of the parking lot, the tears finally spilling all over her face. Her entire world had fallen apart in just a few short hours, and now she and Jarrod would have to bear the burden of their uncertain future.

Damn Joe! Damn every male on the face of the Earth, except for her brother. She'd never lose her heart to one again.

Ever.

## Chapter Two

A week later in the confines of her musty smelling, compact, two-bedroom apartment, Cori sat at the kitchen table pouring over employment ads. Jarrod looked at the screen of a computer that must have been a hundred years old.

“Here’s a job that sounds good Sis,” he said and scribbled on a piece of paper. Cori, head throbbing and eyes burning, looked over at her thirteen-year-old brother. Some of her tension eased. He was growing so tall and handsome, and looked a lot like a male version of her.

“What kind of job?”

Jarrod glanced over at her, and then back at the screen. “Office Manager for Building Company. Will Train. Must be a self-starter and able to multi-task. Growth potential. Good pay.”

She frowned. “I suppose they want my resume mailed to some post office box or e-mail address. Impressive, with my factory experience.”

Jarrod shook his head. “No. This is the only ad that has a phone number. You can call.” He pushed himself to his feet and handed her his penned copy of the ad.

Cori glanced at it, feeling a wave of pessimism. If she didn’t get a job soon, she’d have to begin using Adrienne’s methods...no. She couldn’t.

“Thanks, hon. This is the kind of job I want, one with a future.” She could feel Jarrod staring at her so she raised her eyes. “Yes?”

“Are we going to get evicted?”

Cori smiled, not revealing the fear underneath. “I’ll always make sure you have a place to live, Jarrod.”

“Not foster care!”

She hoped not. Rising, she hugged him. He almost stood as tall as she did. “No.”

“Can we ever move into a neighborhood where the kids aren’t so mean?”

If only!

As she entered her closet-sized bedroom with the hideous orange walls, a warm breeze soothed her cheeks. The window had been shoved open to let in some air. She headed towards the corner of the tiny room and looked in her stuffy closet. At first, she reached for a sensible navy suit, but suddenly halted with her hand on the hanger.

Adrienne’s words played in her head. “You do what you have to do to get hired.”

Jarrod’s words joined Adrienne’s. “No foster care?”

Cori’s heart raced as she reached for another outfit then held it in front of her. The white camisole fit tightly, hugging her body like a second skin. Men

whistled at her when she wore it, but she'd never worn it to work, let alone a job interview.

A hot pink, waist length jacket, and short matching skirt would show off her legs. Joe had always made a big deal out of her legs, calling them 'perfect'. She felt slightly dizzy as she set the clothing on her unmade bed, and then got down on her knees to pick out shoes. She passed over a few pairs of sensible low heels and chose a pair of white high heels. She hated walking in them and would most likely twist an ankle. But again, Joe thought she looked sexy in them. Since she'd had no male love interests before Joe, she only had his opinion as a reference.

When she finished laying out her wardrobe, she sat on the middle of her sagging mattress and covered her face with her hands. "Damn you, Joe!" Her husky words erupted from her throat in a soft vent. No, she couldn't bend her head in despair. She needed a job worthy of her intelligence. Only her youth, insecurity, and love for Joe had kept her at the factory for four years. Not to mention that Joe had kept promising to promote her. "Any day, babe," he'd say when she'd threatened to quit.

Cori shook her head. Never again would a man make a fool of her.

## Chapter Three

The next morning, Cori called the building company and a matronly sounding lady gave her an appointment at 4:30. The company was located in Hoffman Estates, an hour away. She didn't like the idea of a long commute, but hell, she needed the job. In the meantime, she visited a few job placement agencies, none offering her much hope of quick placements.

As Cori drove to Fletcher Builders, she recalled what the last interviewer had told her. "You don't have a lot of experience or even any college. With the job market so tight, employers want experience and education."

A model home held the offices of Fletcher Builders. Cori parked in the lot then strode towards the clean, tan brick house that looked like one she'd love to own. An overhead bell jingled as she opened the door and stepped inside. The cool assault of air conditioning dried her sweat. As she looked around at the fresh, well-decorated, contemporary home, she felt a pang that Jarrod couldn't live in a place like this. The sound of footsteps grabbed her attention and she set her gaze on a short, plump woman with a matronly hairdo and dress. Her weathered face looked kind and reassuring, and Cori drank it up.

"You're Cori?" The woman's soft, gravelly voice soothed her.

Cori nodded and offered a smile.

“I’m Jackie Stapleton. Follow me.”

As they walked through the house, Cori tried to shake off the twisting in her gut. The older woman brought her into a study, a makeshift office. Two metal desks, file cabinets, and state-of-the-art business equipment filled the room. A few men wearing hardhats, flannel shirts, jeans and work boots mulled around a coffee machine. One of them caught her eye and winked at her. She turned away, shuddering.

“Mr. Fletcher will be here in a moment,” Jackie Stapleton said with a reassuring smile. She walked to one of the desks and started doing paperwork.

Cori’s gaze fell on a wooden hardback chair against a paneled wall. She couldn’t sit down. Her nerves wouldn’t allow it. Clasp ing her resume to her chest, she fantasized that a kindly older man interviewed her and hired her, believing in her skills. She hadn’t needed to bare her assets; he just trusted her to do the job.

A side door opened and a gust of warm, humid air rushed through the room, tossing her hair. Cori glanced over at the newcomer, tall and imposing, wearing a hardhat and similar clothing to the other crew members, a blue and white flannel shirt thrown carelessly over a powder blue tee and old jeans. She looked away and weathered another wave of nerves. Where was the interviewer? She dropped her gaze to the ground, tensing her muscles, and waited.

“Cori Mallory?”

She knew that voice. Oh, heavens, did she know that voice. It couldn't be. Cori lifted her head and gasped at the same time that he flinched.

For a moment, they just stared at one another. Her heart had leapt to her throat and after the initial shock, a hint of amusement flickered across his face.

Cori sucked in some air. *This is a cruel joke. I'm seeing things. The pressure is getting to me.*

The man removed his hat and tossed it to the desk behind him. She could view him clearly, and with the hat gone, she recognized him well and with dread. The hat had flattened his chocolate waves; otherwise, he looked the same as he had at the pub. His eyes, the color of water in an aquarium, drank her up without masking his ogling. She felt her face heating and wanted to run, but couldn't move. Lord, he had the shoulders, chest, and tapered waist of a Greek God statue and his legs looked strong and muscled behind worn jeans. The bulge behind his zipper could probably fill any woman with...she blinked and lifted her gaze.

“You...you work here?” She thought the voice came from her.

His hot eyes bore into her, taking in all of her before finding her stare. “I own the business.”

Cori couldn't catch her breath. “I...but you're dressed like the crew...”

He nodded. “I was out in the field with them.”



As they locked gazes, Cori felt an odd sizzle leaping from him to her.

His closed lips turned upwards. “Well, well,” he said, his voice low so that nobody else could hear him. “I finally know your name, after all.” A mischievous glint twinkled in his eyes, while his smile told her he enjoyed this turnabout.

She was screwed.

Cori held back the urge to bolt because she still needed the job. Even now, she’d try to get hired. She thought of her sexy clothing. “So you’re Mr. Fletcher then.” She changed tack and tried to sound respectful, even a little flirtatious.

“Obviously. Adam Fletcher.”

He didn’t appear or sound friendly. Cori couldn’t believe, after her vow to not be a fool for a man again, she’d fallen right into a fool’s role once more. No! She steeled herself. She needed the job and refused to let him humiliate her. What would Adrienne do, she thought.

“That your resume in your hand?” He held his out, his face suddenly all business.

Cori nodded and gave it to him, leery of his intent.

“I’d prefer to conduct this interview in private. Let’s go into the kitchen. Follow me.”

Only the thought of Jarrod's welfare moved her legs. She found herself following him to a cheerful kitchen. She didn't notice too much detail. Her foggy mind wouldn't allow it.

He didn't glance at her as he pulled out a brown oak chair and lowered himself onto it. She did the same right across from him and tried to sit tall.

"I guess you'll talk to me today, Princess," he said, without lifting his gaze from her resume. She felt her heart starting to pound. "Bet you won't even insult me."

She had to do something to turn things around. "I'm sorry I was rude at the pub," she said, as she slowly slid out of her jacket to draw his eyes to her chest. His gaze lifted when she spoke, they focused on her breasts, but he wore no expression. She brushed the material covering them and, thinking of how Adrienne did it, and ran her tongue over her lips. He'd wanted her before. Well, if he hired her, he could have her. Batting her lashes at him, she tried her best. "I'd love to show you how sorry I am." She'd ripped that off from Adrienne.

He laughed. "Yes, I suspect you're very sorry now." His gaze fell to her breasts again, while her temper started to rise. "It's cool in here, Ms. Mallory. You may want to put your jacket back on. You won't get hired for this job that way."

Cori's mouth dried. He'd rejected her offer, and she bet he'd loved doing it. Although she didn't blame him for his anger, she rose to a stand. "Is this interview

even worth my staying?” She felt her muscles tighten and watched his impassive face. The more she looked at him, the better he appeared. He’d said it was cool in the room, he was wrong. She felt heat rushing through her body.

Adam Fletcher glanced at her resume one more time. “I need an Office Manager very badly. I can’t discount anybody. Jackie will be retiring soon and the right person hasn’t applied for the job yet.”

And she couldn’t afford to leave. She stared at him as he, in turn, shook his head.

“Your only employment experience is factory work?”

Sinking back to her chair, she lowered her head. “I’m really smart...I catch on fast. There’s a reason I took the first job offered me.” Then she told him an abbreviated version of what had happened. He looked bored, but at least he let her speak. “I stayed with the job for four years because I was promised a promotion, but it never happened,” she finally finished. She dared to peek up.

His elbow rested on the table, his chin in his palm. “You were let go?”

Her face heated. “Yes.” She wanted to lie, but didn’t lie well. On top of that, if he called Joe, he’d find out she’d been fired, although Joe would never tell him the entire story

“Why?” He sat back, tilting the chair to its hind legs. His impressive arms folded across his chest.

Now what? She could feel his hostility and the job probably would never be hers.

“I...after I worked there a few months, the boss, Joe Corelli, approached me in a romantic way and we started...” her throat worked hard.

“You slept with him,” he said smoothly, “like you’d sleep with me to get hired. Interesting.”

“No!” Her eyes shot daggers at him. “I didn’t sleep with him to get hired! This happened after I worked with him for a while, and I didn’t know he was married...” She stopped, mortified, seeing his shock and then hearing his quiet laughter.

“I get the picture,” he said. “So you’ve only worked in a factory, stayed even though the promotion you were promised didn’t happen, and had an affair with your married boss. Tell me, Ms. Mallory, why the hell would I want to hire you?” He let the front legs of his chair fall to the tile, a shit-eating grin showing how much he enjoyed his revenge.

“I made some foolish mistakes.” She lifted her chin. “Taking the factory job wasn’t a mistake though. The courts would have put my brother into foster care if I didn’t have a job, and I was only eighteen. I had to take what I could. Social Services still checks up on me to see if I’m taking good care of Jarrod.”

“Do they?” He angled his head and caught her gaze. His flashing eyes inspected her, seeming to bore into her soul. “Look, this isn’t an easy job. It’s very different from the factory. You’d be making sales pitches to prospective homebuyers, figuring out mortgages, and you can’t tell difficult customers to get lost. Bad for business.”

Cori swallowed the words she wished to fling at him. “I know how to treat customers, and I believe I can sell. You can’t judge me by that one incident.” Her fingers dug into her palm.

“No? Why not?” He pulled a pencil out of the pocket of his flannel shirt and tapped it on the table.

As he stared at her, she squirmed in her chair. “Why not? That was personal, not business.”

He nodded. “True. So you’re at least nice to customers? That’s encouraging.”

She felt her composure slipping as anger swelled inside of her.

“I find this interesting,” he said, leaning forward, resting his forearms on the table. Pointing his pencil at her he said, “You told me you didn’t want to touch me when I met you at the bar. For the record, that wasn’t why I approached you. Later, you seemed to want to make love with me, but then said you faked any enjoyment.” He tossed the pencil to the tabletop. “You’d sleep with me to get the

job, although you don't find me a bit appealing." He quirked his eyebrow. "You must really want this job since I'm so repulsive."

"Men are so vain." Really, he wouldn't hire her. Why keep this up? Still, she didn't leave her chair.

"Men can be vain." His eyes flickered at her. "People...even men...have feelings, believe it or not. Anyone can be hurt."

His honesty disarmed her and, as she met his gaze, a spark seemed to electrify her.

"I'm sorry. Even if you throw me out of here, I'm still sorry. I wanted to apologize that day, but then you confused me and I got tongue-tied." There. Now what?

His eyes softened a bit. "I didn't want an apology then. I don't want one now."

He did, she thought. She'd wounded his male pride and hurt him, and he wouldn't let it go.

"I'm wasting my time here." She shook her head, letting out a tired sigh. She could only hope that the job agencies found something for her. She'd blown this job interview before she'd stepped foot through the door.

Suddenly her cell phone rang. She reached into her suit jacket pocket and looked at the Caller ID. Jarrod! "I have to take this. It's my brother."

He sat back and nodded.

She rose and turned from Adam, moving away from him, staring at the refrigerator. Strangely, she could feel his eyes upon her, but she shook it off. “Jarrod, I’m in an interview right now.”

“I’m sorry, Cori.” He didn’t sound it. He sounded like an eager teenager. “Juan and Nick want to know if I can go to the arcade with them.”

“No!” Her voice rose above the level she’d wanted to keep it. “Jarrod, you know it’s dangerous to walk the streets once it gets dark, and if you go to the arcades...that boy was killed near that place. No, stay home.”

“It sucks. There’s nothing to do.”

“Invite them inside, but don’t go out. Please, Jarrod.”

“You worry too much.”

“I worry way too much, but I love you. I lost Mom. I refuse to lose you too.”

A pause then, “Oh, all right. I’ll tell them to come up and play my video system.”

She let out a breath of relief. “Thanks, Jar. I love you.”

“Love you too, Sis.” He hung up.

Cori snapped her phone shut, stuck it back in her pocket, then turned to face Adam, who, indeed, had his beautiful eyes focused on her. Now he wore a serious, thoughtful expression on his face.

“Sit.”

“What for?”

“You won’t know that if you don’t sit. I won’t keep you long.” His eyebrows drew together and he frowned.

She was tempted to walk out of the door to avoid further humiliation but something about his expression drew her towards him. In fact, he drew her, as if he had her on a string. What the hell was wrong with her? She didn’t bother to analyze it.

She moved towards the chair and sat, crossing her arms.

“Your mother died and you have custody of your brother?” he asked after she’d settled. “Is that it? From what I heard, that’s the conclusion I’ve drawn.”

She nodded. “She died of cancer. But you didn’t need to eavesdrop.”

He laughed. “I couldn’t help it; you were loud.” His face sobered. “How old is he?”

“Why?”

He waited.

“Thirteen.”

“And you live in a dangerous neighborhood?”

“Yes, and we’re about to get evicted from our apartment.” She smirked this time. “Not that you care.”



“No family?”

“Just us.” A lump rose to her throat. Only the glimmer of kindness creeping into his eyes kept her tears at bay.

“So you need the job.” He leaned forward and a lock of dark chocolate fell above his turquoise eyes. She noticed the dimple in his cheek again; his handsomeness seemed to conjure up a force in the air, causing the room to spin.

She tried to ignore his presence and focus on the most important issue. “I need the job. I’ll do anything if you’ll give me a chance.”

“Even sleep with me, although you’ve only pretended to respond to me.”

She hadn’t pretended anything, but even now, she wouldn’t admit it. “Anything.”

Adam dropped his head and studied her resume again. When he lifted his gaze, his eyes narrowed. “Desperation is a great motivator. You’d likely do a good job because you need to.”

Her heart banged against her chest. What did he mean?

He focused on the wall beside him and ran a hand through his hair. She noticed that his scar cut off above his dimple. “I have a brother myself, only four years younger than me. He went through a difficult time in high school and my parents threw him out.”

Cori stared at him, absorbing his words and barely breathed. He sounded distant, but not unpleasant.

His gaze turned towards her, his lips a straight line. "My childless uncle left this business to me when he retired to Florida. I was twenty and barely making it, but Jordan had gotten into drugs and my parents couldn't deal with it. I couldn't let them send my brother to military school, so I moved and took him with me. He straightened out fast with me." He grinned. He was obviously fond of his brother. Then his smile faded. His eyes suddenly seemed liquid soft. "Tough times for us, but good times too. My uncle gave me a chance to do what I love, and I made this business work. In the process, I was able to help Jordan. Guess you're doing the same thing with your brother, or trying to."

She swallowed hard.

His eyes had hardened again. "For your brother's sake, and only for that reason, I'll hire you for a week. If it works out, you can stay. If it doesn't, I'll send you out the door with no regrets."

Her head reeled. "You...you'll give me a chance?"

"Against my better judgment. You'd better learn fast." The depths of his eyes penetrated into her. "For some reason, I do believe you're bright. Prove me right. Or wrong."

“Thank you!” She felt a wave of ecstasy, euphoria! His bad ass stance with her had been a facade. Or, at least she thought so. She smiled at him.

His swarthy skin colored slightly and he looked away from her, into empty space. “The hours are eight to five, and the pay, to start, is fourteen dollars an hour. Jackie will explain the benefits. Since it’s Wednesday, you can wait until Monday to start...”

“I’ll come tomorrow.”

His eyes rose to hers, startled, as if he hadn’t expected her to say that. After a pause, he nodded and glanced down at her resume still again, as if keeping his eyes on it stopped him from watching her. “You live an hour away I notice.”

That threw her. “I may be a little late at times. If so, I can make it up by staying late.”

“No.” He shook his head. “You will go home on time. Jarrod can’t stay alone if the neighborhood is unsafe. I won’t care if you’re sometimes late.” He sounded gruff but his eyes didn’t match his voice.

Her breath caught. Damn! He could be nice! As he rose to his feet, she watched him and felt an overwhelming wave of gratitude. Jarrod would eat! She could pay the rent!

She'd have a job with a future! Without thinking, she ran around the table, threw her arms around him and kissed him, her body pressing against his. "Thank you," she whispered, right above his lips. "Thank you so much for hiring me!"

"Stop that!" He took a few steps backwards and gaped at her. "Enough of the games."

She felt too giddy to blush. Her body tingled from her contact with him, damn, he felt good, and she felt naughty. "I'm sorry," she said, grinning. "I seem to be saying that a lot today." Her gaze happened to fasten on the bulge in his pants. Her grin widened.

"I don't want you to try to seduce me. That's over," Adam said with an edge to his voice.

"Fine," she said, feeling like giggling. She had a job! She had a job!

Adam crossed his arms. "I won't have sex with my employees. The only thing you'll gain by continuing that is termination."

Her smile melted. He looked dead serious and she had to grudgingly give him high marks. What man warned a woman not to seduce him? "I really didn't have seduction on my mind." Truth. Now that she'd had time to think it over, sex with this hottie would screw up her life. "I'm just relieved that my brother won't be out on the street and that I have a job."

“I suggest you keep it then. Eight o’clock tomorrow.” He left the kitchen in long, purposeful strides, leaving behind his musky smell and his powerful presence.



Cori dressed a lot more conservatively for her first day of work, although she’d tried to still look nice. A white short-sleeved blouse with a short dark blue sweater tied under her breasts matched well with a flared navy skirt at the knee. Her freshly washed hair hung long and straight and smelled like flowers. For some reason, she’d dabbed matching cologne behind her ears. Jackie noticed it and told her she smelled good. She’d been the only person, other than Cori, in the office so far today.

She tried not to want Adam to stroll in. It bugged her that she thought of him at all.

Her lips against his...her body pressed against his...the feel of his hard cock against her sensitive areas...her nipples hardened at the thought...the spot between her thighs burned. What was this all about? Nobody had ever affected her this way...the man wasn’t even here...

Concentrate on work, Cori, she told herself. So far, one young couple had come into the office inquiring about building a home, and Cori had winged it with

Jackie looking on. Afterwards, she'd patted her on the back. "You're a natural salesperson."

Now the two of them poured over figures, which Cori always liked and understood well. When Jackie glanced at the clock and suggested a break, Cori was ready. The two women rose and headed through the living room towards the coffee machine.

As they strolled through the well-furnished room, the bell jingled, signaling a new arrival.

"I'll get it," Jackie said. "You sit down and take your break." But Cori had already turned around.

Cori never responded to the woman. A boy stood in the foyer, his hair, face, and clothes smeared with mud and dried blood on his cheek and the corner of his lip. An angry purple bruise almost shut his left eye. He stared at her, saying nothing, "Who are you?" Jackie asked. "What are you doing here?"

Cori heard her voice as if in a dream. She ran towards him and, when she reached him, she threw her arms around him as he did to her. "Jarrod! What happened to you? How did you get here?"

Jackie stood beside them, but Cori barely favored her with a glance.

"This is your brother?" Jackie asked.

Cori held him at arm's length, appraising him. "Yes, it's Jarrod." To her brother she asked, "Are you all right?"

He dropped his gaze.

"Come sit down," Jackie said, taking his arm.

"My shoes...muddy," he mumbled.

"Take them off."

He kicked them off, then let Jackie and Cori guide him to the study. He slid behind Jackie's desk and cradled his head, laying his cheek in his arms. Cori bent over him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Tell me." Fear and despair washed over her.

"I'll get the first aid kit," Jackie said. Her heels clicked against the tile as she walked away.

"Your eye, Jarrod," Cori said, stroking his short, black hair.

"I took the subway to get here," Jarrod muttered in a hoarse voice. "Then, after I got off, some guy felt sorry for me and gave me a ride here..."

"A stranger?"

"I could hardly walk and I had to get here."

She saw a tear in the one eye that could open and calmed down. "Who did this?"

“Some kids. They make fun of me...call me nerd...and some nasty words. Today...they took my key so I couldn’t get back in the apartment. Threw it somewhere. Took my cell phone so I couldn’t call you. My wallet too. I had just enough money in my jeans for subway fare.” He tried hard to steady his voice. “It’s such a bad neighborhood, Cori.”

Her heart broke. “I know, hon.”

“You don’t. I came here and I’m never going back to that school again.”

Jackie returned holding an ice pack and a first aid kit. She handed the ice pack to Jarrod who raised his head and pressed it against his eye. He sat in stony silence as Jackie cleaned his scrapes. Cori grimaced, knowing he must hurt. What would she do now? She had to finish working, but she’d worry about Jarrod. For all she knew, his appearance at work would anger Adam and he’d fire her. Employers cared little about your personal problems and expected you to keep them at home. But it had been smart for Jarrod to come to her. Where else could he have gone with no key? Damn neighborhood!

“Where do you live, Cori?” Jackie asked as she dabbed some antiseptic on Jarrod’s chin.

Cori told her, a chill climbing down her spine. “I can’t afford anything else,” she said. “I’m on a list for low income housing in another neighborhood, but the wait is long.”



“I’m not going back,” Jarrod said, “even if I have to run away. The guy almost stabbed me with the knife, Cori. I broke away just in time.”

“Maybe you can home school.” Jackie suggested.

But she had to work. She had no time to teach him. Yet how could she send him to school again, now that she knew how he suffered there?

“Can’t we live somewhere else?” Jarrod asked, his voice so weary for one so young.

A shadow fell over the desk and a strong awareness surrounded her. She looked up and jumped as she saw Adam, wearing a hardhat and tight fitting navy tee shirt. As he took his hat off, shaking his hair to fluff it out, he asked with little expression, “What’s going on here? Who are you, Pal?” He spoke softer when he addressed Jarrod.

Thankfully, Jackie stepped in and told him the story. Cori watched his face. His features changed from stoic, to wide-eyed, to thin-lipped. At the end, he strode around the desk and took Jackie’s place at Jarrod’s side. Cori, beside him, could feel his presence although he didn’t touch her. God help her!

“Who are you?” Jarrod asked, his eyes narrowed.

He stuck his hand out, his face respectful and serious. “I’m Adam. You must be Jarrod.”

Cori held her breath as Jarrod hesitated, then shook his hand. “How do you know my name?”

“Your sister told me about you. Hey, looks like you had a rough morning.”

Jarrold half shrugged and lowered his gaze, dropping the ice pack to the desk.

“No.” Adam shoved the ice pack back in his hand. “Use this. Don’t be embarrassed. I’ve had black eyes before. The ice helps the swelling.”

Jarrold glanced at Cori, who gave him an encouraging smile. His gaze traveled back to Adam, then he put the ice pack back on his eye. “Is my sister in trouble because I came here?”

“No. I’m glad you did.”

Cori wanted to hug him, which reminded her again of their brief, but tantalizing contact...her nipples hardened again and her pussy ached. She shook her head to clear it. At a time like this, how could she even think about that?

“I have an idea.” He broke into her thoughts. “My brother Jordan took the day off. Bet he’d like company. He lives in this development so I can walk you there. Your sister can get you after work.”

Cori stared at him, her heart thudding.

Jarrold shrugged. “I guess.”

“Why not talk about it to Jordan? Maybe he can figure something out.”

“Nothing you can do. We live in a neighborhood where kids beat you up unless you’re as tough as they are. Join a gang or get beat up.” He rose to a stand, but he offered Adam a tentative smile. “Thanks though.”

Adam gazed over at Cori, his face a mask again. “Jordan lives five houses down. Do you mind if Jarrod stays there today? Jackie can give you his phone number.”

“I’m grateful.” She spoke with a great deal of humility.

He nodded. Turning back to Jarrod, he clapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s go,” he said, his voice upbeat. “Jordan has just about every videogame system that exists and you can use his computer too.”

Jarrod’s face lit up. Cori could see it in profile.

“Aren’t you going to say good-bye?” Cori asked feeling temporarily relieved. There would be plenty to worry about when they had to go home.

“Bye, Sis,” Jarrod said not looking back.

Cori and Jackie watched as they strode, side by side, through the living room. By the time they opened the front door, they were talking to each other and Jarrod seemed more animated. Cori turned away and shook her head, her eyes stinging at the edges.

“He’s good with Jarrod.”

“Adam’s a good guy.”

For the first time, her body rippled with sexual excitement towards Adam for more than just the hotness of the man. She was starting to like him too. Lethal!

“He didn’t come off that way at first...” Then she remembered how she’d treated him at the pub. “Maybe he’s nice, after all. I’m glad he took an interest in Jarrod.”

“Poor kid.” Jackie shook her head. “Maybe Jordan or Adam can help him.”

Cori didn’t think they could and hardly wanted to be indebted to either in any way anymore than she already was.

“Let’s get that coffee now,” Jackie said putting an arm around her. “You look like you need it.”

Cori had never needed coffee more in her life.



The rest of the day flew by for Cori. With Jarrod temporarily safe, she could concentrate on learning her job. Jackie pulled a chair up beside hers and had Cori watch her as she worked at her desk, often telling Cori to take over. Cori had never tried so hard at anything in her life. Not only did she need to catch on to stay employed, she wanted to show Adam she wasn’t just some airhead with delusions of grandeur. Damn him! He disturbed her in so many ways and she wouldn’t let him see her fail. Jackie commented often that she learned quickly, that she was smart. Cori thanked her and tried even harder.

Out of nowhere, Cori suddenly felt compelled to lift her gaze from her work. A force she couldn't explain seemed to grab onto her.

Adam stood there, towering over her desk. He startled her and she couldn't figure out why he'd arrived until she glanced at the clock on the wall. Five o'clock. Time to yank Jarrod from safety and take him home.

She quickly looked Adam over. It seemed an automatic response to his presence.

Lord, he looked great. What a hottie! He'd been in the field, she guessed. An unbuttoned blue-checkered flannel shirt hung over a navy tee. Wide shoulders pressed against the material. His longish hair had blown back. The blue of his shirt accentuated his eyes. Jeans clung to him and his work boots had crusted mud on the toes. He ran a hand through windblown hair but didn't speak.

"Why didn't you bring Jarrod with you?" she asked as he silently watched her. "Is he still at Jordan's house?"

Adam continued to stare at her, his hot eyes giving nothing away but growing more intense.

"Is he?" She suddenly feared for her brother. After all, she didn't really know the Fletchers...

"Yes, he's there." Adam let out an exasperated breath. "Where else would he be?"

Jackie cut in as she rose from her chair. “Adam, dear, I have a Tupperware party tonight. I need to leave right away.” She clapped a hand on Cori’s shoulder. “She’s a real find. This one will know my job in a few weeks.”

Adam nodded at Jackie. “Good. You have a nice weekend, dear.”

Jackie smiled at him. “I hope you do too. You ought to have fun for a change.” She winked at him, then collected her purse. Winking at Cori as well, she said, “You need to help this man get back into the swing of things. See you both.” She left.

Cori watched Adam’s reaction to Jackie’s words. He put his hands on his hips.

That left Cori and Adam alone. Adam wielded a serious height advantage, especially with Cori sitting down. She stood up to eliminate some of the disparity.

“Take me to Jarrod. We have to get home.”

He crossed his arms, his brows coming together.

“You don’t understand! If I don’t get him home before dark, it will be dangerous to walk to our apartment from wherever we park. It could be blocks away...”

“Jarrod isn’t going home with you.”

She felt an anchor drop in her stomach and dread filtered through her mind. She tried to speak, but couldn't. Finally with a reeling head, she managed to sputter at him.

"You...you can't keep him. Why...why would you want to? Are you some sort of psycho?" She reached for the phone on her desk, but he grabbed her wrist and held it.

She tried to pull away, but his strength overwhelmed her. "Hear me out."

She swallowed hard and sat back down, her hands clutching one another in her lap. What if she'd sent Jarrod into harm's way?

Adam's gaze scathed her. "He can't go back there, to wherever you two live."

She let out a laugh. "Are you going to give me one of your vacant houses? I can't afford to move! I'm on the verge of eviction even where I am. I may even have to go to a worse neighborhood..."

"No, babe." He leveled those burning aqua eyes on hers and his lips turned up a little. He didn't look threatening, but...

"Don't call me 'babe.' I'm not your babe."

"All right, Sweetheart." He grinned and she realized he was deliberately trying to get a rise out of her. She actually took heart. He looked playful now, anything but dangerous.

Cori pulled her hand away from him, surprised that her skin prickled.

“What’s going on?”

Adam sobered and his eyes suddenly flashed dark and dangerous. “That kid goes through hell at school, Cori. Kids beat him up, hold knives to him, even a gun once. I take it he’s a smart kid in an area where the kids admire ‘tough’, not smart. Don’t look so shocked. He wouldn’t tell you because he loves you and didn’t want to scare you. He knew you were doing the best you could.”

Cori collapsed onto her chair, covering her face with her hands. Her heart drummed out of control. “No,” she said. “I would have known. It can’t be that bad...”

“It is.” His voice whipped at her, even as he kept it low and in control. “He’s a nice kid who deserves a chance for a good education. At the very least, he should be able to go to school without fear.”

Cori felt tears stinging her eyes. “How?”

“I told you I’m nice.” He snapped his fingers and she looked up. “Come over here.”

She automatically rose, still numb, and felt her legs moving towards him as she stumbled. He caught her forearms when she tripped on her own shoe, and with brute strength, set her on her feet, but didn’t let go of her.

“Careful, sweetheart.”



She looked up at him, fascinated at his strong throat and the Adam's apple bobbing up and down. A lump clogged her throat. "I'm not your..."

He kissed her and everything else melted away. Her body tingled and leapt to life.

All of it.

Then he let go and used his imploring stare as a weapon while her skin still flamed.

"Jarrod has to stay with me. There's no other option."

She took a step backwards. She couldn't think clearly in his arms. "No way."

Adam's gaze burned into hers and held her attention. "If he doesn't stay here, he could die. The kids are really out to get him. My house is enormous. Five bedrooms."

She sucked in a breath and gaped at him. She wanted to ask more details about Jarrod and the secrets he'd kept from her, but at the same time, she didn't want to know. They chilled her to the bone. What came out of her mouth didn't have anything to do with Jarrod. "Why...why five bedrooms for one person? Do you sleep in a different room every night?"

Adam charmed her with a killer smile. "Why? Because I can. At any rate, that gives me more than enough space for one thirteen-year-old boy that could use

some fattening up. I left the crew early to talk to him and we liked one another right away.”

But I don’t know if I like you, she thought. In truth, she didn’t know what to make of him. He certainly awakened feelings within her; hot and cold tingles climbed through her body. She tried to shrug them off. “How dare you talk to Jarrod about his living arrangements without asking me about them first?”

His smiling eyes and lips narrowed. “He brought it up, but I think it’s a good idea. He’ll just run away if you take him back there, Cori. He’s in trouble and I want to step up. I’m able to help, so let me.”

The frank honesty in his expression and voice convinced her, but...”I can’t leave my brother. I’ve taken care of him, more or less, since he was born. He’s like my child.”

“You’ll see him every day after work. My house is on the development.” His voice softened a little.

She shook her head, torn. “We’ll miss one another.” She locked her eyes onto his and felt herself pulling forward, although she knew she hadn’t moved. “He’s going to miss me too. It’s been us against the world for so long.”

Adam’s large, rough hands grasped the bare flesh just below her sleeves, making her glad she’d removed her suit jacket. A stinging burn radiated from his hands to the rest of her...all of her... “I’m trying to help,” he said, his voice quiet.

“I wish you hadn’t made the offer.” Her mouth felt dry, like she’d chewed on cotton balls.

His eyebrows lifted. “You want Jarrod to get hurt?”

“Of course not.” God, this man was impossible. He loved to goad her. She had a feeling he’d goad her no matter what the circumstance. She let out a sigh. Adam was right, damn it. Jarrod couldn’t go back. His offer to keep Jarrod safe should have calmed her, but it made her uncomfortable. “I just wish he could stay with Jordan...and not you.”

“Why?” His gaze dug into her.

Why? She tried to think. Why? “I don’t know if I like you. I...I’m glad you’re helping Jarrod, but...,” She felt like a fool, words failing her.

“You’ve never met Jordan. You may hate him.”

She doubted she’d hate him, but she also doubted two men could turn her knees to rubber, even if they were brothers. “It would be more comfortable dealing with someone who isn’t my boss.”

He chuckled a little and moved daringly close, his hard abdomen rubbing lightly against hers. She had the urge to press herself into him completely. Why in hell did she want to do that? He befuddled her beyond all understanding. When he spoke again, his warm breath teased the front of her hair and her forehead, as she

stared up at him. “Jordan is a typical bachelor. Lots of girls and parties. Not a good place for Jarrod.”

“And you?” She challenged.

His eyes seemed to fade in vividness and she held her breath. “I’m different. Jordan calls me a monk.” He shrugged. “I’m quiet; need my space.”

She nodded, aware that he hadn’t given her much space. In fact, he stood so close to her that the heat from his body made her sweat. Their gazes collided again and something flickered in his beautiful eyes. “You won’t feel right without your brother.”

“I already said I’d miss him terribly, yet I know this is a great opportunity...”

“Then I guess you’ll also have to stay with me.”

Her eyes rounded and she froze.

“Is that so distasteful to you?”

She asked herself the same question and shuddered. Quite the opposite. She’d enjoy it too much. Although she wished he didn’t arouse pleasant feelings in her, he did. It would be enjoyable...and dangerous.

“Well, no...but it’s not like I have tons of money to pay you for living there...”

“I need somebody to look after the house a bit and cook. I’m not very good at either. Believe me, just having somebody point out to me that my socks are on the bathroom floor or not burning boiled eggs will help me out a lot and be more

than worth actual rent.” She couldn’t help laughing. “Can you do those things? If so, you’ll be pulling your weight.”

“I don’t mind nagging you to pick up your smelly socks and I can cook more than just eggs. I love to cook and I’m a good one.” She thought of Jarrod with a knife to his throat and shuddered, no longer smiling.

“What is it, sweetheart?” He suddenly pulled her against his rock hard body, wrapping his strong arms around her back. Her entire being screamed with ecstasy. She could feel his even breathing, the strong, steady beat of his heart. Sheathed in his warmth, everything felt right, yet she didn’t even know him.

“What did you think of that made you turn ten shades lighter?” he asked, one hand massaging her back, igniting each cell that lived inside of her. Her body tensed against him and her nipples hardened. A muscle clenched between her thighs. Just what she needed, another man sweeping her off her feet. One she’d live and work with. She tried to stay on guard but found it difficult.

“I...” What had she been thinking? He’d distracted her in such a delightful but disturbing way. Then she remembered her frightening thought and hugged him in a tighter grip, as she trembled. “Jarrod. With the kid and the knife. You’re right. He can’t go back. But I have a lease...”

“And I have a shyster lawyer. He’ll get you out of that lease.” He eased back a few steps and stared down at her from his great height.

“How tall are you?” The words just slipped out.

“Six foot three.”

“Were you always so big?”

“Oh, I’ve always been very, er, big.” He gave her another disarming, unexpected grin.

Her head reeled as he pressed his lower half hard against her. She could feel his hot, throbbing cock, and her feminine muscles almost went into spasms. Just as she started to push him away, because of course, she had to protest, he rested his cheek on top of her head in a gentle and very touching gesture. Her heart sped up and she cupped her hand over his ear, then brushed back some hairs that had fallen forward. She stroked its silkiness several times, her body sizzling. He stared at her, unmoving...

Abruptly, he pulled back, letting go of her arms last. He seemed to like teasing her.

The look on his face indicated he’d known exactly what he’d done. Did she really want to stay with him? He must know how attractive she found him, but continued to punish her for the incident at the pub. He could be such a jerk. Somehow, she knew, however, he’d treat Jarrod well. That mattered more than how he treated her.

Cori brushed down her rumpled blouse, angry with herself for letting him play with her senses.

He appeared all business, ignoring the moment they'd just shared. "We'll go to Jordan's house to pick up Jarrod, then I'll take him back to my place. Jordan will drive you back to your apartment so you can pack your things."

She resented his dismissal of her warm reaction to his body. It would be a merry hell to live with him, but she suddenly felt a little rebellion of her own. Two could play this game. She'd try to figure out exactly what the game was later on. The rules were so vague. In the meantime, her brother would be safe. Herself too. Even if he irritated her, she gave him high marks for caring about Jarrod's welfare.

"Get your things. We're walking to Jordan's house to talk to Jarrod now. He's going to be very relieved."

"I suppose he will." She tried not to sound resentful that he could help Jarrod more than she could. Just to make things clear, she said, "As soon as I can, I'm moving out. I'm sure I'll do a good job at the office and you'll want to keep me. You give raises, right?"

She could see him holding back a smile and thought she saw admiration flickering in his eyes. "I do give raises, yes."

"Eventually, I'll be able to afford an apartment around here, Jarrod can stay in the same school district and we'll be out of your hair."

“I didn’t expect you to stay with me forever,” he said. “To be honest, one day I’ll meet some special lady, the kind you keep for life, and I’ll marry. For now, it’s fine. Marriage won’t happen any time soon.”

She wondered why his words sent a chill down her spine.

“I understand,” she said smoothly. “I have no desire to get married, but some people still do it, I hear.”

“You don’t ever want to marry?” He laughed in a good-natured way. “You’ll change your mind. That boss of yours hurt you, but not all men are that bad.”

“I think you have serious asshole potential,” she said in a joking tone, but she meant it.

“You’re going to end up thinking I’m nice. Not that it matters. You and I could never be a match beyond a certain amount of lust.” His eyes gleamed.

Before she could respond, not even sure how she should respond, he grabbed her hand and her body flamed all over.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Jarrod needs to know the plan as soon as possible. It will comfort him.”

As her body betrayed her once again, she thought, at least one of us will find comfort.



## Chapter Four

When Cori returned with Jordan, back from packing, darkness shrouded everything. Cori wallowed in fatigue as she climbed out of the car with Jordan helping her out. Jordan turned out to be darker in appearance than his brother and more distant. He hadn't said much to her, but he had a caring demeanor.

Cori stumbled towards Adam's house. Vaguely she noticed the large red brick house illuminated under the moonlight, and the blackened pond behind it, under an ebony sky. She'd notice more tomorrow.

Jordan had a key and opened the door.

Light hurt her eyes and she blinked against it.

"I'll take everything upstairs to your room," Jordan said, his voice soft. "Adam may be asleep."

She rubbed her eyes and glanced at a grandfather clock that stood near the hearth, 10:06. "And I have work tomorrow," she mumbled.

"No, tomorrow you won't go in." Adam's voice rang with authority.

He appeared from behind a wall that must have shielded another room. The kitchen? He'd changed into another t-shirt, which was apparently his uniform. This one was powder blue, tight, and highlighted all of his luscious muscles. The

second part of his uniform, dark jeans, sheathed the hardness of his thighs and calves. His hair looked unruly like he'd raked his fingers through it over and over again. As always, he dwarfed the room and commanded her attention.

"Did you hear me?" he asked and she noticed a beer can in his hand. "You can skip one day. I don't care. You had a busy day and night."

She nodded, emerging from her trance. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

He took a sip of beer and nodded.

"How's Jarrod?" she asked.

"Fast asleep. I took him out to eat and he ordered the whole menu." He sounded amused rather than angry. His gaze moved to Jordan. "I'll help you with those bags. She sleeps in the room farthest from mine."

That got a rise out of her tired body. "I'm just here because of Jarrod. I don't care how close your room is to mine."

"I know." But he added a wink, the smile on his face saying otherwise. How he loved to taunt her! Damn, he knew he affected her!

She felt her temper bubble to the surface, but bit back the words. Fatigue held her in check.

The brothers gathered her bags and headed towards the stairs. When they disappeared, Cori moved over to peek around the wall. To her delight, she saw a kitchen. It was glorious. Black Corian covered the island and counters. Flecks of

gray and brown dotted the surface. Cori marveled at the cabinets. They were tall and abundant, a honey gold wood. A double oven lined one wall. A cook top stood adjacent to the sink, which held ragged stacks of dirty dishes. To the other side she saw assorted cartons of fast food. Remnants of meals gone by stuck to a few plates on the counters.

She knew what she'd be doing as soon as she awakened the following morning.

Cori returned to the foyer, resting her back against the door. Adam and Jordan returned shortly, talking and laughing quietly. When they reached her, they both turned their attention to her.

"You look exhausted." Adam's voice held no mockery now. To Jordan he said, "You do too. You'd better go home. We have a busy day tomorrow."

His brother nodded, said a short good-bye, then left.

"You." Adam leveled his eyes on her. "Upstairs with you and to bed. And sleep in. Nobody will be here when you wake up. Not me. Not Jarrod."

Her tired eyes tried to sharpen. "Wait. Jarrod..."

"I'll take care of Jarrod. Have to sign him up for school. No point in delaying it. I'll just go to work later, after the kid's settled in."

She had mixed feelings about his fast connection to her brother. "Won't I have to sign him up?"

“Do you have his birth certificate?”

She nodded.

“Give it to me and I’ll say I’m his adoptive uncle.” He grinned and she couldn’t help chuckling. “Look, the truth is, the school knows me well and I won’t have any problem getting him in. If you need to sign anything for him, you can drive to the school in the afternoon.”

Her memory jogged. “I just remembered. My car is still in the parking lot at work.”

He shrugged.

“It won’t get towed?”

Adam burst out laughing, his eyes actually laughing as well. Without malice he said, “It’s my business. If I don’t call to have your car towed, who will?”

Her face reddened. She couldn’t think clearly around him, could barely even speak.

“Tell you what. I’ll walk down, get your car, and park it in the driveway here.”

Adam’s voice took on a soothing tone that she hadn’t heard before.

Quickly she lifted her gaze and found his eyes shimmering down at her from his great height.

Her heart pounded. Was he almost smiling at her? Not making fun of her but smiling at her? A pleasant shudder took over her body.

“You can leave it there,” she mumbled.

“No, I’ll get it,” he said. “And before you offer to get it yourself, I’m not tired and you are. I’ll go.”

“Thanks again.” She felt humbled. Then she cocked her head. “Why are you being nice to me?”

“I’m nice, that’s why.” He held out his hand. “Your keys?”

She reached into a dainty white purse which hung by a tiny strap slung over her shoulder.

After he took the keys, he stared right at her and shot a finger at her. “I want you in bed by the time I return.”

She assumed he meant he wanted her to sleep because she looked ready to collapse. The mischief in his eyes made her wonder if he wanted her to think of the double meaning. He wore an amused expression and she felt him goading her. She suspected he’d make a pastime out of getting on her nerves.

“I’ll be fast asleep.”

“That’s a good girl.” He didn’t move.

“Um, I’m a woman, not a girl.” Why did he agitate her? Why did he arouse her? After Joe’s betrayal, how could any man arouse her? She collected her wits.

Adam oozed sex appeal. She could feel normal sensations of desire without feeling tender emotions that endangered her. That had to be it.

“You *are* a woman and a hot one.” He smiled, his dimple flashing at her.

Somehow, she found her gaze glued to his and an odd shiver slid down her body. She didn’t move and neither did he. No, he barely blinked...and his features changed...softened...

Dizziness took over as he moved a step closer, then halted. As she felt the warmth surrounding him, she found her stare clinging to his lips. Never had she seen such inviting lips, wide and sensual, made for kissing. For a moment, she wanted to taste him, just taste him. She didn’t want more of course. Joe had cured her of that, but...

“I find you so attractive.” He sounded fascinated, not insulting. To her shock, delight, and pleasure, he reached out and tenderly ran a thumb over her ear as he broke into a winsome grin. “Your ears stick out a little.” His thumb slid to her nose. “Your face could be more oval, but I like it the way it is.” He tilted his head, his deep brown waves spilling across his forehead. “Everything else is perfect. In all, you’re a stunning package.”

She couldn’t take in a full breath. His touch sent sensations racing through her insides, all sorts of sensations that seemed to tickle and tease. “You’re a nice package yourself.” The words spilled out against her will. Well, nothing wrong

with letting him know he held an animalistic appeal for her. Not liked she loved him!

He took her hand between his and pressed it to his cheek. “Really? What about my scar? It bothered you so much, you said I wasn’t your type.” He flashed a dimple at her.

This close up when he smiled, she noticed strong, white teeth, and the fact that one of his top, side teeth was just a little twisted, which strangely, added to his sexiness. His razor thin scar stood out against a swarthy complexion. Automatically, she reached up and traced it with gentle fingers. “Who did that to you?”

“My father, during a fight.” His shrugged as if it didn’t matter.

“Your father? Adam!” She flinched feeling unwanted tenderness towards him and outrage at this faceless father.

Adam’s smile widened. “That’s the first time you’ve spoken my name. It sounds beautiful, coming from you.” His smile melted to a straight line. “My father came after me when I arrived to get Jordan. He wanted Jordan in military school, not my apartment. We both lost our tempers and during the fight, he accidentally scraped me with his ring. So I have a souvenir of the incident.”

“Oh, Adam!” A sinking feeling in her stomach assailed her and she cupped his rough chin in her palm. Lord help her, he felt so good. “I’ll bet he felt bad afterwards. Your father.”

“I don’t know. I grabbed Jordan, left, and never saw my parents again. They warned me that if I took him, they’d disown both of us.”

She gasped. “How awful!”

“Not at all. I did the right thing.”

“But...”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

She could feel his jaw tensing up. Ripples of tenderness washed over her.

“As long as the scar doesn’t bother you, I’m proud to wear my victory,” Adam said, his voice smooth, soft, husky, sensual...his hands slid up her arms, causing goose bumps to ripple down her spine.

Caught up in his presence, she mumbled. “Your imperfections make you human.” As she took in his arresting face, she added, “Without them, you’d just be another handsome man. Boring.”

He kissed her fingers, his breath igniting an inferno against her flesh. “I’ve never been accused of being boring.”

He had her under his spell and she stared at him, continuing to appraise him with approval. “You can look gentle, but tough at the same time. Naughty and



nice.” She felt her smile stretching across her face and forgot her resolve to steel herself against his charms.

“That’s a good thing?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

He dropped her hand and stood there, leaving her body crying out for his touch. “My ego needed that.”

She flinched and her jaw dropped. “Your...what?”

He jostled her keys as he looked at them. “I needed that after what you said at Flannigan’s. I needed to know you didn’t mean it.”

“So this was a trick?” She wanted to slap him, as she’d done at the pub, but she couldn’t. He was her boss and he’d offered Jarrod the world.

“Sort of,” he said in a good-natured voice, his gaze lifting, his eyes smiling. “I’d hate to have some young woman here, even as an employee, cringing each time she looked at me.”

“Why you...”

“I can fill in the blanks myself.” His boyish grin mocked her. “Hey, I know your ex-boss was a jerk, so you hate all men. That’s all right. Some woman played a really dirty trick on me a few years ago. I never loved her, but I trusted her. I’m not all that crazy about the female sex either. See you later, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your...”

He grabbed her, pulled her towards him, and pressed his palms against her cheeks as he stole an obscenely heated kiss. Cori, pushed him away, she told herself, slap him, stop this insanity, stop it now...Oh, my God, kiss him, let yourself go, melt in his arms, grab onto his tantalizing body and never let him go...

He pulled back, grinning, and headed towards the door.

“Why do you keep on doing that?” Her senses shocked, she couldn’t stand how he turned her on, then deflated her with seeming ease.

But it’s not easy for *me*...

“Please don’t do that again!” While he drove her senseless, he retained control. She hated that, even if she loved his touch. “You have to stop it!”

He’d already left.

Cori took off her shoe and threw it hard. It hit the door with a thud then dropped to the ground. Well, she’d have to get back at him, render him at the mercy of his easily aroused cock...she could do it. The idea excited her too.

Sleep became a difficult task to accomplish in spite of her fatigue. Between her anger at Joe and at Adam, she tossed and turned. Men! They drove her nuts and would be her downfall, if she allowed it. Fortunately, she had no intention of allowing it. As soon as she had enough money, she and Jarrod would move out. She only hoped Jarrod didn’t get overly attached to Adam. She’d have to keep reminding him that this arrangement could only be temporary.

## Chapter Five

When Cori woke up the next morning, her bed and covers felt so soft and luxurious that it confused her at first. Then she remembered everything. Her eyes shot open while her heart raced. She recalled, as if from a dream, that she didn't live in a crime-ridden neighborhood now, thanks to her mysterious new boss, Adam. Jarrod and she were safe at last, but for how long? Jarrod...

She shook her hair out of her eyes and rubbed them. Sitting up, she glanced towards the closed drapes. Full sunlight streamed through a slit. Why had they let her sleep so late? Had Adam taken Jarrod to sign up for school?

She took a moment to dress, throwing on a sleeveless tan peasant top and white Bermuda shorts, then ran to her brother's room. He was long gone. He'd shoved the covers back and had tossed his pajamas on the foot of his bed. She assumed he'd gone to register for school. Just to make sure, she ran down the stairs and checked for Adam's car in the driveway, where he'd left it last night. It was gone. She felt a rush of gratitude towards her new boss.

This took a little of the pressure off her, at least for now. He'd literally swiped control of her brother, who'd been so unhappy lately. Now that Jarrod had opened up to Adam, she could kick herself for not seeing the signs earlier. It

brought to the forefront the importance of making this job, this life change, work. Why was Adam being so kind, so generous? She tried not to be suspicious but she couldn't help it. Being burned by life's hard knocks made a smart woman wary. And Adam was keeping secrets. This could be the perfect time to find out more about Adam.

Last night, thinking about a sleeping Adam had taunted her. Her imagination had run wild, driving her crazy with...what? She'd pictured him, rumpled hair on his pillow, his wide, muscled back exposed after he'd kicked off his covers. Maybe he even slept nude...sleep had been slow to come to her after that thought. Could she call this fascination with her boss, arousal? Certainly, just thinking about him woke up her senses, especially those between her thighs. No! Stop it, Cori! You don't even know the man! She didn't, but she wanted to learn as much as she could about him. Should she poke around his room while he wasn't home? Her heart raced.

Snooping was wrong. Very wrong, and very tempting. She bit her lip. All right, yes, she shouldn't do it, but he wouldn't tell her about himself. If she was going to put herself and her brother's lives in his hands, she had to know what kind of man she was dealing with. This would be the only way she could find out. It couldn't hurt to check his room out quickly she decided, passing the staircase to the other side of the hallway.

One quick look around and she'd never do it again. Soon she nudged open his bedroom door and stepped inside.

The smell of oak wood and the residual scent of his musky aftershave, assailed her. She looked around at the masculine decor. His desk, dresser, and headboard matched. Sports and mechanics magazines, plus pictures of famous athletes, dotted his desk and dresser. A few golden trophies caught her attention. With the drapes drawn and blinds lifted, sunlight bounced off his cream-colored walls and thick, beige carpeting. Her gaze rested on his bed and her mouth watered. She remembered her nighttime fantasies of him. His king-sized, unmade bed was mussed up, brown and white blankets rumbled on the floor. So he had kicked off his covers. Or maybe he'd thrown them down when he woke up. She felt a twinge of guilt at invading his privacy, but temptation pulled her further inside.

Cori strode to his dresser to pick up the trophies. He'd won several for athletics, especially in baseball, and a few for academics. Good at everything and handsome as sin, she thought, both proud and irritated at the same time. Then she took the plunge and opened the top dresser drawer, her heart slamming against her chest. Folded white t-shirts and underwear; she didn't bother suppressing a grin. He wore bikini briefs. It figured. Certainly they'd fit him too well for a woman's peace of mind.

A lump under the stack of briefs caught her attention. She dug her hand under the garments and felt a tube...of what? Withdrawing it, she stared. Prescription, but nothing special about it. It looked like a white tube of toothpaste, except it was some sort of cream, rolled up halfway at the bottom. She squinted, trying to read the crinkled up faint black letters that directed its use. "...when outbreak...until..." Her whisper filled the room, then she shoved the tube back under his t-shirts.

None of the other drawers contained anything more exciting than neatly folded clothing. Her heart thudded as she headed towards his solid oak desk. It had sharp angles and edges and seemed to call out to her. If she was going to find anything incriminating, it would probably be here. Hands shaking, she opened the largest drawer in the middle and spotted a bunch of scattered papers. Ignoring the mess, she spied a stack of pastel colored letters. Pay dirt? With a hunger to know more about him, she grabbed the first lavender colored, scented letter and opened it.

"My dearest, precious Adam." She drew in a breath, cringing at the woman's cloying perfume. Why did the greeting bother her so much? "Don't hold it against me. I beg you to think it over. I'd be so good to you if you married me, and now you really can't marry just anyone. Why not me? Love, Amy."

Cori wrinkled her forehead as she thought. No wonder he carried himself with such a confident swagger. He had women begging him to marry him. But what did 'you can't marry just anyone' mean? Arranged marriages weren't the norm in this day and age, and she instinctively knew a man like Adam couldn't be bossed around. She folded the letter, put it back, and picked up another one, staving off new feelings of guilt. These letters were key to understanding the man who controlled her family's future, she just knew it. "Dearest Adam, When your cock, so large and warm, is inside of me..." She blinked and read it over several times, blushing even though nobody could see her. Christ! Did she need to know this about him? It just fueled her vivid imagination. She already found him more desirable than she'd ever let him know. Apparently, Amy had enjoyed him intimately.

A flush went through her body and she suddenly felt jealous. No, that was insane.

Cori read on. "When you're plunging into my pussy, over and over again, scraping my hips with yours, coming inside of me, groaning with pleasure, licking my tits, biting my skin, gripping me so tightly that I swear we're one person, I almost lose my mind. The sensations of pleasure are out of this world. Yes, I scream. I scream your name and I love you all the more. Since you're gone, my pussy misses your cock."

Cori rolled her eyes.

She'd signed it "XXX, Love you, please come back, Amy." Triple X indeed. She suddenly disliked Amy with a passion. If Cori were in her place, she'd show Adam how she felt, not send him dirty love letters. That was beyond tacky. Of course, digging through his drawers wasn't exactly a class act...but she couldn't stop now.

And didn't. As she reread the letter, she imagined herself in Adam's bed instead of the noxious Amy. Her breaths came faster, as her pulse raced. Her nipples hardened and she felt tingling as the hot spot between her thighs pulsed just from thinking about Adam inside of her. What the hell?

"You're a psycho, Cori," she said to herself and stuffed the letter away, her body still zinging. If just reading about him could do this to her, she could only imagine what actually making love to him would do. And the thought scared her. Men were the enemy. She had to remember that, especially after the disaster with Joe. If she was naive enough to unknowingly get involved with a married man, her tastes in men had to be seriously flawed. Adam may be great eye candy, but he appeared to be involved with another woman. No, he couldn't be involved with her. He'd made a point of stating he lived like a monk. This must be a past girlfriend. So why did Amy stir jealousy within her? It didn't make any sense.



“Dear, dear, dear, beautiful, gorgeous Adam, Your body is surreal; like the statue of a Greek God...” Cori let out a breath feeling shivers at the visual, yet also irritation. She continued. “When you sucked my pussy, I think I passed out for a minute. No man uses his tongue the way you do. I thought I would die. How long did I scream? Did I hurt you? Scratch your back with my nails? Adam, you are every woman’s fantasy, and you’re mine. I love you for yourself, as well as the pleasure you give me...”

Cori shoved the letter back in and shut the drawer with a bang. It sounded to her as though this Amy loved him strictly for his body, if you could call that love. What a nut! Then she spotted a small photo on his desk, framed in gold, just sitting there, the lone woman among male sports stars. She picked it up. A beautiful honey blond stared back at her, brown eyes huge and soulful, short nose a little wrinkled as she smiled with shining white teeth. A pearl choker hugged her long neck. Cori took the back off the picture and read the words. “From Amy, to The Man of My Dreams.”

Damn her! Something in her liquid dark eyes didn’t look quite right. Was that why she and Adam weren’t together? Cori didn’t want to think about it as she put the photo back together. Why should she care? Still she couldn’t help wondering, who was Amy? Did he still care about her? The other woman had to be the reason he’d turned into a monk. Had she broken his heart? He seemed to be too

confidently masculine for that. Was it all an act, hiding the fact that he couldn't get over their breakup? She thought about how Adam had hidden his hurt over her words to him at the pub. Maybe the man just put on a good act.

She glanced at the Chicago White Sox clock on the wall. 11:32. Maybe he'd go to work and not return home until much later. She pulled open another drawer, getting comfortable, and saw what looked like some sort of typed report. She unfolded it and saw a doctor's name on the letterhead. Lifting her eyebrows, she readied to delve into it.

"What the hell are you doing?" His loud voice vibrated off the walls.

Cori jumped, dropped the paper back into the drawer, and spun around. She felt her face heat as her gaze collided with Adam's. He stood in the entrance, a hand bracing himself against the doorway, his forehead lowered and his complexion darkened. His scar stood out on the far side of his face and his tensed muscles reminded her of a panther.

"Well?" He took a few steps into the room and crossed his arms. His shoulders, which stretched the fabric of his blue tee shirt, rose and fell quickly. His knees bent slightly, as if ready to spring. She noticed his powerful thigh muscles straining against a pair of crisp, blue jeans. A short chain hooked from one belt loop to a wallet in his back pocket.

She didn't know what to say so she tried to act nonchalant. "Where's Jarrod?" She gave him a smile.

Adam's eyes almost popped out of his head. "That's all you can say after I caught you red handed?"

She felt her throat constricting and dropped her gaze. She'd thought the most humiliating moment of her life had been when she'd interviewed with Adam. Well, this topped it.

"Jarrod wanted to stay at school after I signed him up."

Surprised that he'd answered her, she lifted her gaze and felt his eyes blazing at her. She could almost see smoke billowing from his ears. "I...I was cleaning your room."

He laughed.

She bit her lip and lowered her gaze...and saw a bulge that heated her face...

She heard his footsteps closing in on her. A rough hand gripped her bare shoulder.

She wished she'd worn a top with sleeves because his hand scorched her skin. She thought about the letters she'd just read and felt her face heating even more; indeed her entire body seemed to burst into flames. How could she think of what to say to him when he touched her? His presence made her senseless.

“Why did you come into my room?” His quiet, low voice squelched her plan to weasel out of it. He continued. “I want to let Jarrod stay here, but you’re part of the bargain and I can’t have you snooping around like this.”

For some reason his true accusation got a rise out of her. “I wasn’t snooping—”

“Liar. What were you looking for?”

She took in a breath and held it as she studied his startling gaze. The intensity and beauty of his eyes burned through her. Dark brown hair spilt above his aqua eyes and seemed to frame them, as did dark upper and lower lashes. “Bedroom eyes,” Adrienne seemed to whisper into her ear.

“I...”

He waited and his other hand grasped her other shoulder.

“I guess I was curious.” Damn him! She felt her own eyes blazing at him.

“About what?” He didn’t flinch.

She didn’t either. Not this time. “You.”

“Why?”

She couldn’t tell him why. “You said you live like a monk. It made me curious.”

To her surprise and relief, she could see his lips twitching. He tried to hold in a smile. “Were you looking for condoms?”

“No!” Her itchy palm that slapped men wanted to do it again, although she was in the wrong, not him.

“Well, then?”

“I...wondered if you were gay.” There. By his frown, she knew she’d scored a point. This had become a contest, a battle of the sexes.

His grip on her shoulders tightened. “What did you find out?”

Oh, hell, this stupid game would do her in. She could see him escorting her and Jarrod out the door. She couldn’t let that happen. “I didn’t really think you were gay. The way you look at me, I know you’re not.”

He relaxed his grip. “Then...?”

His nearness intoxicated her. He made musk, earth, and a hint of sweat seem like a potion to arouse her to new heights. His lips invited kisses...damn him. “I needed to know more about you for Jarrod and me to stay with you. I didn’t expect you to exactly open up to me. Being a big brother yourself, I’m sure you understand my protective instincts.”

“And did you find out anything?”

His face literally turned white and she sensed a real fear surging through him. She shook her head. “Nothing important.”

The color rushed back to his face. “Next time just ask me questions. Don’t come in here.” He shook her slightly.

What else was he hiding? She couldn't tell for sure. "Who's Amy?" The words just blurted out. His hands on her, the heat from his body, his handsome face so close to hers, his lips...she barely realized she'd spoken the words until he responded to them.

"Shit."

"I'm sorry I asked..."

"You're always sorry. She's a girl I once knew."

"The last one you were with?"

He nodded and his gaze dropped.

She wanted to reach up and soothe him with a gentle stroke of his hair. "I can tell Amy doesn't evoke warm memories. Why do you keep her letters and her picture?"

He smirked. "To remind me never to trust a woman again." His eyes smoldered.

She didn't like the way the conversation had turned so she tried another tack. "I guess you're not a monk after all."

His eyes flashed and locked on hers, his wide, full lips, thinned. "Lately I've been one."

"Why?" The words just tumbled out as her stare lowered again to the growing bulge in his jeans. "It's not like you aren't interested."

He took a step forward and she felt sparks jumping off of him. “No, it’s not like I’m not interested. I’m definitely interested. Let me show you how much.”

“You don’t need to justify...”

His lips pressed hard and hungrily against hers and pulled her towards him until all of her touched him. The jolt that shot through her body electrified her and she melded into his hard muscles, including the one behind his zipper. God, he seemed big.

Joe hadn’t been that size. He pushed his bulge against her and she moaned, although clothes separated them. Tingling all over, she swept her tongue through his mouth as he did it to her. He had ravenous, urgent lips that tasted of mint. When he pulled back and licked her lips, her legs almost collapsed. Her arms gripped him tightly around the neck as his tongue teased the side of her face and the inside of her ear, all the while pressing his rock hard cock against her.

He pulled away.

Both of them were breathing hard and Cori almost cried out at his withdrawal. At the same time, tears filmed her eyes. She didn’t need this. Couldn’t handle it. That he drove her crazy made him all the more dangerous.

Judging by his arousal, she must drive him crazy too. It might be her only defense.

“Your body is your best weapon against a man.” Adrienne’s lesson jumped to the forefront of her mind. Two could play this seduction game. She couldn’t afford to let him win. There was more at stake than her heart and common sense. Jarrod...

Their gaze’s merged for an eternal minute.

Finally, his lips turned up slightly.

She tilted her head. What now?

“You liked that, didn’t you?”

Cori started shaking on the inside. How dare he...

“You’re thinking I have a lot of gall.” He seemed to read her thoughts and they amused him.

“Well...yes.” Those itchy fingers again. They longed to connect with his cheek.

He grinned, happy with himself. “But I caught you in my room. You weren’t supposed to be here, and you know that.”

“I did, but...”

He put up a hand, his grin as engaging as it was infuriating. “Forgive me for considering the possibility that you kind of like me, scar and all.”

She swallowed her anger. Damn! He had the upper hand. Even so, she’d had enough of men screwing her around.

“Will I have to lock my door at night to escape your advances?”



She could see he was going to break out laughing at any moment. Was this better than his anger? She couldn't take it and not fight back at all. "If you lock your room at night, I'll never even know."

"You look cute when you're mad."

"I'm not mad." Time to be humble. He knew he held some important cards. She had to make him think he had the upper hand. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have been in here, and I'm not mad that you're making the most of finding me here. Although I wish you wouldn't be so..." So what? Arrogant? Obnoxious? Damn it, damn it, damn it, she had enjoyed his touch, way too much, and her hardened nipples gave her away. Clearly, the man was no virgin, even if, of late, he'd cloistered himself off like one.

He stood there, hands on his hips, legs spread and she wanted to eat him up.

"Would another kiss calm your temper?"

Yes. "No!"

He finally did laugh and took a step forward, bringing him right back to where he'd been before. She stared into his hypnotizing stare and melted. Damn him! Why did he cast such a spell over her? What magic powers did he possess that nobody else had? His hands gently grabbed her forearms, then traveled upwards, teasing her skin and making her go hot inside. "You don't want another kiss?"

“I don’t. I don’t!”

He lowered his head.

“I do!”

His lips drank her again and this time the tense sensations she felt while near him exploded once more, bursting into little particles and racing through her blood, everywhere, everywhere imaginable. She grabbed the back of his head and fisted one hand into his thick, silky hair, then splayed her other palm over his muscular back. Solid, like a wall, soft, like velvet...muscle and skin...his musky scent, his delicious lips. What was he doing? What was she doing? Why did she even care? As his lips traveled to her throat, she threw back her head, eyes closed, and laughed.

“I would give you what you want, if I could,” he mumbled against her flesh.

That broke through the pleasurable fog a little bit. “What are you talking about?”

His lips and tongue touched the hollow of her throat. “I mean I know you want me, but we can’t.”

“I don’t want you.” But she didn’t pull away. She twisted his hair around her fingers and slid her other hand down, down, down. She’d never been this way before, but she wanted to touch his swollen cock to see how it felt...to do what Amy had done...

“You want me and that will only happen on my terms,” she managed. Would letting him think she wanted him be so bad? The rational side of her knew it might keep him interested enough to keep Jarrod and her here and safe. But despite Adrienne’s urging, she didn’t have it in her to play the slut. Would playing hard to get be as effective? Perhaps he liked women who made him chase them. Maybe he’d broken up with Amy because she’d loved him too much. Never had she dreamed she, Cori Mallory, would use sex as a weapon, but now it was necessary. It was vitally important that she beat Adam at his game of seduction.

“I need to get away from here before I...” He turned on his heel and headed towards the staircase.

She put out her hand as if it would bring him back, but he never looked over his shoulder.

The next thing she knew, the front door had opened and shut, leaving her hungry body still tingling for him, feeling abandoned inside, and strangely dazed. Sweat-drenched, she headed towards her own room, shaking her head in confusion.

## Chapter Six

Adam glanced up at the clock on the wall of the office, 4:55. He stifled a yawn. What a day he'd endured.

Adam had marched straight to his office after his encounter with Cori. It had helped him forget. Now he inhaled the strong smell of coffee as he bantered a little with a few members of his crew. Jackie stood behind them, waiting for her crack at the coffee machine. When she reached it, the others had cleared out and only Adam remained. He took a sip of coffee and rested his back against the wall, staring into space, his mind crowded, chaotic, and uneasy.

"Adam, that man who came here last week wants to buy the house on the corner of your block."

Adam raised his eyes and nodded at Jackie. He tried to focus on work. "You mean Corelli?"

Jackie removed her glasses from her head and slid them up her nose. She held out a piece of paper. "Joseph Corelli."

Adam scratched his head, thinking hard. "That sounds familiar and not work-related. The name."

Jackie shrugged. “Jordan talked to him a few times. Me too. We told you about him. Guy owns a few businesses in Chicago and currently lives there. I can’t imagine how you’d know him other than through the business. He’s been to the house several times and has decided to buy it.”

Adam took a sip of coffee. After he swallowed he said, “Good. He can afford it.” One more house sold. He sucked in a deep breath and checked the clock, 5:02 now. “Why are you still here?”

“I’m just leaving, dear. See you in the morning.”

Adam nodded and smiled at her. After she left, he found himself alone with his thoughts.

The day had kept him busy. After enrolling Jarrod in school and finding Cori in his room, he’d come to work for a few hours, then picked Jarrod up from school and dropped him off at home. He hadn’t wanted to see Cori again after the way she’d mesmerized him earlier. He should have been angrier at her for searching his room, and he certainly didn’t trust her to keep out of it, but he couldn’t look at her and really stay upset. Crap, he felt his cock stirring at the thought of her.

Part of it had to be his three celibate years. He needed to get laid and soon. Time to get on the computer and look for some single’s group. Maybe he wouldn’t obsess over Cori, whom he couldn’t have, if he got it on a regular basis from

somebody else with his problem. He drank down the last of his coffee, crushed the cup in his hand, and tossed it in the nearby trash.

He heard the bell jingle, signaling an arrival in the office. Jackie must have forgotten to lock up. Damn! He didn't feel like working anymore. Exhaling harshly, he took a few steps out of the office into the main part of the house.

"Well, well, well." He felt his heart race and a pleasant ripple pulse through all of him. "What a surprise. Can't stay away from me, Ms. Mallory?"

She stopped halfway towards him, one hand on her hip, her head tilted. He almost laughed at the reaction on her face. He loved to tease her.

She looked lovely. The tight ribbed red shirt she wore accentuated her perfectly shaped, half melon tits. Her flare jeans, accentuated the shapeliness of her hips and thighs. As his gaze reluctantly lifted from her body to her face, he laughed at the red stains on her cheeks. Her hair appeared full and freshly washed and her heart-shaped lips turned down at the ends.

"You didn't come just to see me?" He crossed his arms, feeling a familiar, frustrating itch in his loins.

"No. I'm missing something and I came to see if I'd left it here yesterday."

He felt himself grinning and he sauntered up to her. She backed up a few paces. When he reached her, he inhaled the fresh scents of baking. So, that's what she'd done today. He spotted a smudge of flour on her chin. Reaching out, he

grabbed one of her shoulders in a gentle grasp, then wiped her face with his other hand.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes spelled confusion, but she didn’t back away. What a good sign! He meant to make her ache for him. Then he’d never give her what she wanted and show the princess what it felt like to be rejected.

“What did you leave here?” He didn’t know whether to believe her story or not.

“A Kennedy half dollar. It’s sort of a good luck piece for me.” Her entire face reddened now and he found her blush adorable. “I didn’t even think the place would still be open, but I thought I’d try.”

“You want to get lucky?” She brought out his mischievous side.

Cori yanked out of his grasp and headed towards the office. He immediately followed her, his wide grin taking over again.

“Will you please leave me alone?” She went to her desk, kneeled down, and opened the bottom drawer.

He sat on the edge of the desk while she rummaged through various books and papers. “You’re the one who keeps coming after me. I should ask you to leave me alone. You probably applied for this job because you knew I was here.”

She stared up from the floor, her eyes dark. “Are you serious?”

“No, but I understand that women find me irresistible, even when they deny it. Now you come looking for me at the office. Makes me wonder.”

“You’re impossible.” She started rummaging again and suddenly let out a happy cry. “It’s here!” In triumph, she held up a coin, then stuck it in her pocket. Rising to her feet, they locked gazes and he flashed her a smile. She turned her head and tried to walk around the side of the desk opposite where he sat.

He blamed his hard-on as the reason for darting over and blocking her. He grabbed her arms and felt the heat and sizzle of her skin. “So do you feel luckier now?”

“Actually, no!” She tried to pull away from him, but he held tight. To his surprise, she kicked at him, almost hitting the family jewels.

“Hey, there! Why are you trying to hurt me? I’m not hurting you.”

“Take your hands off of me. Why do you keep touching me?”

He removed his hands, not without reluctance, and crossed his arms, wondering if a hard-on could bust a zipper.

She walked around him and headed out of the room. He toyed with letting her leave, then decided to follow her again.

“Me and my shadow,” she said, tossing her head as he trailed behind her.

He laughed. She made him laugh. “You don’t mind,” he tried to see how she’d react.



To his surprise, she halted and whirled around and he almost collided with her. Instead, he found himself only a few inches from her and the heat swirled around him again. Hell, he could almost see the smoke.

In spite of the sexually charged atmosphere, she narrowed her eyes. “I thought you don’t fuck your employees.”

He heard a quiver in her voice.

“I don’t.” He felt sweat beading on his forehead. “I’ve kissed a few, that’s all.”

“Did Amy work for you?” she shot at him.

Some of the heat cooled but as his gaze set on her chest, the temperature shot up again. “No. I’ve never dated an employee, like I said, but I’ve stolen a few kisses.” His gaze lifted to her slightly parted, delicious, pink lips. God, they beckoned to him.

“I need you to stop this.” Her tone and expression surprised him. Her coffee-colored eyes looked hungry, rather than upset. Did he detect a hint of pleading?

His breathing increased, as did the size of his cock. She desired him. He could feel it. “You’re afraid.”

“Of you? I don’t think so.” She tried to laugh, but came up short.

That bulging zipper again. “You don’t think I’ll hurt you. Unlike you, I wouldn’t hit you, even if you deserved it.”

She lowered her gaze, but he caught her chin and made her look at him. Lord, she tempted him. If only he didn't have...

"You're afraid you'll want me." He felt her trembling under his fingers and it turned him on all the more.

"You're the one who wants me," she said, barely above a whisper.

He couldn't argue. But he felt her desire for him too. Closing the small gap between them, he gently pressed his palm against the back of her head. He waited a moment to see if she pulled away. He didn't want to do anything against her will.

She remained motionless. He caught her stare and sensations clawed inside his body and went straight to his cock. Ruled by his pulsing erection, his reasoning gone, he backed her into the wall and pressed his lips firmly against hers. As she melted against his body, he pushed hard against her, and let the feelings take over. His mind turned to mush.



Cori tried to keep a grain of reasoning in her brain, but as he pushed against her, all hard muscle and sinew, she couldn't think. Her hand slid into the thick softness of his hair and her other arm wrapped around his rock solid back. Her heart galloped and she felt her entire body flush with heat. Just his pounding heart and ragged breathing drove her wild. She should have shoved him away or slapped him, but then she would lose these feelings—these electrifying sensations.

He'd taken over. How could she gain the upper hand?

She heard a guttural noise erupt from his throat as his lips and tongue devoured her. His hands ran up and down her back, one suddenly slipped in front and tickled her ear then slid gently down her face and throat until it circled her sensitive, screaming tit. Another sound erupted, but this time it came from her own throat. Her knees turned to rubber as his clever hand touched her flesh through the neck of her pheasant blouse. When his fingers ignored her bra and tweaked her nipple, she almost passed out.

He pulled back to grin at her. She should say something mean to him, stop him, but she couldn't. His bright eyes looked so naughty and his lips, red from the kissing, begged for more.

He grabbed her under her arms. "Don't want you to fall, babe. I can tell you're weak."

Damn him!

"I'm not your babe." It came out as only a whisper.

"I know, sweetheart."

She felt a magnetic pull towards him and wanted to fall into his sensual body, but she didn't have time. Suddenly he hoisted her onto his shoulder with one easy swing of his arm.

“Hey!” Her heart fluttered as he carried her back into the office. Shocked, but actually enjoying his Tarzan imitation, she hit his back with her fists and kicked her legs, not really meaning to hurt him. She no longer had the urge to hurt this man who intrigued her, who gave her so much pleasure. And suddenly she wanted him to make love to her. It was her idea. She had the upper hand. She would have him and by the way her body screamed she knew it would be an experience like none she’d ever indulged in before.

He set her on the desktop, her long legs hanging over the edge, and she laughed at his wickedly grinning face.

“You’re crazy,” she said.

“Crazy like a fox.” His wink sent heat waves shuddering to her belly.

He stared down at her, then fingered the bottom of her top and started peeling it off of her. She accommodated him by lifting her head so he could remove it. What the hell?

She should have protested. Instead her nipples pointed at him like two straight pins and her breathing hastened. His hands, oh, god, his magic hands. Rough and large and, oh so gentle! They grazed her skin and sent fireworks clear to the pleasure area between her thighs. “Adam,” she mumbled.

He pulled off his shirt and once again, she stared at the twin of a Greek God statue, sweat glistening on his skin. His dark hairs begged for teasing. She reached

up and brushed her hand against them, grazing his nipple in the process. A sound like a choke erupted from him and he climbed on top of her, catching her lips again.

His body weight on top of hers, felt wonderful. Her tits fit like puzzle pieces against his nipples, and he groaned, rocking back and forth to cause wonderful, delightful friction.

She felt the hardness of his cock against her pussy and icy cold prickles shot through her veins along with flames of fire. His lips tore from her mouth and started working downward, her chin, her throat, her chest, her tits. He sucked a nipple as if he were a suckling baby and she gritted her teeth, tears springing to her eyes. “Maybe it’s time to stop,” she muttered but she never wanted him to stop.

He lifted his head, taking his heat with him. “Do you want me to?” His heavy breathing tickled her neck. Her skin blazed.

“No. No, don’t stop.”

He lowered his dark head and caught her nipple in his teeth, gnawing playfully.

She tried to thrash her legs, but his weight prevented that. She wanted to arch her back, but again, she could only try.

In the midst of her foggy brain, a grain of common sense trickled through. She couldn't let him hold all the cards. This scrumptious, delicious, gorgeous man had the advantage. She needed to change that or he'd win.

"Move over a little. You're hurting me," she said, her own words sounding far away.

He lifted his lower half to move to a different position, but before he could settle down again, she unbuttoned his pants, laughing all the while.

He froze and his eyes grew round, then he laughed as she pulled his pants down a little and grabbed onto cock.

Her head lifted to take a look and she couldn't breathe. She'd never seen a cock quite as large, thick and smooth as his. She had a flash of all the things Joe had taught her to do and she suddenly wanted to take it in her mouth. As she gaped, she vaguely realized that he'd leaned on one elbow and was unbuttoning her shorts with nimble fingers that stung. Before she knew what had happened, he'd tossed her shorts to the ground and his fingers slipped between her thighs.

"Bet you taste like honey," he murmured and lowered his head. She readied herself, but he pulled up. "I can't." He sounded pained.

"Why not?"

His breath caressed her hot spot, making her strong muscles below clench.

He said, "I'd love to. I can't." Then hot, soft fingers stroked her dampness and made her forget her questions.

Cori screamed as his slick fingers slid up and down her pussy. Her muscles seized and released, causing her entire being to convulse with waves of indescribable sensation and pleasure. Suddenly she no longer ruled her body. The sensations did; he did. "Adam! Get inside of me! Please!" Her pussy throbbed with ache and need of him and only him. Again she cried out. It was her call; she still retained the right to say she controlled the game. "Adam, damn it, fuck me! Please, babe! I can't take it anymore!"

"I'm not your babe."

Suddenly he rolled off her and jumped lightly to his feet. All the pleasure emitting from his touch withdrew and she sat up on the messy office desk and watched him with her jaw hanging open. Casually, he buttoned his jeans, looking down at his fingers. The fingers that had just driven her half insane.

"Playtime is over," he said.

Cori swallowed a lump in her throat. Her body still hummed with sensation and, as she looked at him, he'd never seemed so appealing. Mussed hair, wide shoulders, six pack...her gaze traveled to his bent head and she saw the length and thickness of his eyelashes. She couldn't let him just walk out the door.

“That desk can’t be too comfortable,” he said, his voice lacking its earlier animation.

“It’s not, since you left.” She slid off the desk, aware of a softness in her voice that she rarely allowed. She stopped maybe a foot before him and reached up to stroke his messy hair, now spilt above those luminous eyes. “What did you do that for?”

“Didn’t you like it?” His lids fell a little, hiding his expression. He reached for his t-shirt laying at the foot of the desk, then stuck his head through it and wiggled his muscles into its thin material.

He looked better than any movie star she’d ever seen. His gaze locked with hers but didn’t show any emotion. He could certainly turn it on and off.

“I wanted you to make love to me,” she heard. Yikes! The words had come from her! He’d won, she guessed, but did it matter?

“I don’t want to get you pregnant.” His voice remained low-key and soft. But something flashed over his features making him seem vulnerable and that gripped her heart.

“I’m on the Pill, babe.”

“I’m not your babe. Or sweetheart.” A half smile crept through.

She found her legs moving and her arms flinging around his neck. Could touching a man cause one to pass out? The taut, slippery feel of damp skin, along



with his strong muscles intoxicated her. “Does that change things?” She quickly kissed the side of his lips and said, “You know, it’s refreshing that you care about not getting me pregnant. The men I’ve known have all been very thoughtless.”

He exhaled and tried to pull away. As his warm breath caressed her cheek, she held on tighter.

“I’m afraid I played a dangerous game and it has to stop now. Please, you don’t know what it does to me when you touch me. Stop,” his soft voice pleaded.

“No.”

“There’s no point. Let go before I come in my pants and embarrass myself.”

Reluctantly, she pulled back feeling hurt, but also white hot. His affect on her didn’t stop with their separation. She still tingled from him.

He ran a hand through his hair and kept his gaze low. “Because of what you did at the pub, I wanted to get back at you by making you want me. I didn’t even know if I could do that.”

“You could. And did.” She had to laugh. Now she had a chance to make things right. But he didn’t smile.

“I shouldn’t have done it. Shouldn’t even have approached you, but I couldn’t stop myself. I’ve never found myself more attracted to anybody in my life. I can’t even explain how beautiful I think you are. Words aren’t adequate.”

She froze feeling warmth wash all over her. “That’s—quite a compliment. I saw Amy’s picture. She’s gorgeous.”

His mouth twisted. “She’s a Barbie doll. You’re something more. Besides, she’s about as mature as a fourteen year old and you’re a woman. I just...” He appeared as if searching for elusive words.

She desperately wanted to throw herself into his arms. “You’re not so bad yourself, babe. I’ve never felt this sort of attraction either.”

His lips turned up slightly.

Encouraged, she went on. “Your touch alone is almost enough to cause an orgasm. I’m willing to make love to you. Hell, I want to.”

“I have that employee rule.” He puzzled her by taking a step backwards.

“Break it.”

“I can’t.” The pain on his face seemed real.

“What’s wrong? Please tell me.” She clenched her fists to keep her hands to herself.

He turned away, frustrating her further.

“I’ve kept this a secret from everyone else,” he said, his voice suddenly harsh. “Why should I tell you?”

She felt a wave of dread. “I find it’s better to share my burdens. I’m not going to spill any secrets you tell me. Anyone who’s nice to Jarrod is forever in my good graces.”

He turned to stare at her. “I know. You’re a loving, caring sister.”

She didn’t dispute the truth, but worried about the sudden fatigue in his eyes.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this,” he said and his voice had a rough edge to it. In a defiant, yet almost frightened way, he stared her down, his eyes blazing to the center of her soul.

She waited, her body tensed for a blow.

“I have Herpes.”

The blow hit her like a hard punch to the midsection. She could only stare at him, shaking her head in disbelief and denial.

## Chapter Seven

A long moment passed between them. Adam stared at her, his eyes filled with bitter self-loathing. She felt a shiver from his gaze. "You're teasing me." But he wasn't.

She knew it.

He shook his head.

She tried to steady herself, since the floor had tilted. "How? Amy!"

He smirked.

She shut her eyes and mentally cleared her mind. "Did she...do it on purpose?"

"I just don't think she cared if it happened."

She opened her eyes wide and assessed him. He looked tense, a mist of anger clouding his eyes.

"She had it and didn't tell me. When I told her I had a rash, then she told me and seemed quite happy about it. She thought I'd marry her then because who else would have me?"

I would, she thought, then she blinked several times. She didn't want him even without Herpes. Well yes, she'd wanted him, but only for sex. She certainly didn't want his disease.

"Did you love her? Before you knew?" The words tumbled out. She barely realized they'd come out.

"No. I'd never loved her. I told her from the start it was a sexual relationship and that I couldn't offer her more." He shrugged. "She claimed to have fallen in love with me. I never meant for that to happen."

Cori licked her dry lips. She found the situation absurd. Before her stood a man who attracted her like none other; who looked better than any man she'd seen in her life. And he had Herpes. Again, her tongue felt loose. "So...since then...?"

His gaze imprinted its intensity on her brain. "So since then I've been celibate. I'm not a saint, but I won't give this to anybody else." His words struck, like a whip.

Cori recoiled. "That's, considerate of you..."

"I'm a considerate man." His forehead lowered and he crossed his arms.

Another long silence passed between them and they kept their gazes locked solid. A shiver and a wave of heat took her. Damn it! "You never plan to make love again?" Why had she asked that?

He flashed an icy smile, his charming dimple mocking his predicament. “I plan. I figured I’d join some single’s group for people with Herpes, but as of yet, I can’t bring myself to do it.”

She understood. “Amy. What a bitch. Did you see a doctor?”

He laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “What for? She has it. I broke out in a rash—a bad one. I went to this free clinic and saw this nurse for a few minutes. She said it looked like Herpes and I got cream. I didn’t even give my real name, I was so ashamed.”

Oh, shit. In spite of the horrendous turn of events, she so wanted to hug him. He’d shut down.

“Why were you ashamed? She gave it to you. It’s not like you went out every night of the week and did some woman...”

His eyes flashed. “At one time, I did, but never got it then. My payback was Amy.”

He paused, his eyes remote. “Not sure why I was, am ashamed. Just having it is embarrassing. A stigma. I try not to think about it, but its there—especially when I see a woman I’m interested in.” His eyes cleared and focused on hers.

She took it all in, and widened her eyes, then let out a breath. “How often...do you get outbreaks?”

“I just had the one at the beginning. So far I’ve been lucky. But I could still infect somebody.”

“Condoms?”

“If necessary, I guess. One day. Maybe. I’m always afraid it won’t work and the woman will still catch it.” He let out a frustrated breath. “Nothing is a guarantee except abstinence or a partner with it.”

“Condoms are supposed to help.”

“I know.” Something flashed in his eyes and she sensed an exposure in him that touched her. The moment passed, but she’d seen it. It mattered. “There are ways to satisfy partners without intercourse.” She had to try. In no way did she want him to think they shouldn’t touch again. Quite the contrary, she wanted to put her hands all over him and wanted his all over hers. Just staring at him made her wet with need.

“True. We’ve already done one of them.” He perked up a little.

Their gazes froze and the muscle between her thighs clenched and quivered with excitement.

“But I really wanted to plunge inside of you.” His eyes never wavered. “I wanted to slide as deep as I could and feel the warmth of your pussy around my cock. I wanted to come inside of you until I collapsed. I can’t do that.”

She realized her breathing had sped up and her nipples had hardened. Again. At the same time her entire body had tingled with desire for him. “I’d like that too.” What happened to playing hard to get? Now that she’d found he was impossible to get, that unattainable goal made her want to lie down and weep. “If you’re not having an outbreak, can you still pass it along?” She found herself reaching for the impossible.

“I can’t take any chances.” He shook his head decisively. “I refuse to do to anyone else what Amy did to me.”

“You’ve never told this to anyone before,” she stated, because she knew.

“No.”

“Why tell me?”

His lips quirked upwards. “What choice did I have? You wanted me. Any normal, hot-blooded man would rush at the chance to have a beauty like you. I won’t have you living and working with me, wondering if I’m a normal guy. Better you know about the Herpes. This way you can understand that tempting me is futile.”

That thought depressed her. She found herself moving closer to him and before she knew what she’d done, she’d reached up to smooth back his luscious, silky hair.

“Don’t, babe.”



“I’m not your...” She couldn’t kid around with him. “I like to touch you.”

“I’m sorry. It would truly be better if you really didn’t find me attractive.”

“I know.” A lump clogged her throat. She tried a sad joke. “Would have been best if I’d really meant what I’d said at the pub.”

He nodded. “Would have helped if I didn’t find you so attractive either.” His hot gaze took her in and a flash of pain passed over his features.

She felt a flush and suddenly wanted to scream at the unfairness. Pull yourself together, Cori. She smoothed down her blouse. “If it’s only an attraction and we don’t really like one another, we should be able to control ourselves.”

He flashed his dimple and white teeth. “Spoken like a woman.”

She felt his stare. It caressed her and she shivered. Actually, she did like him. The little tidbits she learned about him all seemed positive. She knew many men would take what they wanted, Herpes or not.

Herpes. She’d really worked herself up and wanted to make love to him. Now what?

He stood there, all male hormones and oozing sex appeal. Now what, indeed?

“There’s nothing you can do?”

He laughed and took her chin, his thumb caressing her cheek. “You’re a frisky one. My deepest regret when I leave this earth will be never having been able to test exactly how frisky you are.”

His thumb left tingles on her skin and she reached up to grasp his hard forearm. “I’d settle for less than penetration.” With him so close, she needed to touch him in the most satisfying way possible, no matter what the limitations.

He pulled back and appraised her. “Maybe another time. Right now I want to fuck the daylights out of you, babe. I don’t trust my control.”

She swallowed hard, her body reacting with a scream. “I’m not your babe, and I guess I can’t be, even for one night...”

“Stop torturing me.” He spoke just above a whisper, but she couldn’t mistake the depth of his words.

Sentences bubbled to her throat, but she swallowed them. She could feel his pain. It matched her own. To ease it, she turned away, aware of her trembling knees. “So Jarrod, um, how is he?”

She heard him expelling a breath. After an eternal pause, he said, “Jarrod seemed pleased with the school. Had a good day. When I dropped him off at home this afternoon, he thanked me for everything. Nice kid. Didn’t he talk to you?”

Cori felt her stomach clenching. Jarrod would expect them to stay with Adam. “He did. Said he never wants to leave. Wishes you were his big brother.”

“In a way, that’s my function right now.”

Cori chewed a thumbnail. The sexual tension hung heavily in the air. “Yes, well, I appreciate it.” Staying with him in a platonic way would do her in.

The musical notes of a cell phone surprised her and she whirled back around as Adam lifted the phone to his ear. He eluded her. While he listened to the caller, his face took on an appealing look of intense concentration and she wanted to hug him. Finally he said, “All right, I’ll be over. Tell him to wait for me.” He whipped his phone into his back pocket and straightened up, still avoiding her avid stare. “I have to go to a house. The man who’s going to buy it is there. I have to let him in.”

She didn’t move.

He took a few steps from her then halted and turned towards her and she lifted her head. They looked at each other and he appeared a little flustered, which was unusual for him. She bet she looked devastated. She didn’t want him to leave, but he was temptation itself, so it was best if he did go.

“Would you like to come with me?”

His offer surprised her.

“You may have to show a house one day,” he said.

She knew he wanted her to go but didn’t understand why. Did he want to be friends with her? Adam Fletcher, with his tall, well-built presence, evoked

thoughts well beyond friendship. She couldn't do it, at least not right now. She had so much to think over. "I think I'll go back and check up on Jarrod."

Adam nodded. "All right. I'll catch you later at dinner. Be sure to cook something good." He reached out and tenderly grabbed her arms. "Thanks for...understanding."

He kissed her and she melted against his hard body, every cell in her being leaping to life. How she wished she could do him. She moaned, as did he, then he pulled away and patted her head.

"Better leave or..." He winked at her, and then left, never looking back.

Cori felt her heart sink, so after the bell jingled as he left, she ran towards the big picture window in the living room. Until he disappeared from view, she stared at his back. He had the fluid, quick, graceful movements of a stalking animal. After he'd disappeared from view, she turned away and pressed her lips together. This sucked.

She could still feel his hands, his body, his lips on her, and her body tensed. Her muscles clenched. Waves of pleasure caused her intimate spots to spasm all at one time. Didn't take much to get her wet, not around Adam anyway. "Adam, Adam, Adam, what am I going to do with you?" She wished she could do what she really wanted to. Feeling a little foolish and slightly guilty, she touched herself down below to obtain a little relief. You're pathetic, Cori.

She let out a sigh and dropped her hands. If she'd known him for a long time and they were in love, then he found out he had Herpes, she'd have to make hard choices. But that wasn't the case; they barely knew each other. She couldn't risk catching it just because she found him hot. Even though his touch made her body twitch. Even if her body wept for him long after he'd left her...



Adam stepped into the large, bare home, sniffing in the smell of plaster and fresh paint. He eyed the stocky middle-aged man with his dark coloring. He had a pretty wife, short, perky, and auburn-haired. Two well-behaved children stood next to them.

Joe Corelli looked around and grinned. "Each time I see it, I love it more and more. What about you, Jenna?"

"Oh, it's gorgeous," she gushed, squeezing the hand of a well-scrubbed, dark haired toddler.

Adam tried to remain aloof, stepping back respectfully to give the couple time. They meandered all over the house, going up and down the steps. When they finished touring, they held hands and both beamed.

"It's perfect," Joe said.

Adam smiled. "I'm glad you like it."

"How soon can we move in?"

“As soon as you close.”

“That won’t take long.”

Adam mumbled some words, his mind on the couple. They looked like such a happy pair and the kids were so cute. Suddenly he saw a flash of himself with Cori.

No, it could never happen. Besides, he barely knew her. He didn’t know anything about her except that she didn’t have Herpes. That fucked it up right there. No chance to even explore their feelings and see if they’d make a good couple. Except for some fooling around, minus the actual bliss of the penetration, he couldn’t do anything about his intense attraction to her. He grimaced as the couple hugged. Somewhere, deep in his soul, it hurt to watch them.

After the Corelli’s had driven off, he trudged slowly back in the direction of his own house. The big five-bedroom house that would ultimately shield his family. He’d marry and have a few kids because that’s what he wanted. If he loved his wife, that would be a bonus, but not necessarily a requirement. If he found her attractive, if she loved him, if he considered her a friend, if she was a great mother, that’s all he expected. Love eluded him. Even before Amy, during his wild days of nonstop partying and drinking, the ones he’d wanted the most weren’t attainable. He’d not lacked for female attention, but they’d always been the wrong women. He didn’t expect his luck to change now.

Who needed love anyway? It made men into simpering women. He'd seen men weep over lost love. As he took heavier steps on the sidewalk, he clenched his fists. No woman would hold him in her power that way. Ever.

In a way, it was a blessing he couldn't have Cori.

## Chapter Eight

Two weeks later, Cori left work after waving good-bye to Adam. Her heart thudded madly as she strode down the sidewalk to his house. The sheer chemistry between the two of them could ignite a fire, but they hadn't touched since the day he'd told her he had Herpes. In fact, she felt he avoided being alone with her. Often he stayed out late and came home smelling of booze. Other times he played ball with Jarrod or helped him with his homework. Jarrod worshipped him. She could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice when he talked about him. Jarrod seemed happy with his new life, so Cori resigned herself to staying indefinitely. The one time she'd reminded Jarrod that they had to leave one day, he'd said, "Bet Adam won't make us go. Ever. In fact, maybe you'll get married."

Kids!

Cori, living and working day-to-day with Adam, saw the nice person behind his arrogant, tough facade. His softness, directed mostly at Jarrod and Jordan, never included her. They exchanged insults and barbs. He back-handedly complimented her cooking.

"This doesn't suck too bad."



He kept a wall up when around her, and she reciprocated. Just a quick glance from him turned her insides to butter, but she never let it show. Only in her dreams did she let down her guard. She'd wake up drenched with sweat, her body screaming with desire, the muscles down below pulsating her core. Daylight meant the end of dreams and disappointed her.

Lost in thought, the houses that she passed blurred and the threatening rain clouds didn't faze her. When Adam wrapped himself around her mind, he took over. She didn't understand it at all. Never before had any male dominated her thoughts this way. She saw him so often. Why did she think of him when they were apart?

"Cori Mallory!" The female voice sounded both shocked and appalled.

Cori halted and focused. A short, lithe woman, maybe thirty-two years old, stood before her, her fist clutching a leash while a small white poodle sniffed at a tree.

"Do I know you?" Cori searched her mind. The woman had shoulder length auburn hair, bright blue eyes, and petite features. She wore a sleeveless white shirt, tied under her breasts, exposing bronzed skin and a bellybutton. Low-cut blue shorts showed the tops of frilly undergarments. Her heels elevated her, yet she still didn't stand as tall as Cori did.

"Slut!" the woman said to her, her eyes slits.

Cori felt a wave of shock. "I think you have the wrong person. Excuse me...."

She tried to breeze past the intruder, but the woman grabbed her by the front of her white gauzy cotton wrap dress. Her full skirt brushed the backs of her legs and her foot, which was jammed into a low-heeled white sandal, almost turned. She caught herself before tripping on her face. "What the hell are you doing?" she asked the woman, trying to shove her away.

The small woman hung on tight. "What the hell are you doing?" The woman's voice verged on rage. "I never wanted to see you again, bitch!"

Cori pulled away from her with a vicious tug and stared at her, too curious now to want to leave without answers. "I've never seen you before," she said, tossing her hair, hoping she looked tougher than she felt. "Would you like to tell me how you know me?"

The woman flashed her an ugly smirk, exposing small pearls for teeth. The eyeteeth seemed to sharpen, like a vampire's. "I've seen lots of pictures of you. We've never met. You're the slut who fucked my husband."

Cori felt the words like a physical blow. She couldn't speak.

"That's right," the woman said, her face white with anger. "I'm Jenna Corelli. Joe told me how you'd come to work and undress in his office. Only a eunuch could have resisted that sort of temptation and my Joey is a real man. Why the fuck are you in my neighborhood? Joey told me you were one of his factory

workers so you can't be too rich." Her eyes sparkled with meanness. "Especially since he fired your ass!"

Cori tried to clear her head. "This is your neighborhood?" She heard her voice, but it sounded odd and far away.

"Just moved in. Don't tell me you struck oil and also just moved in."

Cori felt a band around her chest, impeding her breathing. "You bought one of these houses? Joe is here?"

Jenna grabbed the hair on the side of her head and yanked it so hard that she would have screamed had she not bit her lip. No way would she scream. With an efficient chop, she struck Jenna's forearm. The woman yelped and let go of her. Cori quickly stepped back, her hands up, ready to protect herself.

"It wasn't like Joe said," Cori said, managing to sound calm. "He's lying to you. That shouldn't surprise you at all. You know he's a fantastic liar. He told me he was divorced..."

"He would never say that!" The woman changed from white to beet red. "Why the fuck are you here? Are you stalking him?"

"No!" Cori couldn't believe this was happening. "I don't want him! I...my boss is Adam Fletcher—"

"The builder?" She winced.

"Yes!"

“He’s your new boss? Are you seducing him too? I’ve heard black women are easy.”

Cori whipped her head up to meet her eyes, her adrenalin rushing. “You bitch...”

“I’m a bitch? I didn’t do anyone’s husband, babe. You did!” Hatred gleamed in her eyes. She was not only angry that her husband had cheated, but with somebody like her...an African-American woman.

She decided to keep her poise for now and be the bigger person. She’d dealt with racism in her day, and this woman wasn’t worth the energy nor did she want to act in a way that would bolster the fool’s stereotype. “Keep my race out of this, it’s irrelevant,” she said, her voice icy. “Listen...”

“Oh, I’m listening.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm. “I’m all ears.”

Cori wanted to grab her and shake her. Instead, she kept her wits. “I never seduced Joe. As for Adam, what do you care what goes on between us?” Did this pious woman have a crush on Adam? Why had the thought even crossed her mind? In case she did, she said, “Adam is allowing me and my younger brother to live in his house so that Jarrod can go to a good school. I’m only telling you before you send some private eye to spy on me.”

Jenna laughed. “Let me guess. It’s platonic.”

“It’s none of your business, but I’m certainly not interested in Joe.”

Jenna laughed again. “Yeah, well, that Adam’s a hot young man.” Her smile faded. “Sluts like you have no trouble fucking two men. You keep your hands off Joe.”

“You have nothing to worry about. I hate him.”

“Of course you do, honey. He chose me over you.” She lifted her chin and stared at her with eyes as cold as ice.

Cori scanned the territory, ready to flee the woman. She wanted to run home and hide in her room. Joe lived in the development! She couldn’t live here too, not with him so close. “Look, you want to believe him. I’m sorry for what happened, but I didn’t know. He lied to both of us. Your Joey is a bastard.”

Jenna fingered a pearl necklace she wore, her eyes smoldering at Cori. “If you go near Joey again, I’ll kill you. I’m completely serious.”

“You’re completely delusional and crazy.” She’d had enough.

“Did you move here just to be near Joey?”

Cori broke into a sprint and ran, the best she could in heels. She headed down the sidewalk towards Adam’s house. She heard the dog barking and Jenna’s evil laughter, but the sounds grew softer, not louder. Jenna wasn’t following her, at least not this time.

When Cori slammed inside the house, she kicked off her shoes, picked them up, and then ran up the stairs, happy that Jarrod and Adam were both absent from sight. She shut her door and leaned against it, breathing hard, her heart racing.

Joe lived there! Joe lived there! He'd bought a house! His wife had just confronted her!

Cori tried to allow the truth to settle in. When it did, it hit her with a bang. Joe!

She'd never wanted to see him again and certainly had never wanted to meet his wife. Jenna obviously loved him with a blindness that could endanger her. Oh, she didn't really believe Jenna would kill her if she suspected anything, but you never knew...people were strange...

"Cori?"

Cori straightened her clothes, then opened the door for Jarrod. "Hi, darling. What's up?"

Thanks to Adam, Jarrod had new, trendy clothing and he looked tall and handsome in a powder blue polo shirt and dark blue khakis. "I want to visit a friend who lives in this subdivision. Can I?"

"Who?"

Jarrod blushed three shades darker. "Um, her name is Sara."

"A girl." Some of her tension ebbed away. Thank God for Jarrod.

After he left, she plopped down on the mattress of her bed and lay on her back, legs dangling over to the plush carpeting. Her heels scraped its softness. Staring up at the white canopy, she felt a wave of dread revisiting. What the hell would she do now?

Adam had done so much for her. She didn't want to bother him with this. Besides, what would he do about it? Joe had bought the house. He had every right to live there. She didn't move for a long time and eventually her lids grew heavy. She shut her eyes, just to rest them. In no way would she fall asleep yet. She wanted to cook a good dinner...



Adam climbed the staircase, tired from the day. He still wore a white t-shirt and old blue jeans from working with the crew. One of his white socks had a small hole in the toe, but he didn't care. All he wanted was a short nap. Too much work and too many nights awake, tossing and turning, thinking of Cori...it could drive a man insane. Would he ever get a full night's rest again?

He paused at the top of the stairs and inhaled. Cori's scent. Her damn scent. That elusive womanly flower scent that drove him nuts. It reminded him of springtime and sex...making love on a beach or in a park. Sensual. Hot. Like everything else about the woman.

Amy would love how she'd driven him to this state. She'd been so angry at him for refusing to marry her. Maybe he ought to call her and fuck her again. After all, they both had Herpes and he needed sexual release.

His nose followed the scent. He didn't want Amy. He wanted Cori. He thought of her intense dark eyes, her brilliant smile, those ruby lips, bouncing tits...she had a great set of tits. Every time she passed near him, he wanted to reach out and grab her. Why had she come into his life?

And why did he stand before her door when his room was on the other side of the hallway?

Adam couldn't avoid her. She drew him to her. It couldn't hurt just to see how she was doing. Usually she made dinner and for some reason, tonight she hadn't. Maybe she didn't feel well. The thought jolted him and he knocked on her door. When she didn't answer, he twisted the knob and walked inside, then stopped. Slowly, his lips spread to a closed smile. In the semi-darkness, she lay on top of her mattress, her dark hair fanning her beautiful caramel-colored oval face, the faint light from her window highlighting the lustrous sheen of her hair.

He broke into a full grin, feeling warm and fuzzy inside. He rarely felt this way towards women. Usually it was all about sex and only sex. Not with Cori. He strode into her room, sat down on the edge of her bed, then stared at her, just enjoying how she looked and smelled. His gaze fell to her chest and he admired



how it rose and fell with her gentle breathing. Impulsively, he reached out and smoothed back her hair. Heavenly. His hand burned.

“Hey, Miss Sleepyhead.” He knew she’d want to wake up and change into a...what? Lace negligee? His cock stirred at his wicked thought. He pictured her wearing a sheer red negligee and felt his breathing deepen and increase. Did she even have a negligee with her? Should he search her closet like she’d searched his room? No, women did that, not men. It didn’t matter anyway. He’d go nuts if he saw her in one. That would tempt the gods, let alone just a mere man like him. A man who hadn’t gotten laid in three years and who currently sat beside the hottest woman he’d ever laid eyes on, sprawled out on a bed.

He had to look away or his cock would erupt. He remembered when he’d had so much self-control. Ah, the good old days, BH. His life could be sectioned into two parts: BH and AH. Before Herpes and After Herpes. His life sucked AH.

“Adam?”

He started and focused on her lips. Had she really spoken? His gaze shot to her eyes. Two bright half moons stared up at him.

She lifted her head and tossed back her hair as she pulled to her elbows.

“What are you doing here?”

Good question. Trying not to show his discomfort, he said, “I thought you might be ill. I wanted to check up on you.” Too soft. Adam cleared his throat. “After all, I need you at the office.”

She sat beside him now, inches from him, and turned her face towards him.

He caught his breath. Now what? Her lips were close enough to kiss and he wanted to do just that.

“I’m not sick, Adam.” Not physically, anyway.

“I just wondered. You’ve never fallen asleep after work before.”

She went silent and still, and he strained to see her in the dimness. When he couldn’t make out her expression, he felt another pang of worry. His hand shot up to her forehead and he tested her temperature.

She threw his hand off. “What are you doing? I’m not two years old and you don’t have to see if I have a fever. I don’t.” Her warm, teasing breath tickled his chin.

Maybe she didn’t have a fever, but he sure did. “Sorry, babe. Just checking.”

“Adam, go away. I’m not in the mood for company.” She dropped her head.

He felt a wave of uneasiness. “Is everything all right?”

“Just go away.”

“Where’s Jarrod?” Always a safe topic.

She told him.

“A girl! Well, well, well. I’m not surprised. I saw quite a few girls checking him out when I signed him up.”

“You would notice that.” She sounded disgusted.

“Yes, I would.” Usually she teased or baited him. Tonight she sounded disgusted. With him? With life? “Did something happen, babe?”

“I’m not your babe. Or anyone’s.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Had she sounded harsher than expected? He hated not being able to see her expression. “What is it?”

“I...”

“Yes?” He automatically lifted her chin, electric shocks exploding through him, straight to his hardening cock. “Tell me.”

“It’s nothing.”

He let out a breath. “Liar. Didn’t you tell me burdens are better shared?”

“Yes.” She hesitated. “This is just a small thing. I’ll deal with it.” She ripped her chin from his grasp.

“If it’s so small, tell me.” He wanted to know, wanted to help.

“Really, it’s nothing.”

“I lay out my big secret to you, and you’d hide a small issue from me?” Damn it, would she just tell him?

“If it gets bad, I’ll tell you. I promise.”

He tried to assess the sincerity of her words, but needed to see her face for that.

“You’d better. I’m a great White Knight.”

“Well, I’m a shitty Damsel in Distress. You’ve done plenty for me and Jarrod already and you don’t need to involve yourself in my every problem. I can take care of myself. The only reason I agreed to move here is because of my brother.”

“I know.” He didn’t know. He wanted her to say she’d moved here to be near him, even though nothing could come of them. How crazy was that? How crazy did she make him? She certainly played with his head. And his cock.

His cock throbbed and, seated so close to her, he felt it was necessary to at least place a hand on her shoulder, using considerable restraint not to just sweep her into his arms.

“I like you here. You and Jarrod.”

She hesitated before saying, “Good. And I want to keep it that way. I’m not going to force you to slay every dragon that comes my way. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve gone overboard to help my brother. I think he likes you more than me.” She actually smiled.

Thank God she was starting to relax.

He laughed. “That will never happen, babe. He adores you.”

“I’m not your...”

“Babe. Sweetheart.”

They shared a laugh and he placed his other hand on her bare shoulder and gently tugged her towards him in the semi-darkness. He could see the delicate outline of her features and focused on her lips. “I’d like to call you Brown Sugar.”

Her breath caught and he thought she liked that name. It was true too.

“If you’re ever in danger, tell me.” Adam stared straight into her penetrating gaze. “All humans need help sometimes. There’s nothing to be ashamed of in that.”

Wow. So near her...

“Do you ever ask for help?” She cocked her head.

He could feel her breathing and tried to control the swelling behind his zipper. He thought about her question. “No.”

“Aha! Why should I when you don’t?”

“Because you’re a woman.” And what a woman! He drew her nearer him, knowing he courted disaster.

“How sexist can you get! Women are tougher than men! We’re stronger from birth and we live longer.”

He started to slowly and tenderly lower her to the mattress, then climbed halfway on top of her.

She didn’t push him off. Instead, she stroked the side of his hair, arousing him to another level.

“Men are tougher. Women just drive them to an early grave.” He lowered his lips to her neck and started kissing her warm flesh. Sweet surrender, she actually relaxed and gasped, rather than pushing him away. “Push me away. It’s best.” His lips traveled to her shoulder and he shoved back the straps of her summer dress with his lips and tongue. “I’m asking for help. Help me out here and push me away.”

She laughed. “Not yet. It feels too good and I need it...need you.”

Lord, she had to be nuts. Or he was. His heart pounded as he skirted the gentle silk of her flesh. “Sit up, love. I need to unzip this.” He rolled off of her and slid to his elbow.

She did pull to sit but said, “Adam, you’re right. This could lead to other things.”

He thought of something lying underneath his mattress. He’d bought it for a time like this and had never expected to use it. “Wait here. I can’t get exactly what I want, but I can give you what you need...sort of.”

“Wait here to get what I need? Sort of?” She laughed uncertainly.

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

He grinned as he bounced to his feet. Hell, he’d relieve himself in his bedroom. He had to. Then he’d come back and give her the ride of a lifetime. He only wished he could do it with his cock. As he bounded out of the room leaving

the door wide open, he thought about going back online later to see if he'd missed any new cures for Herpes, even though he already knew the answer to that.



Cori couldn't believe she'd awakened to find Adam staring down at her. The man smelled of sex. How badly did she want to do him?

She fanned herself with her hand and tried to swallow but there was no saliva in her mouth. He certainly had good timing. She needed the distraction after her confrontation with Jenna Corelli. And Adam certainly provided that. She wondered what he was up to. Well, she'd have to wait.

Her mind drifted to Jenna and Joe. What the hell should she do now? Would the lady bother her whenever they saw each other? Maybe she should tell Adam, but what could he do? Nothing. She'd handle the Corelli's herself. That bitch with the poodle would learn soon enough that Joe was a cheater when he did it again. And Joe himself wouldn't risk losing half his fortune by approaching her now. He'd find somebody further from home. She wondered how Joe would react when Jenna told him she lived right near him. She could almost see Joe coughing until he choked. The thought made her let out a short laugh.

"What's so funny?" Adam stepped into the room, one hand behind his back. He shut the door.

"Took you long enough. Where did you go?"

He sat beside her, pressing down the mattress. Immediately, her body stirred and she wanted to lay a hand on the powerful thigh that pressed against her own. “Can’t stand to be away from me for too long, I know,” he said, teasing her.

She felt a rush of blood through her veins. Little did he realize his jibing had struck close to home. “You came to me, not the other way around.”

“I was being a Good Samaritan.”

Every fiber of her body screamed to life and a siren went off in her head. Two weeks of torture and finally she could wrap her arms around him again, so she did. He pushed her down on the mattress as his lips claimed hers. His lips attacked her as if he were dying for a taste of her lips. She moaned against his mouth. He groaned in return. Her hand slid to his buttocks, he had such a cute, round one. In return, he plunged down her throat while his hand reached for the neck of her blouse. Somehow they were soon completely naked beside one another. All except for his briefs. He wouldn’t take them off and she didn’t force it.

As she ran her hands up and down his glorious, hard body, she tried to read him in the dark, like Braille. She wished to know every bone, every muscle, every smooth area, the roughness of his hair. Who knew when he’d allow this again?

“Why are you doing this?” Her hand slid into his briefs and ran up and down his erection.



“No, babe. Please.” He sounded pained. “I...made myself come already. I want this to be for you.”

“I wanted to make you come myself.” She heard Adrienne laughing at her. Adrienne wouldn’t believe what she’d done, what she’d become under his spell.

Adam dropped his head and kissed her bellybutton then licked it.

She kicked her legs and arched her back, a guttural noise escaping her throat. Lord, she couldn’t speak, couldn’t think.

“This is about you,” he spoke just above her skin. “Don’t worry about me.”

The rousing sensations made her senseless. “I...all right.” Hell, she had to give in.

He worked his tongue down towards the raging muscles between her thighs and her mind went blank when he reached her curls.

“Sweet,” he mumbled. “So sweet.”

Then she heard a vibrating sound and lifted her head. He held it up and grinned.

A vibrator. Joe had used one a few times. She knew the damage it could do and her breathing sped up. She felt a wetness down below. But a plastic toy; it felt wrong.

He had an evil grin on his face.

“Don’t use that, Adam, please,” she tried, almost unhinged. “It’s not normal to use that. I don’t want you to.”

He slowly slid it inside of her and all reasoning went to hell. She blanked out, yet was still conscious as she exploded inside. She heard herself screaming, felt herself scraping his back and surrendered herself to the paradise of her pulsating, throbbing pussy and her weightless, boneless body. The Fourth of July...inside of her...she couldn’t stop thrashing or raking his back with her fingernails or screaming...oh, Lord, the screaming...screaming as the sensations swung her into oblivion.

In the afterglow, her body still felt like jelly and the tingle hadn’t completely subsided. Her body pressed against his, feeling the hardness of his muscles, skin, and cock. “Give me that vibrator,” she mumbled.

He backed off and peered into her face. “You want me to do it again?” He flashed her his best grin, dimples flashing.

“Yes! But not right now. Give it to me.”

He reached behind him and handed it to her. “What are you up to, she-devil?”

“Roll to your back.” She flipped a switch and the vibrator buzzed.

He obeyed, still grinning, his eyes shimmering with anticipation.

She pushed down his briefs. “Jaysus!” Her eyes rounded. “I have no idea how you can fit that thing inside a woman!”

He laughed and laughed until she set the vibrating toy against his cock. Then he threw his head back, arched, and moaned. It didn’t take long before he came all over himself. She had the last laugh as she cleaned him up with a wet rag.

She didn’t have the last laugh though. He strode to the bathroom with the weapon in his hand and she heard water in the sink. A moment after that, he sat down beside her, flipped her to her back, pushed up her skirt and switched on the vibrator again. The wickedness in his eyes shot tremors through her even before he pressed the quivering head of the toy directly upon her trembling, needy clit.

She felt an explosion within her and didn’t remember much else after that, other than the pure, erotic sensations.

## Chapter Nine

After showing Cori another way to Paradise, Adam had left the room abruptly, wishing to hell he could do more with his own. Still, the vibrator had worked well. As he strode down the dark streets around his development, he let the cool nighttime air soothe him. It tossed his hair and caressed his cheeks as he passed house after house, all of them his own creations. Usually he felt good about seeing what his company had accomplished. Tonight, a restlessness left him uneasy and nothing felt completely right. Cori was getting to him. Worse, his caring transcended just sex and he couldn't slap a lid on his emotions.

Adam crossed the street, sprinting towards a nearby jogging trail. Running helped him let off steam and he had plenty of steam to let off. As he jogged down the sidewalk, his right foot suddenly hooked under a jelly-like object that moved as he tripped over it. He tried to stop himself from falling, but his foot turned and he dropped flat and hard to the solid cement. The air left his lungs and a sick wave of nausea swept over him. Shocked by the impact, he rolled to one side, gasping for air, ignoring a few bloody scrapes. What the hell had he tripped over anyway? He hadn't seen anything.

Before he could shake the cobwebs from his head, he felt hot, rapid panting over his face, followed by a rough tongue slurping his chin to forehead as if he were an ice cream cone. He turned away from the slobber, but the tongue didn't go away.

"What the fuck?" he half whispered, half gasped, then sat up, his knees in the air, blood soaking through one of the knees of his jeans. He ignored the blood and groaned.

"You trying to kill me?" he asked the puppy. It looked like a black lab mix. The dog jumped and yipped, its tail wagging frantically.

Adam took a few deep breaths to force the air back into his lungs and stared at the dog. He didn't have a collar on. "Who do you belong to?" he asked.

The dog didn't answer. Instead, he ran between his thighs and pressed his paws against his now torn t-shirt, licking his face again. Adam couldn't help laughing. He stroked the dog's stiff, short coat and wondered what to do next.

The dog obviously belonged to somebody. Maybe it would go home. Groaning again, he forced himself to his feet, feeling sharp stings on his knee and elbow. He checked the elbow and saw another bloody scrape. "Shit." He reached into his back pocket and grabbed a handkerchief, then dabbed at his wound. "Leave me alone, dammit. Go home," he told the dog.

The dog's tail wagged with more vigor.

Adam put his handkerchief away then started walking down the street, still headed towards the jogging trails. The puppy caught up to him and trotted next to his scraped white and blue leather basketball shoe.

“Go away,” he told the dog. “Get lost. I’m not bringing you home to mess up my place. Forget it.” He tried to break into a sprint again, but gasped and pulled up short, both hands gripping his lower thighs. The damn scrapes hurt like hell as well as a few sore ribs. He straightened up. All right, no jogging tonight. Might as well go back home and clean himself up. He didn’t like to admit defeat, but crap, the blood on his knee was getting bad and he stung all over. As much as he liked to play macho and ignore pain, jogging wouldn’t work tonight.

Letting out a disgruntled curse, he pivoted and headed towards his house.

So did the puppy.

“Get lost!” he hissed. “Go! Go somewhere else. I don’t need a mutt following me around!”

The dog trotted faithfully at his side.

Adam halted and the dog sat on its haunches. Under the streetlights, he could see him clearly. He was a cute little thing, shiny ebony fur and a twitching red nose. Adam knelt down, ignoring his various pains, and sat on his heels, one elbow on his undamaged knee. “What do you want from me, mutt?”

The dog jumped up, his paw scraping the bad knee. Adam bit his lip and slowly stood up again, his gaze never leaving the dog's. The mutt had friendly brown eyes that pleaded for love. It looked more pathetic than any woman who'd declared her love for him, knowing he didn't love her back.

"Oh, hell." He turned his head. Dogs were easier than women. If he could deal with Cori in the house, how could one puppy hurt, especially since the owner would probably claim it as soon as he put up signs about a lost dog? "Come on." He snapped his fingers and started to head towards his home.

The dog never missed a beat. He caught up to him and overtook him, his dark eyes never letting Adam out of his sight. Adam eventually laughed. Jarrod would like having a dog around, even if it only spent the night. Maybe Cori liked dogs too...



Cori set a stack of pancakes on the kitchen table, then called Jarrod. As she marched back to the stove, retrieving eggs and sausages, she felt a swell of mounting anger. She hadn't meant to fall asleep and not make dinner, but it had happened. Now she'd whipped up a fast dinner, which more closely resembled a breakfast, but at least it was hot and smelled great. And she'd gotten some of her hostility out while beating the batter and eggs. Damn Adam! He'd simply left the

house after playing with her and hadn't returned yet. She guessed he'd miss supper and that didn't bother her one bit.

He could starve for all she cared.

Jarrold strode into the kitchen and broke into a grin. He walked over to the sharp-edged wooden table in the middle of the room and pulled out a chair.

Cori brought a dish and silverware to him.

He started stacking pancakes on his plate, then reached for the syrup. "Where's Adam? Barhopping?"

"I don't know." The thought of Adam barhopping sent a wave of jealousy through her body. No, no. That couldn't be right. No way.

Jarrold dug into his pancakes and stuffed them in his mouth. "He's nice, Cori. You should try to get with him. I think you like each other, the way you guys stare at each other..."

"Jarrod!" Cori stared at him, realizing how grown he'd become. "I don't want a relationship." Her brother chewed and tried to hold in a smile at the same time. "We're friends, that's all." She thought of earlier that evening and wondered what they were.

Friends who sometimes fooled around, but only to a point? A friend she wished she could fuck?



A very alluring, attractive friend with Herpes, whom she could never have. And shouldn't want. Period.

"I think you could be more than friends," Jarrod said as if reading her thoughts. "Can I please have some milk?"

Cori rolled her eyes to the ceiling, then headed towards the refrigerator.

The front door was shoved open and Cori's heart sped up. She wanted to greet Adam with either a kiss or a swat, but controlled the urge.

"He's here. Go say hi," Jarrod whispered loudly as she poured the milk.

"No!"

"Jarrod! Cori!" His voice sounded jovial and unusually animated. "I brought a visitor."

Jarrod pushed back his chair and ran out of the kitchen. Cori followed, then cried with delight as a little black puppy with a tail longer than its length, ran up to her and started jumping at her feet.

"Hey!" Jarrod protested as he bent down. "He likes you more than me, Cori!" But the dog turned and started licking Jarrod's face and her brother laughed.

Cori looked across the room as Adam grinned. "Did you buy this puppy?" she asked and suddenly noticed a superficial scrape on his forehead, a tear near the bottom of his shirt, and an ugly red stain on the knee of his blue jeans. "Hey, what

happened?” Sobering, she ran up to him and flinched at a bloody circle on his elbow. It didn’t drip but it looked painful.

He squirmed under her stare. “It’s nothing. I’m going to wash up and I’ll be right back.” He brushed by her and headed towards the stairway. “I didn’t buy the dog, by the way. He followed me home.”

“It’s a she,” Jarrod put in. “Do you need sex education, Adam?”

Adam climbed a few steps, but Cori bolted and went after him. He ignored her and continued climbing the staircase, but so did she.

“Go away,” he muttered, no longer good-humored. “First the damn dog follows me home, now you’re following me upstairs.”

“Yes, I am! And you can’t stop me. What happened to you?”

“I tripped over the dog.” He reached the hallway and marched away from her.

“You what?” The urge to giggle fought with concern.

“Me and my shadow,” he mimicked as he stormed into his room with Cori on his heels.

“That’s my line,” she said. Her gaze struck the wet circle of blood on his elbow. “Let me clean you up Adam. I’m probably better at it than you are. I’ve taken care of Jarrod for a long time.”

“No.” He stepped into his private bathroom and tried to shut the door, but she caught the door before it slammed and pushed her way inside.

Adam turned towards her and asked, “Didn’t you get a good enough look at my bathroom when you snooped?”

“Come to think of it, I didn’t check it out.” She held in a grin, amused by his obvious annoyance. Taking a stroll around the rather large room, she ran her hands along the green tiles on the wall, fingered a few pine colored towels hanging from the rack, then peeked into a glass enclosed shower. “Nice.”

“I’m so glad you approve.”

She turned toward the toilet with its green rug covering. He’d kept the top and the seat up, like a typical man. Biting back a laugh, she shut it and said, “Sit down, dear.”

“I’m not your dear.”

“Where do you keep your washcloths and towels?”

He glared at her and she felt a strange thrill. It would be fun and sexy to fuss over Adam.

“I’ll find everything myself,” she said. “Sit down. I’m not going anywhere until I take care of those scrapes.”

She heard him grumbling.

“Oh,” she said, just outside the bathroom, reaching into the linen closet, “take off your pants too. I need to get a look at your knee.”

She heard a laugh. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea. We get into trouble when I take off my pants. By the way, you don’t have to treat me like a child over some scrapes.”

“Don’t act like a child then. Sit down. Scrapes need to be cleaned.”

When she entered the bathroom again, she found him seated in his briefs on the closed toilet lid. She had to pause to admire him. Never before had she seen him this close to naked. Earlier today, the room had been too dark for a good look. In the light, her head reeled as she appraised his bottom half. His thighs and calves were strong, solid muscle. The dusting of wiry hairs on his legs added to his masculinity. And between his powerful thighs...

Adam stared down at his injured knee and Cori snapped back to reality. She quickly headed toward the medicine cabinet and found some antiseptic, then wet the washcloth. As she sat back on her haunches before him, she said, “You’re a mess. Looks like you hit the ground hard.”

“Really!”

She glanced up at him into his crooked grin.

“I don’t like anyone to fuss over me like this.”

“Then don’t fall down when you have a woman like me around.” She found herself becoming aroused. Her damn nipples stiffening right before his eyes, her belly quivering, her pussy aching, it had become normal for her body to react this way to this sexy man. Now she had him practically naked and her breathing sped up as his eyes caught hers.

“Well?” he asked, a sexy grin telling her that he knew what he did to her. His hot eyes told her she did the same to him.

He leaned over and grabbed her crotch and she fell to her seat, laughing at him with both desire and disbelief. “What was that for?”

He grabbed her hands and pulled her back to her heels, then slid his hand down the neck of her shirt. When he tweaked her nipple, she gasped.

“Naughty boy!” She was fully turned on now and retaliated, grabbing his crotch and his nipple at the same time. “Two can play at this.”

Before she knew what had hit her, she was on her feet, savoring a kiss that melted her soul. Nothing...nothing was as heavenly as feeling his intimate kisses, simulating other things, while they pressed their bodies together. She melded into his solid chest and deliberately pressed against his hardened cock. He groaned. She groaned.

“I’m going to bleed all over you,” he whispered into her ear.

She pulled back and he frowned at his bloody elbow.

“I wasn’t the one who got sidetracked,” she muttered, pushing at his rough chest so he’d sit down, which he did.

As she picked up the rag that she’d dropped, he wore a shit-eating grin.

“Sorry.” He didn’t look or sound sorry at all.

And she didn’t want him to feel sorry. She relished his touch way too much...relished him.

As she applied antiseptic to his scrapes, she felt his eyes blazing into her. A few times she dared to meet them and a shiver coursed through her.

“You have a gentle touch,” he admitted after she finished.

“Feel better now?” Her heart sped up. He sat right across from her, on a toilet lid of all absurdities. How could anyone look sexy on a toilet lid?

Adam could, especially almost naked and covered with a few battle scars like a real life romance hero.

He rose to his feet and sidestepped her. “I’m fine. I was always fine. Takes a lot more than that to keep me down, babe.” He headed out of the bathroom and she shut her eyes a moment to stop her banging heart from busting out of her chest.

When she heard him opening his dresser, she joined him in his bedroom. He’d chosen a fresh pair of pants, beige khakis, and stepped into them. They locked eyes as his hands froze on the zipper and Cori felt a flame striking within

her. His eyes, those hot 'bedroom' eyes with long lashes both above and below, she felt like they called out to her.

He caught her gaze and smiled. "When you look at me that way..."

"What way?" She cocked her head to one side, feeling a thrill inside of her all over again. He grabbed her arms and kissed her, but this time he pulled back far enough to stick his hand down her shorts. Before she could assimilate what he'd done, his finger had found her clit and it leapt to attention as he manipulated it back and forth. She threw her head back but thankfully, he caught her before she collapsed. When she came to, he held her in his arms, his lips feathering her forehead. "You're a drug to me, girl. I need you so badly."

Cori, still trying to catch her breath, saw a flicker of something in his eyes. Desire? Need? Dare she think...something more romantic?

Their eyes locked in a stare that stopped time, him gazing down at her with blazing aqua eyes and she panting from the orgasm and trying to read his signal.

"Adammmmmmm!" Jarrod's voice from downstairs interrupted them. "The puppy pooped on the floor! Don't worry! I'll clean it up!"

"Shit," Adam mumbled. He ran out of the room buttoning his pants. Cori sucked in a breath then ran after him, almost catching up.

Jarrold had the puppy wrapped in his arms. "She didn't mean it, Adam," Jarrod said, his eyes round.

Adam stared down at Jarrod and Cori saw his expression softening. “I know she didn’t mean it. She needs training. It’s all right. I’ll clean it up.” He eyed the small pile of dog waste, while Cori wondered how he really felt. He had nice hardwood floors.

If he felt any anger, he hid it. After he cleaned it up, refusing help, he sent Jarrod out in the fenced back yard with the dog just in case. After Jarrod and his new companion left the house, Adam took a seat on the carpeted stairs, lowering his head, dropping his forearms to his knees. Cori moved towards him, but stopped short. She rested her elbow behind the golden knoll post on the banister. She wanted to rumple Adam’s already mussed up hair, but used all her self-restraint to stay in place. “What are you going to do with the dog, Adam?”

He lifted his head and shrugged, his gaze on hers. “Have to see if I can find her owner.”

“And if you can’t?”

“I’ll keep her. I can’t take her to the Humane Society. They try to find homes for all the animals, but...” He looked away from her.

Her breath caught. “They euthanize them sometimes.”

He didn’t say anything.

“You care about animals.”

“You’re surprised?” He peered up at her from beneath wavy dark bangs.



“Everything I learn about you surprises me. I don’t really know much about you at all.”

“I don’t know much about you either.” He ran a hand through his hair and it spilled over his forehead in an even more alluring way. His eyes burned at her.

“I’ll tell you about me.” She wanted to tell him about her. And she wanted him to tell her all his secrets, way beyond the Herpes.

“How did you lose your parents?”

The question came out of left field. She felt a jolt of surprise. Recovering, she said, “My mom had been sick since Jarrod was little. Cancer. She really fought hard. Dad was...pretty useless, never around at all. I took care of myself. Mom got worse after Jarrod’s birth, and my father ran off with a younger woman. We don’t know where he is.” Cori felt a tug at her heart but pushed the hurt aside. Adam’s kind eyes helped. She’d never seen his face so gentle; it warmed her and helped her continue. “Mom could never care much for Jarrod. I took care of them both. Then she finally died when I turned eighteen. That’s the story, I’m afraid.”

“You’ve had it rough, babe. I’m sorry.” Cori heard a low, comforting tenor in his voice. She wished he’d wrap his strong, warm arms around her. She could almost feel them.

“Don’t we all have it rough in some way? Taking Jordan couldn’t have been a picnic.”

The temporary softness hardened. “No, but I couldn’t give up on my brother like they had.” He paused and his eyes took on a faraway look, lost in the past. “He turned out well. I’m giving him half ownership of the business when he turns twenty-five.”

She automatically took a seat beside him on the step and he grabbed her and held her close. She felt herself smiling at him, even though his eyes still seemed lost. “Brave of you to take care of him.”

He made a face. “I could say the same about you.”

“I did what I promised my Mom I’d do. What I had to do.”

“Yeah, well same here.”

“Do you ever miss your parents, Adam?”

“After what they wanted to do to Jordan, no. They can go to hell.”

“I understand.” She paused, a twinge of pain passing through her. “I miss my mom. She did the best she could, being sick, and with Dad running off. I wish I still had her around.”

To her surprise and delight, he put his arm around her and pulled her close to him. She snuggled into his hard body, very aware of his bare chest.

“I’m sorry you lost her,” he mumbled into her ear.

She couldn’t have pinpointed who started it, but she found herself kissing him with his arms wrapped around her and her arms gripping him back. As

always, her body zoomed to life from the contact. She sighed against him and his arms tightened. Her tits hardened, the muscles between her thighs clenched and ached, as she reveled in his feel, his scent, his masculine sexuality...sweet torture...

The front door opened and the dog ran in, Jarrod right behind. As he shut the door, he spotted the two of them together on the stairs and Cori tried to pull away.

“Don’t bother,” Jarrod said waving a dismissive hand and grinning. “I already saw and I’m not surprised. Hey, can we name the dog Princess?”

Adam rose, leaving her chilled and empty. He headed down the stairs, then knelt the floor, and the dog came to him. He stroked her neck. “She may have an owner, Jarrod. Don’t get too attached yet.”

“I know she doesn’t,” Jarrod said.

“How?”

“I just do.” He met Cori’s eyes and she smiled at him. Jarrod had never seemed so happy and she knew Adam had everything to do with that.

As well as maybe the delusion he nursed that she and Adam would marry one day.

Adam continued to pet the dog, but looked up at Jarrod. “If nobody claims her, you can name her anything you want.”

“Anything-You-Want. Terrible name,” Jarrod teased.

Adam reached over and rubbed his hair. "Princess is fine. Maybe you can help me hang posters of the dog in the neighborhood tomorrow."

"Can we drive to the store now and get her stuff...leash, collar, dog food? Please?"

Adam let out a breath, then carefully stood, grimacing. He shot a glance at Cori. She saw amusement in his eyes, a familiar look. "I suppose we can, if your sister will baby-sit the dog."

"Please, Cori?" Jarrod asked.

She nodded.

"Let me get a shirt first, Jarrod. I'll be right back." He breezed right by Cori as she caught his sweaty, earthy scent. It lingered and her head reeled.

A few minutes later, Adam had thrown on a casual blue cotton shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, top three buttons undone to expose dark hairs and his powerful throat. The blue tinted his eyes to a deeper shade, contrasting with his swarthy skin. The shirt tucked into his khakis and a tooled brown leather belt held his attire together. He bounced towards the door and put a large hand on the knob.

"Jarrod?"

Jarrod, who was sprawled on the floor letting Princess lick his face, reluctantly stood up. "Can't we take her with us?"

“No. She’ll be here when you come back, Sport,” Adam said, flashing a grin at him. His dimple and white teeth spun Cori’s head. She watched silently and speechlessly as the two left.

As soon as Adam slammed the door, she ran upstairs into her room. Falling across her mattress, she reached for her bed stand where she grabbed her cell phone and pushed a button, then waited until she heard the familiar, comforting voice of her cousin.

“Adrienne! Oh, thank God!” Cori felt her fingers digging into her palm. “I’m so afraid!”

“Calm down, hon. Tell me what’s going on.”

She’d meant to tell her about Joe, but that’s not what came out.

“I’m afraid of my feelings for Adam. I’m not sure...but I think I’m in love with him.” Her voice caught and she felt overcome with emotion. “What the hell am I supposed to do? He won’t love me back and there’s the Herpes. You usually have the best advice and I really need some right now. How can I stop myself from falling in love with this man?” She held her breath and waited.

There was a long pause. “But Herpes, Cori?”

“I know. It’s a bad situation, so how I stop loving him?”

“You can’t,” she finally replied. “It isn’t something you can control. And with his Herpes, Girl, you really have a problem.”

Cori had never heard her cousin without words of wisdom and it sank her heart.

“I needed to hear something different than that. How do you stop from falling in love? You must have some methods!”

“Girl, I’m not a miracle worker.” She softened her voice. “I can tell you how to lessen your chances of losing your heart, you know, keep focused on the man as a sex object. Once you pass that though, you’re in trouble.”

Cori heard her voice as if far away. “Then I’m in serious trouble,” she said half to her cousin, half to herself. Since no help would be coming from Adrienne, she changed the subject and told her about Jenna and Joe.

“Cori, you have to leave! You’re risking falling in love with a man who has Herpes, as well as agitating Joe’s crazy, racist wife! You can come here and live with me! Leave Jarrod there!”

“It’s a tempting offer, and I thank you, but I can’t leave my brother. And I can’t move him either. He’s crazy about Adam.” She thought about Adrienne’s apartment in a neighborhood not much better than her own had been and knew she couldn’t take Jarrod there.

“Just watch yourself, girl. I love you like a sister. Please be careful with Joe and Jenna, and don’t let Adam touch you anymore, no matter how hard it is.”

Cori couldn't imagine not letting Adam touch her, especially when he was hard. Shit, bad joke, and she felt more like crying than laughing. She needed his touch, which frightened her to death. Nobody had ever held so much power over her and she didn't like it. Not at all.

"Cori? You still there? You wanted advice. Don't let him touch you. That will only make it harder."

"He has to touch me. He has to touch me as much as he can and as often as he can. Oh, Adrienne, I know you've seen a lot of men, but he's built like a God...and...and his male equipment...I swear, he's twenty inches long."

Adrienne cracked up.

"I love his cock."

"Cori, is this you?" She laughed again.

"I think somebody else is taking over me. I really do. Look, I have to go now. Got to make sure the puppy doesn't have another accident."

"Puppy?"

After she got off the phone, she lay across her bed for a long moment thinking about her situation. It sucked. She didn't want to live near the Corellis and she didn't want to burn for Adam. Worse, she didn't want to enjoy his company beyond sex and actually like the man behind the handsome face and hot body.

Fearing for her sanity, she forced herself to get off the bed, go downstairs, and watch the dog, denying how much she looked forward to Adam's return. Hell, she wanted him around her all the time. It didn't get much worse than that.

Cori wrapped her arms around herself, shivering and sat on a leather recliner. The puppy jumped into her lap and she cuddled her, but her mind was on Adam. Was she already in love with him? Could it happen that fast? It had taken her months to fall in love with Joe. Even then, her feeling towards Joe had never been so strong that she couldn't bear him out of her sight.

Without a question, this could come to no good. As the dog licked her face, she held her close and tried to stop the trembling of her body. Her attraction and affection for Adam grew stronger every day. She needed a plan to counteract it, but what?

Cori groaned and shut her eyes. For once, she felt as if something were out of her control.



## Chapter Ten

Nothing more had transpired between herself and Adam the rest of that night. They'd fussed over the dog, then all three had gone to sleep. Alone. Cori had burned for him, but that had become the norm as she tried to fall asleep. Her wicked dreams of Adam were always the same, he came to her in the middle of the night, climbed into her bed, and they made love.

She sat at her desk at work now. Adam had hung around her desk a lot more than normal, something that Jackie Stapleton noticed and seemed happy about. Jordan came in from the field and cocked an eye at his brother, who ignored him. Then he'd pulled Adam aside and obviously made a comment to him that had Adam's face red with anger or embarrassment. Jordan left the office, chuckling.

Cori loved the unexpected attention from Adam. He teased her more than usual, made excuses to touch her arm, her shoulder, and rub her head, as well as lean over her desk a lot to stare at her. When she asked what he was doing, he grinned and said, "This is a staring contest."

She never tired of looking into those beautiful, aqua blues, or watching his sexy muscles bulge against his clothes, or feeling the magnetism of his powerful aura. His scent taunted her and she feared she got little done that day.

After work, Jarrod was there, so Adam controlled himself and Cori did too. It wasn't easy for Cori, all she had to do was look at him and her panties got wet. It was truly humiliating, but at least it was her own little secret. Adam's teasing at work had affected her like foreplay. As he moved around the house, her gaze followed him. She loved his fluid, confident movements and his cute expressions as he spoke with Jarrod, one eye on her.

Cori almost wept when Jarrod asked if, since it was a Friday, he could spend the night at his friend Jamie's house. She also almost packed his bags for him. Her body leapt to life with anticipation of time alone with Adam. She knew he was in a mood and would do something, something different, erotic, and exciting. And she'd get to touch him. If only...

If only didn't count.

Her bliss ended when Adam walked up to her as she cooked dinner, Jarrod in tow. She could feel him standing right behind her as she stirred a pot of stew. "Yes, Mr. Fletcher?" she asked, her voice trembling.

He put a hand on her shoulder and she almost collapsed. He smelled unusually sensual, an exotic, almost Middle Eastern cologne scent.

"I'm driving Jarrod to Jamie's house," he said, his voice warm against the back of her neck.

"Good..."

“Then I have stuff to do at Jordan’s house, so I won’t be home until later. The food smells great. I’ll heat it up when I finally get back.”

A pitcher of ice couldn’t have changed her mood so quickly. She glanced over her shoulder, but he was already leaving the kitchen, Jarrod beside him.

When she heard him shutting the front door, she kicked the stove. “Damn him!” Why had he done that after teasing her all day? Who could ever understand the man?

The man she loved. Or almost loved. She wasn’t sure.

Love, or almost love, sucked when not returned. She thought about her emotions towards Adam. They transcended her childish feelings of lust for Joe. To think she’d ever thought she’d loved him! In her heart, she’d known that Joe had serious ‘jerk’ issues. She knew Adam well enough by now to know he had a big heart and was worthy of love. One day she’d tell him how she felt and see how he reacted. Considering the present given to him by Amy, she had no idea what he’d do.

Disheartened, she finished dinner, then ate it alone as she watched television.



The hours crept by. Cori tried to find things to do. She hadn’t been alone in the house without either Jarrod or Adam since moving in. The big, empty house

spooked her. She'd never lived in anything larger than an apartment before and every sound startled her. She didn't even try to sleep and wasn't tired. Princess snuggled on her lap, which helped. Well, it helped a little. The dog was too friendly for protection, but at least she offered company.

Cori, bored with one movie, flipped the channel to another and froze, suddenly startled into fascination. A young man and woman, completely nude, stood before one another and spoke to each other in what sounded like French.

Cori leaned forward. With nobody home, why not steal a guilty pleasure? The man was classically handsome although nothing in comparison to Adam. The woman, ebony skinned and beautiful, dropped to her knees and licked the man's hardened dick, then ran away and he chased after her. Cori touched herself down below. Who cared what she did? Princess didn't. She just lay there half asleep.

"Adam," she mumbled out loud as her hand rubbed her pussy. She knew everybody touched themselves, but felt embarrassed every time she did it. Still, she didn't have Adam around, so she'd have to.

The man on the screen pinned the girl against the wall and kissed her, then they melted to the floor and he lifted his stiff erection while she spread her legs. The woman looked painful with need, probably like she herself did when Adam touched her.

The graphic movie excited her. Her breathing turned to panting and her fingers slid rapidly up and down her own lonely pussy, manipulating her clit. She increased her speed as she watched the large man plunging inside the woman, who wrapped her arms and legs around the man's solid body.

He said something loud in French.

The woman arched and said something louder and faster in French.

The man thrust into her as she arched against him over and over.

Cori's breath came in spurts as her fingers slid faster and faster. *You're a sick puppy, Cori.* Sorry to insult you, Princess. She flung herself to her back on the sofa and a blast of sensations assailed her. She had caused her own pulsating climax and lost herself in it.

Colored lights danced before her eyes and she shuddered until spent.

*I just gave myself an orgasm. How desperate! Where is Adam?*

Trembling, she pushed to a sit and switched the channel, not sure what she'd turned to.

"Damn you for going to Jordan's house, Adam," she said to the dog.

Princess lifted her ears, then licked her chin.

Cori didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

She glanced at the clock. Midnight. No way Adam was still with Jordan, unless Jordan had one of his famous parties going on. Would some girl come on to

him? Of course! He may live like a monk, but he looked like a God. Damn him! Damn the Herpes that made him think he needed to keep her away from him!

Damn, damn, damn...

The front door rattled and he stepped inside, seemingly none the worse for wear. In fact, he looked magnificent. She stared at him, her mouth watering as he shut the door and took a few steps from the foyer. He halted halfway there. "You're still awake?"

She crossed her arms, refusing to leer at the way he looked in a clingy white button shirt, sleeves rolled up his arms and dark khakis.

"No, I'm asleep," she said with a smirk.

He grinned and sauntered in her direction, leaving her breathless.

To cover up, she said in a snotty voice, "I didn't notice before, but you're not dressed to help Jordan with building around the house. And you aren't dressed how you usually do for work. In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were dressed for a hot date."

He was. Even his hair looked more tamed than usual, although he hadn't been able to stop his unruly chocolate locks from spilling above those sexy eyes.

He laughed, a nice sound, and finished his walk to her. Standing over her, dwarfing her, and making her squirm with desire, he said, "I did have a date."

“That’s your business.” She wanted to die right there, right now. Someone else had put her hands on him.

He pulled her to her feet and held her in his arms as she tried to pull away.

“I said I had business at Jordan’s house. I did. It was a date.” He kissed the top of her head, then spoke into her hair. “Some prospective buyer was there and he wanted us to show him what sort of house we could build for him. He turned out to be a picky one and kept us busy. As soon as he left, so did I.”

Cori felt him pinning his gaze into her and asked, “This was just a business meeting?”

He quirked an eyebrow.

She turned her head. “Not that I care if it wasn’t, you don’t have to lie.”

“I don’t lie.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a sketch. “See? Jack Mason. Remember? He’s been at the office.”

She remembered the self-important man with the big bucks and could see him taking up an inordinate amount of time, yet having enough cash to warrant Adam’s attention even at night.

Just as she’d been about to capitulate into his arms, a flash of light lit up the outdoors followed by a tremendous boom that vibrated the entire house. Shocked, she jumped to him, almost strangling him, just as the lights went out plunging them into darkness.

Princess whimpered a little, then quieted.

“Shit,” Adam said, holding her tight, his lips in her hair, “I’d heard storms were headed this way.”

A gush of water from the clouds started pelting against the house as Cori got her bearings.

“The electricity...”

“Is conveniently off. We could have a lot of fun in this degree of darkness.”

Cori caught her breath. “I suppose we could.” Damn, she’d been dying all day for this!

“Since Jarrod’s not here, let’s just lay on the rug.” He lifted her, and as always, it seemed as if it took no effort at all. She gripped him, leaning into his chest until he sank to his knees and lowered her to a thick carpet that felt luxurious. He gave her a fast kiss on the lips, promises of things to come, then stood up and moved to the nearby hearth.

“Too hot for a fire,” she mumbled, feeling lighter than air.

“Not for small fires.” He lit a few items inside several little dishes that resembled ashtrays.

Exotic incense soon filled the room and she sighed. “Ah, Adam. Smells great. Do you use this to mask the pot I know you smoke all the time?” She felt giddy and teasing him helped.



He laughed. “Yes, dear. I’m such a pothead.”

“I’m not your dear.”

He didn’t respond. Instead he disappeared into the blackness and came back with champagne and a two glasses. “Sit,” he commanded.

She did and he poured her a glass.

“To you,” he said.

“To you too,” she said, annoyed, and they clinked glasses.

After they drained the glasses, Adam got up and quickly got rid of them, then came back with a jar.

She lifted her eyebrows and he grinned as he screwed off the top. “Smell.”

She did. “Chocolate?”

“I’m going to spread this on you, then lick it off. It feels good, heats up your skin. Tastes good too.”

“Can I do it to you too?” She felt a tingle in between her thighs.

“I won’t stop you. Lay down.”

She curled inside as his quick, nimble fingers coated her neck with the oil. True to his word, it heated as it seeped into her skin. Or did his presence heat her? She couldn’t tell.

He sprawled beside her, all male delight, hardness, and powerful aura. When his fingers touched her lower curls she started to moan. When he glided the

oil into her pussy, she grabbed him and forced him over her, relishing in the feel of the oil, saturating him with it, as she rubbed against him and thrashed. Her tits crushed into his hard, rough chest, nipple against nipple, and he let out a breath before claiming her lips. “Mine,” he whispered, as he lifted his mouth just for a moment. “Damn it, mine!”

He rubbed his cock on her thigh and she rubbed her pussy, back and forth on his, wishing to hell she could take his cock and plunge it inside of her. The ‘almost’ killed her, but almost beat nothing. When he started licking off the oil, she joined him and started licking off his. It did taste like chocolate and mixed with his salty taste, no cuisine had ever satisfied her more.

His talented tongue caused her to melt. He cussed and moaned against her skin as she cleaned him off. She could move her hand back and forth on his cock with intense speed with the oil, and he exploded and spilled his pleasure half on her, half on the rug. Then he returned the favor by slipping, what seemed like his fist up her pussy. She laughed and cried and shuddered until completely spent.

As they lay beside one another, he mumbled, “It’s not lightening anymore, babe. Let’s shower.”

“Yes!” Already sensitized, she let him grab her and pull her to a stand, quivering all over. “Can you see?” she asked worriedly.

The power still hadn’t come back on.

“Like a cat in the dark,” he answered against her neck and she shuddered again.

Leaning on his oiled, sweaty shoulder, he guided her in the darkness into the downstairs bathroom.

“How can you...”

“I built this house remember?” He felt his way to the shower and pulled open the door.

“Let’s see you turn it on,” she challenged in a playful voice.

“Your wish is my command, dear lady.” She heard the sound of a rush of water splashing against a wall.

“Shit, you did it,” she said.

They kissed as he lifted her under her arms and carried her into the shower, shutting the door behind him. They kissed under a cascading waterfall as the oil washed away. Soaping one another’s hair after feeling for the shampoo in the dark and washing one another’s bodies proved arousing and fun. Toweling one another off added to the tactile experience. By the time Adam carried her to her bed and kissed her on the forehead, leaning over her, she refused to let go of him.

“I can’t stay. It’s not good.” Adam looked at her with the saddest eyes then he firmed his chin.

“You will stay! Jarrod’s not here and you’re going to sleep here all night. I have control, you know.” *I think!*

He fell on top of her. “I don’t trust my control, but I’ll stay.”

After kissing, touching, and holding one another for at least an hour, he fell asleep in her arms, his breathing tickling her neck.

Cori didn’t want to sleep all night, so she didn’t. She spent the entire night staring at him, feeling so much tenderness mingled with regret over what could have been and what could never be.

She loved Adam Fletcher, and she always would.

## Chapter Eleven

Several evenings later, Adam sat on a wooden stool at Cooley's Bar working on a mug of beer. A lot of women had come up to him and judging by their reactions, he knew he looked good tonight. He'd thrown on his gold medallion, then a blue cotton shirt open at the throat, and navy cargo slacks with buttoned pockets on the sides. Beige driving mocs covered his feet. He'd even tamed his hair, combing it back off his face. All in all, he looked like a successful young man on the prowl, but the women that approached him didn't appeal to him, not even those who were beautiful. Shit! What a mess he'd gotten himself into!

He tapped his fingers on the counter wishing he wasn't here. The loud music bothered him, the smoke burned his eyes, the flirty, drunken crowd surrounding him disgusted him, but he needed this escape. His feelings for Cori were spiraling out of control and that disturbed him more than the tacky surroundings. He'd known her for two months now and hadn't touched her since the night he'd used his sex toy to satisfy her. Since that night, she'd changed towards him. Oh she seemed friendly, but distant. And hell, she spent a lot of time in her room with the door locked. He figured she was trying to fight her attraction to him and couldn't really blame her. He had a feeling that, like him, she'd begun to

feel more than sexual attraction and the circumstances sucked. If conditions had been different, he would have pursued a relationship. Enough of the 'what ifs'. Reality mattered, even if it sucked.

He cradled his mug of beer and stared, not seeing anything in front of him. He'd come here to drink and to clear his mind. Or fog it. Like Cori, he tried as hard as he could to stay out of temptation's way. Jacking off had become a nightly ritual but at least he wasn't with her, possibly passing along the Herpes. If only he could find a woman with Herpes who attracted him as much as Cori did. But he doubted any woman on earth could do that. Just picturing her enticing features and shapely body sent an uneasy itch straight to his cock. He had to think of something else. Fast.

"Adam Fletcher!"

Adam swung around on his stool and saw Jenna Corelli, her auburn hair longer than when he'd sold her the house. It cascaded over her shoulders and spilled just above her pointed breasts. She wore a revealing white tank with kissing straps and a short, short denim skirt. Her spiked denim heels elevated her petite length. Adam often saw her walking her poodle and they waved to each other, but beyond that, he didn't know her at all.

"Hi," he said with distant politeness. "What are you doing here? Is Joe around?"

She moved closer to him, too close. He almost coughed at the smell of cheap, alcohol-leaden perfume.

“Where’s Joe?” He suddenly felt uneasy.

“Home.”

Adam turned back towards the bar. He didn’t like this. “Why are you at a place like this without him?” The venom in his voice rang clear. He had no use for those who cheated on their spouses. He wanted a wife one day and would not cheat on her, nor did he expect her to cheat on him, even if it wasn’t a love match.

“Joey thinks I’m at the movies with a friend. A girl needs time alone sometimes, even when she loves her husband.” She batted long, curly eyelashes at him and tossed her hair in a provocative way.

Adam grunted and took a sip of beer. Her cheap perfume overwhelmed him and made him nauseous.

“Cori Mallory works for you and lives in your house, doesn’t she?”

Adam froze. Not looking at her, he asked, “You know Cori?”

“Unfortunately, yes, I know all I need to about the slut.” He felt her hand gripping his shoulder and wanted to shake it off but he didn’t.

“You shouldn’t talk about Cori when she’s not here to defend herself.” His words were swift and harsh. Yet he wondered. He couldn’t help it. He instinctively

thought the worst of women; the female sex had never earned his trust. He started to tense inside.

“I have to give you fair warning, just so you know what you’re in for if you start to fall for her. I have no idea what kind of a relationship you two have, but she’s nothing but a cheap tramp and a liar to boot.”

Adam whirled around, his muscles taut. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

Her knowing smile and icy eyes spoke volumes. “I’m one of Cori’s victims.”

“Victims? What kind of victim?” His voice dripped sarcasm but she’d scared him. He knew Cori much better now, but she still kept much to herself.

“She used to work in one of my husband’s factories and she seduced him. Waited for him in his office, completely undressed. Grabbed his crotch. Threw herself all over him many times. He tried to resist but she persisted so he did what any normal man would do, at least for a while. When he broke it off, she continued to call him. Joey was quite upset.”

Adam did a commendable job of masking his emotions. “That’s his side of the story. She didn’t know he was married.”

“Yes, she did. She just didn’t care. She’s a sneaky little slut.”

Adam searched her darkened eyes to read them. Was she telling the truth? He had to admit that Cori had been aggressive towards him. As for sneaky, he’d



found her rummaging through his drawers. Still, he didn't think Cori had much sexual experience and she seemed like a thoughtful, caring young woman.

But Amy had once tricked him into thinking she had love for all humankind and he'd been wrong. He wasn't a good judge of the character behind a pretty face. Doubt tugged at him. He tried to force it aside but couldn't.

Adam sucked in a breath, almost choking on the perfume, then said tersely, "Thanks for the heads up." He would think about her words, would he ever, but now he wanted her to go away. It shook him up to think that Cori's old boss lived on the corner of his block and she hadn't told him. Why the secrecy? Was that why she'd been so upset that evening a month ago? Had she seen Joe and missed his touch? Jealousy overtook him, thinking about another man with his hands on Cori. Had she used him as a replacement for Joe?

Adam took a long drink of beer. Maybe Cori wished to continue her affair with Joe. Maybe she already had. Why else hadn't she told him that Joe lived nearby? Adam felt a wave of helpless anger, an unusual emotion for him. He couldn't even ask her about Joe. He had no rights to her and what she did was her own business, even if he felt it morally wrong. Damn! She'd put on such a good act of liking him too! Well, what did he expect? He couldn't fuck her, couldn't even go down on her, couldn't accept blow jobs either. Of course she'd find somebody

else...but Joe? A married man? And whether she'd known before or not, she certainly knew now.

If Jarrod didn't mean so much to him, he would throw her out of his house. Well, not exactly. He needed to give her the benefit of the doubt. He couldn't assume things. But women had played him for a fool in the past. A lump clogged his throat and hated it, hated his weakness regarding Cori.

"You're quiet," Jenna said in a husky voice as he felt her hand sliding into his hair.

Adam pulled away, staring at her with what he hoped were ice-cold eyes. "No, Jenna. I thought you loved Joe so much. Don't even think about it."

"I do love him, but Joey betrayed me and more than once." She ignored his stiff demeanor and wrapped her arms around him. Shocked, he didn't fight her. "You're quite a stud," she said to him. "Joey won't know anything if we sneak away to a motel. Two can play at the cheating game. Trust me, Cori isn't true to you, I know she's not." She lifted her hand and dragged a finger across his lips. He jerked his head but she just laughed. "I've had my eyes on you since I first saw you in the office. A hot guy like you must have lots of experience satisfying women. I like a diversion sometimes, and you'd fit the bill very nicely."

In spite of his demoralization, he stood up, breaking free of her, and stared way down from his tall height. “I don’t mess around with married women. I don’t ever want to talk to you again. Stay away.”

She gasped. “How dare you! You live with the cheapest tramp around and you won’t let me touch you!”

He stepped away from the stool and her. “She isn’t married. I was just leaving.” He hoped his voice sounded as frigid as he felt. Reaching into his pocket, he tossed money on the bar to cover the cost of his drinks and a tip. “Good-bye, Mrs. Corelli.”

With heavy, angry steps, he stormed out of the bar. Home called out to him. He couldn’t directly confront Cori but he could allude to certain things and he hoped he’d get answers.



Cori loaded the dishwasher to the sound of her favorite radio station. She wore a slick button jersey with a Chicago White Sox logo on it and silky black shorts, comfortable clothes for cleaning. Her bare feet felt the cold tile beneath her. As she stuck a bowl into the dishwasher, the doorbell chimed. Jarrod? She checked the clock, 7:17. No, Jarrod didn’t have to be home from Sara’s until eight and he’d never leave her house early. She grinned, thinking of his first girlfriend. No, the

visitor couldn't be Jarrod. Maybe Jordan had dropped by. His company always cheered her up.

She swung open the door, a smile still on her face as she anticipated Adam's good-humored brother.

When she saw who stood there, she stopped breathing and her eyes locked onto his deep, dark gaze. "Joe," she whispered when she finally found her voice.

Joe flashed her an easygoing, boyish grin. "I was working in my yard, and I saw Adam and Jarrod leave, so I knew you were temporarily home alone." He spoke fast, his New York accent pronounced. "Jenna went to the movies with a friend and the kids are at her mother's house. I'm all alone and so are you." His smile wavered. "We need to talk. I've been waiting for this chance."

After she recovered from her shock, she tried to shut the door on him but he wedged himself between the door and the entranceway and wiggled his way inside.

"I'll call the police," she said, her voice cold. "Get the fuck out of here, Joe. Somebody could come home at any time."

He laughed softly and set his hands roughly on her shoulders. When she tried to pull away, his fingers dug in and she couldn't free herself. Her heart sped up and while she didn't exactly feel frightened, apprehension hung over her.

“Let go of me, Joe. Your wife threatened to kill me if I went near you and I assured her that I certainly didn’t want anything to do with you.”

His grin widened. “Nonsense. You want plenty to do with me, honey. I still love you. Just because Jenna hired that P.I., found out about us, and threatened to ruin me if I didn’t take her back, that doesn’t mean it’s what I want. You’re what I want.”

She tried to pull away again. “Well, I don’t want you! I don’t mess around with married men and I wouldn’t with you even if you weren’t married!”

Joe’s dark face suddenly reddened and his smile dissolved. “No, but you’ll sleep with Adam Fletcher.”

“How do you know?” She tried again to pull away, then attempted to bite his hands when he wouldn’t let go. She couldn’t reach his hands, besides he knew her methods of escape and guarded himself. When she kicked at his groin, he anticipated it and easily pulled back, out of the way, his hands still gripping her forearms.

Tears filmed over her eyes but she blinked them back. In a strong voice she shouted, “Let go of me! I hate you, Joe!”

He glared at her. “You don’t. You’re just mad because I fired you. Hey, now you have a new job and you live close by. I wish it wasn’t with Adam but I don’t mind sharing you, if I have to. What I mind is not having you at all.”

“That’s unfortunate. You never will again.” She spat in his face hitting him between the eyes. He released her and took a few steps back, gaping at her. She grinned. She couldn’t help it. That had felt good. “Leave!”

He flashed a menacing grin. “I love when you play hard to get. Remember when I’d chase you around the office and then I’d catch you and I’d kiss you to the ground and...”

She looked around for a place to hide and headed towards the downstairs bathroom but he stepped into her path and caught her arms.

“What part of ‘I hate you’ don’t you understand?” she asked, her adrenalin racing, trying again to bite him or kick him in the crotch. He eluded her, so she puckered up to spit again. He stopped her by sealing her mouth with his dry lips, pushing her against the wall.

She turned her head and tried to lash out with the hands he’d locked behind her back and the legs that he pinned with his own strong thighs and calves. She turned her head and grit her teeth, her stomach rebelling. “You repulse me, Joe! I can’t believe I was ever attracted to you, but now I find you hideous! Let me go!”

He pressed hard against her and stared down into her upturned face. “That’s not what you used to say, darling. I’ve got to have you. Jenna doesn’t know how to satisfy a man.”

“I don’t really want to know this!”

He tried to kiss her again but she turned her head once more.

“You love me! I know you do! Say it!”

“I’m going to tell Jenna about this!” She met his close-up gaze. His dark eyes smoldered at her with hot passion that had once excited her so much. It was hard to believe she’d once thought she loved this disgusting man.

“Jenna will believe me, not you. No matter what I say, she’ll believe me.”

That was true about Jenna. Now what? “Please, Adam will be home soon and, when he sees you, he’s going to beat the crap out of you.”

She didn’t know if he would but she suspected it.

Joe grinned. “I’m stronger than that wus. I’m a bodybuilder, remember?”

How could she forget? Few men could hold her back like Joe did now. She wasn’t any weakling.

“How about a little kiss?” he crooned.

Her insides swelled with anger and she quickly gathered her saliva. With all the force she had, she again spit at him full in the face. This time however, instead of backing off, his eyes slanted, and her heart sped up at the angry creases on his forehead and around his tightened mouth.

“You’ll kiss me and like it,” he said and suddenly, before she could turn, he mashed his lips against hers. She struggled to get away from him but the force of him held her in place. She’d forgotten his strength. As hard as she tried to turn her

head, wiggle from his grasp, or free her arms, she couldn't break his hold. He pulled back long enough to give her a malicious grin, then he yanked her from the wall, bent her over his arm, and tweaked her nipple with his free hand.

She called for help and tried to push him away, but damn, she remembered he could press five hundred pounds.

"You'll love this," he said, then he lowered his head and took her lips, gnashing his teeth against them. She lifted a leg as he threw her off balance. He gripped her with all his strength and held her like a dancer at the finale. His lips refused to lift and she felt him sucking the air from her lungs in a frightening way. When she heard the front door scrape open, she wanted to cry out in relief. Adam had come home! Thank God for Adam!

"What the hell is going on here?" His harsh, outraged voice commanded attention.

Joe set her on her feet and turned around.

Cori, breathing hard, ran up to Adam and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Adam, Adam, thank God! He forced his way in the house and made me kiss him!"

Adam broke away from her, shocking her silent.

His blazing stare shot from Joe, back to her, then back to Joe again.



“I’m sorry you caught us,” Joe said, his voice dripping with remorse. “I didn’t mean to throw it in your face, man.”

Cori caught her breath and whirled towards Joe. “What the hell are you trying to pull?”

Joe grinned sheepishly. “Look, doll, we were caught.” His gaze rose. “Adam, Cori and I go back a long time and we just couldn’t keep our hands off each other...”

He smiled in a smug way.

Adam ran up to him, socked him in the jaw, then the midsection. Joe made an oomph sound and doubled over. Adam grabbed him around his forearm, putting his other hand around the back of his neck while Cori looked on in awe.

“I don’t give a shit about your history!” Adam sounded livid. “You fuckin’ better keep it out of my house! It’s none of my business if you two fuck around, but you’d better not do it here!”

Adam shut his large hand around Joe’s neck as the other man cursed, coughed, and struggled. Ignoring him, he opened the door and threw him out, giving him another fist, this time to his nose. Breathing hard, Adam said in a low, dangerous voice, “You take your pathetic self out of here, and never pollute my property again! If I’d known what a scumbag you were, I’d never have sold you the

house!” He raised his fist again as Joe stumbled down the walkway, still holding his stomach.

Adam slammed the door and whirled around.

Tears ran down her face as she tried to throw herself into his arms, her insides trembling. “Oh, Adam!” she choked but he held out his arms and blocked her from flinging herself at him.

Puzzled, she halted and stared into his eyes, unsure of what the icy gaze meant. He almost seemed angry, as if she’d done something wrong. He couldn’t think...could he?

“And I was falling in love with you.” He crossed his arms, his face and body rock hard.

Her lips moved, but no words came out.

“Don’t bother with excuses. I saw the kiss...”

“He forced me.”

“My ass! Why didn’t you tell me that Joe Corelli was your ex-lover? Did you like it that he moved so close?” His lower lip curled. “I beat the crap out of him but that was only because he was on my property.” A finger shot out. “I can’t control who you fuck, but I figured you’d have more decency than to continue to screw a married man.”

“I...Adam, you can’t think I wanted this...”

“How did he get in? You let him in!” The quiet anger in his voice chilled her more than if he’d shouted at her. But how could he believe she wanted Joe? Didn’t he know her at all?

Actually, he didn’t know her that well and his experiences with women weren’t good either. She looked into his forbidding eyes and wanted desperately to reach him.

“I didn’t know it was him at the door.” Her mouth felt so dry she could barely spit out the words.

He smirked. “Bullshit! You can see through the peephole. You let him in because you wanted him here. You’ve just been toying with me...”

“That isn’t true.”

He laughed. “Well, it is and it’s not. What we’ve done, it was the best I could do under the circumstances, but it obviously wasn’t enough for you and I don’t blame you for that. I’m just disappointed in you for continuing to mess around with him. I want to marry myself one day and I hope my wife is faithful to me, certainly, even in my wildest days, I never went after married women.”

“Adam, I didn’t want him here!” As the reality of his words set in, she suddenly swelled with anger and hurt, an incredible bubble of both. He didn’t believe her. Nothing on earth could have hurt her more and her eyes filled with tears. She wiped them.

“I was warned.” Adam chuckled and shook his head.

“By whom?”

“It doesn’t matter. Look, from now on you and I live here and put on a good front for Jarrod. I love that kid like my own brother. But stop pretending you’re attracted to me and let’s cut out the touching altogether. We could never have been together anyways. In a way, this was a good thing. It brought me back from the brink of falling in love with a woman I can’t have.”

The world stopped. “Falling in love?” Her heart fluttered.

He stared at her. “I’m glad it didn’t happen.”

“I’ve been feeling the same way!”

He smirked. “Yes, I can tell.” His forehead lowered. “Look, none of this matters.”

She felt as if he’d slapped her. “It matters!” Why it mattered she didn’t know. If they loved one another, so what? He still had Herpes. But, as tenderness washed over her, she realized that if he loved her, they’d find a way. “You can’t believe I let Joe in on purpose. I’m not like that.” She heard the plea in her voice. “I’d never have a relationship with a married man.”

“I walked in on you, Cori.” His eyes flashed. “That was quite a kiss.”

“He forced me to kiss him!”

Adam just stared at her, his eyes hard and uncompromising.

He didn't believe her. And she couldn't believe that he didn't believe her.

"Don't give me that look," Adam said in a harsh voice. "You think women have never lied to me before? I found one girlfriend in my bed with another man and she had the audacity to say he'd forced her. Later she admitted she'd made that up. At least she finally told the truth, although I wouldn't take her back."

"I'm telling you the truth!"

His lips twitched upwards. "I thought you were a brave woman. At least be honest with me."

She ran up to him, angrily, her arm lifted, ready to smack his face. He caught her wrist. Shaking, beyond rage, she shouted at him. "You want to believe I let him in on purpose? That I'd fuck a married man that I know is married?" She swallowed a sob. "Fine! Yes, I let him in on purpose! We've been planning this for weeks! And you know what? I wanted you to catch us because I suspected you were falling in love with me and that can't work. I'm glad I cured you of your evolving feelings for me because I'm not getting involved with any man who has Herpes! At least Joe is clean!" Through blurry eyes, she watched as a fleeting look of hurt crossed his face but passed quickly. His complexion darkened, the scar sticking out in contrasting white. His eyes smoked at her, his lips thinned. His hair spilled every which way and he looked beautiful but she hated him because he

hadn't believed her. Instead of comforting her, he'd condemned her. She'd hurt him but he'd hurt her first. They were even and she was back to keeping score.

"After this, I don't even think we should be friends," he said, his voice quiet but laced with steel.

She wiped her eyes, all sorts of conflicting emotions assaulting her. "You were never my friend or you wouldn't think so little of me." She broke into fresh tears. "I hate you, Adam Fletcher!" Unable to stand his judging stare any longer, she turned and ran up the staircase, heading straight for her room. She slammed the door behind her, leaned her back against it, lowered her head, and let the tears slide from her cheeks to her toes.

## Chapter Twelve

Two weeks dragged by, long, insufferable, eternal weeks in which Adam and Cori didn't exchange one word except regarding work. As Adam leaned back on a leather recliner trying to watch the baseball game on his large screen television, he couldn't stop thinking about her, and it drove him nuts.

His mind betrayed him and pelted him with thoughts of her, even though it tortured him. He never caught Cori staring at him with hot eyes anymore. He never saw her smile at him, nor did she tease him until they both cracked up. Hell, Ms. Mallory acted as if he didn't exist, even though they were together most of the time. He hated it. After finding her kissing Joe, his reaction had been violent and swift. Joe was lucky to be alive, and Cori, he no longer knew about her. Maybe she'd told him the truth and he'd just swelled with so much jealousy it had blinded him. Still, women had played him for a fool more than once and his infatuation with Cori posed a real threat to his pride. It was better to be safe than sorry, especially since friendship was the most he could hope for. He'd eventually lose her to somebody else anyway.

He'd reconciled himself to the fact that he'd spend the rest of his life dreaming about making love to her, stripping her of clothes and tossing them on

the floor, sucking her tits and pussy, plunging deep inside her while...he shook his head to clear it. Time to watch the ballgame. He worked very hard at staring at the screen but nothing registered.

The doorbell rang and Adam stood up, but before he could move to get it, Cori ran down the stairs. Without looking at him she said, "It's for me."

He couldn't speak. All he could do was stare. Her freshly washed raven hair glistened as they spilled over her shoulders. She wore a plunging tank top of crushed white material. He could see her tits bouncing as she hit each step and his cock began its dance. Her top ended right above a swinging white and lime floral skirt. The elastic belt clung to her tiny waist and he whistled silently and lowered his gaze. Long, brown, shapely legs seemed endless, and her slender feet sported a dainty pair of leather sandals with beads. His mouth watered and he longed to sweep her into his arms and take her to his bed, doing all the delightful things he thought about at night. More commotion clamored behind his zipper.

Cori didn't favor him with a glance. As she put her hand on the doorknob, she said, her voice very distant, "When Jarrod comes home from Sara's house, tell him I went out with a friend. I don't know how late I'll be." Then she swung open the door.

Adam felt his throat working. Joe? She wouldn't do that to him, would she? Not again.



Joe didn't stand there, but another man did and it jolted him. Shit. One of the realtors he knew. An arrogant, son-of-a-bitch with a rep as a charming seducer! He hadn't seen this coming. For some reason, he'd hoped he'd not only been wrong about Joe, but also that she'd never go out with anyone until she moved out. He wanted to slap himself. No. He wanted to slap Chris Witter, the jerk with the wide smile on his face and primitive dark eyes on Cori. He recognized that predatory gleam in the other man's eyes. It screamed of sex.

"Hi, Chris!" Cori's greeting gripped at his gut. She sounded so happy to see him.

"Hi, beautiful." He stepped into the foyer, took her into his arms, and kissed her on the cheek. Did she linger a little too long?

Adam felt his testosterone surging through his veins.

When Chris stopped admiring her, he glanced over her head and noticed him for the first time. "Oh, hi there, Fletcher," he said with an overconfident grin. "Big night planned watching the ballgame?" He gave him a mocking, arrogant grin.

Cori turned to look at him for the first time and her eyes flashed before she turned back towards Chris. "We'll be late for dinner," she said in a sweet voice. "We do have reservations, right?"

"Yes."

Adam balled his fists as he watched Chris rake his eyes over Cori's form. Adam observed his opponent with a careful appraisal. The tall thirtyish man appeared immaculate, unlike himself. Chris always made sure he had a good haircut, his blond hair chopped short. Tonight he wore a plain white cotton button shirt with the sleeves rolled up, tails tucked into navy dress pants. Dark leather driving mocs bore not one scuff. What a wus, but the way Cori looked at him...

Adam bristled.

Chris put his arm around Cori and whispered something to her and she giggled. A few seconds later, Chris glanced over at him again. "Don't forget to fax over your new listings," he said as an afterthought.

"I won't forget," Adam said crossing his arms. "I don't forget much."

"See you later," Chris said.

Cori didn't turn around and the two of them left the house with Chris guiding her out the door.

Adam looked around for something to throw and spotted a glass candy dish on the coffee table. His hand trembling, he picked it up and smashed it just above the hearth, shattering it into little bits.

After he swept up the mess, he sat back on the recliner, one leg draped over the arm of the chair. He thought about his grooming and let out a breath. He

needed a damn haircut. All right, he'd cut his hair a little, but not too short. He felt grubby after seeing Chris. His endless wardrobe of solid tee-shirts, simple polos, checkered flannels and casual slacks just wouldn't cut it against the competition. He figured the powder blue tee and old jeans he wore tonight didn't give him the best advantage. Damn! He slammed one balled fist into his palm. Seeing Cori with another man drove him insane.

Well, insane it would be.

With regrets that he had no time to improve his appearance, he made a sudden decision, stood up, then raced out the door to the garage. Grabbing in his pocket for his keys, he jumped into his red jaguar. He didn't even care if Cori saw him and knew he followed her. He had to tell her that he believed her about Joe. The Joe problem needed resolution but he'd take care of that later. Right now, he had to deal with the Chris problem before she ended up in his bed tonight. Women liked the bastard.

Adam got lucky and spotted Chris's red Porsche as he turned onto the main road.

While he trailed Chris's car by several blocks, never losing sight of it, the grim truth hit him like a blow to the gut. He already loved Cori. He'd loved her shortly after meeting her and had been drawn to her even before. He'd wronged her by accusing her of starting up her old affair with Joe, then refusing to let her

defend herself. He hadn't let her speak, hadn't given her a moment to explain. His jealousy had made him irrational. Since that night, he'd questioned his snap judgment and Jenna's credibility. He knew Jenna better now and wondered about her mental state.

She practically stalked him. She'd wait outside his workplace and flirt with him when he came out, even after he told her to leave him alone. She called him on his cell phone, having gotten the number when she and Joe first thought about buying the house. The previous night, while he'd been jogging, he'd run into her and her poodle on his route. As he'd hastily zipped past her, she'd called to him and he'd glanced at her over his shoulder. Her unbuttoned blouse had flapped in the wind, exposing round breasts and hard, pink nipples. He'd accelerated his speed and left as she'd yelled after him, calling him some choice four-letter words. How could he trust the word of somebody as unstable as Jenna?

As for Joe, Adam saw him sometimes in the morning before they both left for work. Adam always made sure he gave him a long, hard stare before walking to work. Joe never flinched. The man had balls, considering he'd made mincemeat out of him. He sensed that Joe wanted another crack at him and he'd gladly give it to him. If Cori had told him the truth, and he now suspected she had, then Joe had lied to her, taken advantage of her with no caring about her feelings, then fired her because Jenna had threatened to divorce him and claim half his assets. If he'd hurt

Cori that way and almost put her and Jarrod in the streets, Adam had no qualms about meeting him one more time.

First, he had to ruin the budding relationship between Chris and Cori. If he couldn't have her, damn it, she deserved better than a bragging womanizer like Chris. He'd decide who was good enough for Cori. Right off hand, he couldn't think of anybody but himself. She needed somebody like him. Without vanity, he knew others considered him bright, hardworking, loyal to a fault, trustworthy, and caring towards those he loved. Women found him attractive, although he thought little about that. He also knew he was good in bed and sensed that Cori would need a superb lover to keep her happy. The woman's blood ran hot.

He'd help her find a life mate. If he took part in the process, maybe he could stand her with somebody else, but it couldn't be Chris. He continued following Chris until he pulled his car into a wide driveway. The building adjoining it was a rectangular structure of white bricks and large windows. A lighted sign stood on tall poles above the parking lot: *The Crystal Castle*.

Adam felt somewhat self-satisfied. He knew the place and it wasn't that fancy. They took reservations, but even an ingrate in a tee shirt and jeans could eat there. If they had room, he wouldn't even need reservations.

He stayed in his car watching Chris escort Cori into the restaurant. Glancing at his watch, he waited for five minutes to pass by. As he got out of his

car, three young women emerged from a black corvette beside him and he suddenly brainstormed a brilliant idea.

“Hey,” he said.

All three women stopped and turned to face him. One of them caught his eye. She looked like a model, tall and lean with wheat-colored hair to her waist. Her sleeveless black top glimmered with sequins and her midnight Capri’s slit to her knees on the sides. Her legs were lovely. She’d do nicely for what he needed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. Flashing his best grin, he asked, “If you pretend to be my date, I’ll pay you. Name your price.”

The other two woman giggled as the blond sauntered up to him, her hips swinging in a naturally enticing way. “You’re sexy. I’ll do it for free.” She reached up and slid a finger down the side of his face. “Maybe a tumble later on?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Money,” he said, good-natured but firm. “I’m in love and I’d never take advantage of a classy lady like you. Are we on?”

“This should be fun.” She laughed, her eyes sparkling. “My name is Cassie. You may be amused to know I’m an actress.”

He felt good about his chances of pulling this off and shoved a hundred dollars in her hands. She tried to give it back, but he put his hands behind his back. “No. Keep it.”



Cori sat at a round wooden table in the dimmed room staring at the flickering candle. Every so often she sipped a glass of wine. As Chris talked nonstop, she barely heard his words. She'd been very aware of Adam the entire time he'd seen her with Chris. She hoped it upset him. He'd devastated her by not believing the truth about Joe.

If he loved her even a little, seeing her with another man would give him a taste of his own medicine. Chris had willingly agreed to pretend to be her date. She'd spoken to him about it at work and had asked him, not knowing if he'd take her up on it or tell Adam about it, humiliating her yet again.

Chris thought the idea was hilarious and they'd spent a few hours perfecting their act. Now they could both relax, but Cori felt strangely unhappy, even though she'd pulled off the act and had at least yanked Adam's chain. Adam had reacted. Until tonight, he hadn't paid any attention to her for two weeks. Hell, she doubted he'd even thought about her. In his mind, she slept with married men, a big no-no to him. Tears sprung to her eyes and Chris reached over to squeeze her hand.

She lifted her gaze. "I'm sorry, Chris. You've been so great about this and I'm not very good company."

His eyes flashed understanding. "You love him."

She sucked in a quick breath. She hadn't told him that, had only said she needed to even a score.

"I can tell by the look in your eyes when you talk about him. Hey, when I came by the office last week, you never took your eyes off of him unless he turned towards you. If I hadn't been so sure you'd turn me down, I'd have asked you out for real."

She felt her face heating.

"Don't be embarrassed. I really don't think ole Adam knows anything." He paused and cocked his head. "He loves you too, doesn't he?"

"No!" She shook her head, her heart dropping to her stomach.

"But you live with him."

"Only because of Jarrod. I..." She gasped and froze. "Oh God." She swore her heart stopped. "You won't believe this, Chris. Adam just walked in with a gorgeous woman."

Even as she spoke the words, she shut her eyes to deny the reality. Tears filled her eyes again but she blinked them away. She needed to stay in full control. No way would Adam see her despair. Pride wouldn't allow it, no matter how she wanted to kick and scream like a toddler.

"I'll help you through this," Chris said, bending forward. "Stare into my eyes. I'll keep holding your hand."



Their waiter came and set salads down before them. Chris smiled at him but Cori couldn't. As he walked away, Chris said, "Chin up."

She lifted her chin and felt her eyes hardening. Yes, she couldn't let him see her down. As the thought filtered through her mind, she and Adam locked eyes. He stood in the lobby area speaking to the hostess, the blond on his arm, but his gaze was on her and she saw...malicious amusement? Damn him, damn him, damn him!

"I can't believe he not only has a date, but that he came here with her," Cori whispered and forced her gaze away from him.

"Maybe he followed us."

"Did you see anyone following you?"

"I didn't look."

"I didn't either. As for the girl, he didn't have one when we left the house. I wonder how he found her so quickly."

Chris rubbed her hand with his fingers. "I'll make this look good."

"How well do you know Adam?"

"Too well. We don't see eye-to-eye on a lot of stuff."

She sensed a presence near her and saw Adam and the hated woman out of her peripheral vision. They sat about four tables down and to her left. She almost cried again, giving herself away. How would she manage to eat with him flaunting

his honey before her? Had he finally found somebody with his problem? Could he make love to her? Would he do it at home while she tossed and turned in bed alone? She grabbed her glass of wine and drained the red liquid.

Chris frowned. "Easy there."

"Can I have another glass?"

Chris hesitated.

"Please?"

Chris signaled to the waiter. "Eat your salad. You need something in your stomach if you're going to drink."

"I know." Her gaze happened to lock on Adam's again. He lowered his eyes, reached across the table, and slid his thumb across his date's cheek. Then he dazzled her with his dimpled smile and white teeth but the smile was for the damn lady and not her...

She tossed her head and tilted it, beaming at Chris, hoping her demeanor looked authentic. "Laugh," she said, through her teeth.

Chris threw his head back and laughed and she pretended to join him. The sound hit her ears and didn't ring true but she quickly glanced at Adam and found him staring at her. As soon as he saw her watching him, he focused his gaze back on his girlfriend and said something to her. The woman turned her head and

covered her face, as if delighted and embarrassed by...what? His sweet words? His lies?

Cori seethed inside. How dare he enjoy somebody else when she wanted him and couldn't have him. Her pussy tingled just knowing he occupied the same space as her. Oh, how she wanted him, damn it! She crossed her legs to try to stop the clenching between her thighs.

"Don't lose it," Chris warned. "Eat."

She somehow finished her salad as the main dish arrived: filet mignon, mashed potatoes and mixed vegetables. How would she eat even part of it? While Adam danced attention on another woman, she sat and watched him. If he cared about seeing her with a man, he no longer showed it. He seemed too wrapped up with his woman. She must have imagined his reaction at home. This was turning into a disaster. She drained another glass of wine. "I need more," she said. This time she signaled the waiter. She rarely drank too much but she didn't know how else to make it through dinner.

"Cori, if you love him, this isn't the way to make things better," Chris whispered to her and she appreciated his caring friendship.

He didn't understand. "I can't make it better, but I thought maybe I could make him notice me again."

"Any man would notice you."

“Adam thinks I’m a tramp.”

Chris flinched. “If you were a tramp, you’d go to bed with anyone, even me.”

She forced herself to smile.

“How many men have you slept with Cori?”

Cori glanced over at Adam. He and his date were clinking glasses. She turned her head. “Three.”

“That’s not a lot. Were any of them good?”

“Joe was the only one I slept with for a long time and I thought he was good at the time.”

“Did he make you come?”

“Chris!” Not the way Adam had, she thought as her gaze found him again. Again, she felt like crying. With those unruly brown curls, startling aqua eyes and his sensual wide lips...how could Joe have ever made her come? She ached with need of Adam. If only she could feel him inside of her.

She wondered if anyone had ever died from unfulfilled desire. Her pussy throbbed between her crossed legs and soon she’d need the ladies room to masturbate. Stop it, Cori!

“Cori.”

She snapped to attention.

“It’s true about Adam, I guess,” he said, shaking his head.

“What is?” She didn’t know if she’d want to hear it. She had one eye on him but hopefully Adam couldn’t tell.

Chris quirked a light eyebrow. “Men tell me women can’t forget him, even if they only make love to him one time. They say he’s the best. Of course, he’s been mysteriously saintly lately, until you.”

The implication of his words struck at her heart. “You don’t get it, Chris. We live together but we didn’t have a lover’s quarrel. I’ve never made love to Adam.” As she spoke, she watched Adam’s date reach over and muss his hair and a lump clogged her throat.

“You haven’t?” Chris stared at her.

“Adam and I never had that kind of relationship.” She felt her face heating.

“Wow.” Chris grinned. “Damn!” He sobered. “Yet you do love him.”

She bit her lip and choked back a sob. “It doesn’t matter. I can’t have him.” Cori couldn’t stand much more. She drank half her glass of wine, then turned her head to avoid Chris’s disapproving glare. How could she stand being so close to Adam yet feel so far away from him? She could feel his magnetic pull, even as he wine, dined, and flirted with somebody else. She felt he belonged to her. The tension in her body made her tremble.

Laughter drifted over from Adam's table, his and hers. She felt tears again, but couldn't allow them to spill. The second half of her wine disappeared and, as the waiter headed in her direction, she knew there would be even more.

Alcohol would help her through this nightmare.

## Chapter Thirteen

Adam could barely stay in his chair. In the worst way, he wanted to storm up to Cori and tell her to keep away from Witter. Her laughter and flirting made him sick and angry. Worse than angry, jealous! His heart banged against his chest as his adrenalin raced. Why didn't Cori react to him? Had he really blown it so badly that she didn't care, even a tiny bit, that he was with another woman?

"Adam?" Cassie rapped her knuckles on the table and he quickly found her gaze.

"I'm going to tear him apart," Adam mumbled, "limb by limb. He can't have her. I won't let him sleep with her."

Cassie laughed and brushed her hand against his arm. He felt his tension easing a little and his lips twitched upwards for a few seconds. He liked this young woman. Under different circumstances, he may have seduced her or at least tried to. She smelled of spring flowers and that reminded him of Cori, who had a similar scent.

"I have to break up the love fest," he said.

"I wouldn't call it a love fest. The few times I glanced over at them, they were just talking."

“Witter never just talks. He seduces.” The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He could feel them.

“I wish some man loved me the way you love her.”

He stared at her and ran a hand through his hair. So it showed. Well, no point in denying the truth. “It’s torture. She doesn’t love me back after the way I’ve treated her. Even if she did, we have an obstacle that would keep us apart. I don’t even know why I’m trying.” He didn’t. Then again, he did. If she would only love him, he’d find a way for them to be together without risking her health. He wanted her in every sense of the word, something he’d known from the start. They were supposed to be together; he just had to plan carefully. He needed to learn how to minimize her exposure to his Herpes. There must be steps he could take.

He had to scour the internet for any information. And he knew, for the first time, he had to swallow his pride and humiliation and see a physician.

“What can I do to help?” Cassie asked. “Just tell me what you need from me.”

Adam adjusted his gaze so that he could see Cori and the cursed Chris Witter in his peripheral field of vision. Chris had her palm pressed to his lips and Adam’s heart leapt. It couldn’t happen. He couldn’t allow it. Cori, coy and flirtatious, tossed her hair behind her shoulders and batted her eyes at him. Adam



pressed his weight on his feet, ready to spring out of his chair if it went any further.

“Adam? What should I do?”

“Lean forward as far as you can.” He winked at her, hoping to hell Cori watched him at the right time.

Cassie shrugged then leaned forward, a dazzling smile crossing her face. “Oh, Adam!” she said in a louder voice than necessary. “You’re so adorable!” Between her teeth, she asked, “Was that good?”

“Yes, that was good.” He leaned over the table, the flame from the candle heating his chin and he gently cupped her jaw. “You’re the eye candy, babe, not me.” He brushed the side of her mouth with his lips, then settled back in his chair. Unable to refrain, he glanced over at Cori to see if she’d watched him.

Her eyes smoldered at him. She didn’t even pretend she hadn’t seen and she stared at him for a few long seconds before turning back to Chris.

A reaction! Did he dare hope she cared? He lowered his head and tackled the roast beef on his plate. He’d barely touched it and had noticed that Cori’s plate remained full as well. As he forced himself to swallow, he caught Cassie’s sharp gaze. “What?” he asked.

“You look tense. Don’t let her see you this way.”

His muscles felt tight. He paused to take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and loosen his joints. It was hard, especially with Cori now laughing with Chris, wine glass in her hand. How many drinks had she downed? She must be feeling good by now, which played right into Chris's hot hands. He didn't try to mask it when he watched her anymore. He couldn't. She also didn't pretend not to stare at him. She lifted her chin and turned away from him, as if in one of their old grudge match contests. Even if she liked Chris, he sensed she enjoyed ticking him off more than flirting with the pretty boy.

Two could and would play at this. He turned his attention back to Cassie and put on what he hoped was a charming face. His gaze fell to her long, blond hair and he reached for a lock, twirling it around his fingers. Its silkiness felt good, but he missed the feel and smell of Cori's. Still, judging by the look he got from Cori, his intimate gesture had angered her. The game continued.

"You have lovely hair," he said to Cassie, his voice loud enough for Cori to hear. "Of course, you're beautiful everywhere, I can't wait to..." He set a fiery gaze on her, at least he hoped it looked hot. When he checked Cori out of his side vision, she was flirting hard with her playmate of the night. He seemed enamored with her and something intangible socked Adam in the midsection. How much could a man take?

Why was he even putting himself through this? If he wanted to talk to Cori about taking their relationship further, possibly finding a way around the Herpes, and cutting the silly games, he could do it after she returned home.

After she'd made love to Chris Witter.

No! Chris didn't care for her. She'd be a trophy to hang on his wall. Aware that Chris had similar feelings about him, and not without reason, he lifted his champagne glass and took a sip. Cori was different to him, not a trophy. As a man who'd always taken the bull by the horns and bent it to his will, this unpredictable, willful woman drove him to the brink of...insanity? Worse. Even now, when he couldn't touch her, his body throbbed for her. His hardened erection ached with the need for release. And concentrating on his loins made everything more urgent. "Excuse me," he said, standing up. He hoped his smile looked normal. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Cassie nodded as she cut a piece of steak.

Adam took long strides to the restroom and entered. He did what he had to do, then entered the restaurant again, in a little better shape than before.

He'd taken no more than two steps towards his table when he froze.

Cori, across the room, sat on Chris's lap. In a restaurant? What a blatant lack of good taste, but of course, she'd drunk a lot of wine. Her head nuzzled under

the blond man's stubbed chin and she turned towards his flesh...was she kissing him? The thought shook him to the core.

His gaze scanned the room. Waiters and waitresses shot glances in their direction and exchanged rolled eye glances. Other patrons looked on with shock and disapproval. He couldn't let Cori make a jackass of herself. One older couple frowned in her direction, their mouths taut. The man beckoned to a young, well-groomed man in a dark suit, obviously a high level employee. The manager of the restaurant? Would Cori and Chris get thrown out? Chris wasn't drunk. Why did he encourage her? As he saw Cori move her lips to the lobe of his ear, he knew why. Chris was a schmuck. He'd always known that. He didn't care if he and Cori got kicked out. He just wanted

Cori so turned on that she couldn't refuse his advances once they got back to his house.

Adam swelled with anger. On his worst days, he'd never have let a woman make a spectacle of herself in a crowded restaurant. Even though she might get angry with him, he couldn't allow this to go on. He spotted the cross looking manager who had his eyes set on Cori and quickly strode up to him. "I'll take care of this." He broke up the conversation between the short-haired, pockmarked manager and an older patron seated at a table who spoke to him, motioning towards Cori.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” the silver haired man said, his voice huffy. “Get her out of here or the wife and I will leave and never come back.”

“I know her. I’ll get her out of here,” Adam said, jamming some money into the manager’s hand. “Let me handle this.”

The manager opened his hand, smiled and nodded.

“Dinner’s on me for this lovely couple,” Adam said, gesturing towards the man whose jaw fell open. He stashed more money into the manager’s hands. “Will a hundred bucks cover it?” Thank God he had lots of money on him today.

When he saw that everyone seemed calmer, he nodded politely, then got down to business.

Adam sidestepped a few paces to Cassie and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks, love. I’m going to deal with Cori now. Here’s money to pay for dinner, a tip, and an extra token of my appreciation for your acting skills.” He tossed another hundred dollars at her and set his jaw.

Without further hesitation, he took purposeful strides four tables over and stopped just before Cori and Chris, towering over them.

“Adam!” Chris said with a huge grin. “I saw you here. Forgive me if I was so distracted by my lovely date that I forgot to greet you and your...female friend.”

Adam felt the blood rush to his face and his eyes burned with anger. Cori looked up at him from Chris's lap. He could see her glazed eyes. She gave him a friendly grin.

"Pretty girlfriend. You certainly found her fast. Of course, a man like you probably has a black book just filled with names of women, but don't you have to be careful because..."

"Stop!" Damn her drunken babbling. She'd almost blurted to Chris, of all people, about the Herpes.

Cori nestled into Chris's body. Staring up at Adam with narrowed dark eyes, she said, "You have no right to tell me what to say or do."

"Maybe not, but I will anyways."

"No!" She grabbed Chris around the neck and Chris stretched his grin.

"She's mine for the night," Chris said in that arrogant voice that made Adam want to punch him every time they spoke.

"The hell she is!" Aware he had quite an audience but too livid to care, he grabbed her under the arms and pulled her off Chris's lap. Cori struggled but she was no match for him. Chris stood up, but surprisingly, crossed his arms and simply looked on.

"You can't take her against her will," a voice from another table said, penetrating the mission mode in his mind.

“It’s not against her will,” he said, amazed at the calmness in his voice.

He heard another gasp.

“Call the police,” somebody mumbled and he heard the sound of rustling, probably people grabbing their cell phones out of pockets.

“It’s not against my will!” Cori spoke loudly. “Don’t call the cops. This is my...brother.” She computed everyone’s shocked faces and said quickly, “He’s my *step*-brother, but I think of him as a brother. Why y’all staring at us?” At that, the audience looked down and at each other with uncomfortable stares, but nobody shouted about cops again. To Adam she said, “Put me down, bro. I know I’m tipsy. I’ll walk out with you.”

Surprised, he set her on the ground and grabbed her arm. “Then I won’t tell Mom you made a fool of yourself again,” he said as he dragged her out of the restaurant.

“You’re such a tattletale!” she complained and he finally opened the front door and shoved her into a crisp, cloudless night, one that showcased a full moon and a sky full of twinkling stars. He couldn’t believe what had just transpired and that she’d gone along with him. “So you came out here with me, stepsister.” he said, with sarcasm.

“I couldn’t think of anything else!” she shot.

“I thought you’d enjoy seeing me in jail,” he drawled as he kept his grip on her arm, steering her in the direction of her car.

“What will your girlfriend think?” Cori asked in a tight voice. Her words slurred a little and her gait was far from steady.

“Just a friend,” he said, spotting his car.

“Didn’t seem like it.”

He didn’t answer, felt too angry to answer. Before he opened the car door, he swatted her buttocks once. Although he’d grit his teeth, he’d only tapped her gently. He couldn’t hurt her...ever...

“Why did you do that?” She sounded a little drunk, a little annoyed.

“I felt like it.” He let her inside the car, then got in himself.

“Do you always spank grown women?” she asked as he started the engine.

“No, but you weren’t acting like one today.” He knew his voice had come out harsh. She smelled of her normal fragrant flowers mixed with wine. As he pulled his car into traffic, he didn’t speak to her. He didn’t know what to say or how she’d react to his interference. He felt his throat working hard and saw his white knuckles on the steering wheel. He had her, so now what?

“Let me out.” It came after a long silence and no resistance. “You think I’m a home wrecker.”



“No, Jenna’s nuts, but I didn’t know that when I spoke to her the first time. Then, right after, I come home and saw Joe kissing you.” He put a hand on her arm and hot blazes instantly shot to his groin. “She’s stalking me now. I shouldn’t have believed her.”

Cori’s arm tensed. “Stalking you?”

He flipped on his turn signal and explained, looking straight in front of himself all the while.

“So we both have the Corellis bothering us.” She sounded softer and he dared to feel hope.

“Yes.”

“And you believe me now?” Her tone hardened.

He glanced over at her profile. Such classically carved, smooth features. Such a well-endowed chest, moving up and down beneath her tight tank top as she breathed.

“I believe you now. Move over.”

She slid up to the gears, then leaned over them and rested her cheek on his shoulder, sending a thrill through him. He felt masculine and strong in her presence. And protective. Damn, he felt too much emotion and not enough raw desire for her. He shouldn’t, but couldn’t help himself.

“I think I may be sick,” she murmured.

He threaded his fingers through her luscious thick waves. “Too much wine, babe, and bad company.”

“Ummmm. You’re not bad company.”

“I meant Chris.”

She mumbled incoherently.

An itch attacked his groin. His fingers roved from her hair to her tit and he caught her nipple between his thumb and forefinger testing how she’d react. Would she allow it?

She sighed contentedly. “I missed you, Adam.”

He turned to mush inside, a feeling he didn’t exactly enjoy. He liked playing the badass. To counteract his inner weakness, he grumbled at her. “I’m glad you missed me. Don’t go icy on me again or I’ll have to give you another spanking.”

She chuckled against his neck and he felt that throbbing again. “You can spank me anytime you like,” she said. “That was...was more of a caress than a spanking anyways.”

He shot her a cold look but inwardly he perked up. She truly wasn’t angry at all. He needed to pull himself back. The booze might be talking, not her. He’d have to see how she responded to him once sober.

By the time they got home, she’d fallen asleep. He had to carry her upstairs but instead of taking her to her room, he took her to his and set her on top of his

masculine, brown down quilt. She looked small and feminine lying on her back, her hair fanned out behind her, her face to one side, her pink, kissable lips slightly parted. Before he left the room, he ran his thumb across her cheek and smiled down at her.

He needed to go. Fast. He turned and left the room, keeping the door open in case she woke and called to him. The first thing he did was check on Jarrod. He'd come home and gone to sleep on his own. Since Jarrod had both his cell phone number and Cori's, he assumed the boy hadn't been alarmed that nobody had been here when he'd gotten back from Sara's house. Young love. He probably thought himself very mature to be alone at night. Adam left.

He strode downstairs to his study, a small room with hanging plants, paneled walls, a small gas fireplace and oak furniture that he'd made himself. Gold cushions were thrown over chairs and sofa structures. He went to his computer and sat down, then typed in "Herpes." He'd never wanted to learn more about it before. Since he'd never planned to engage in sex with a partner who didn't have it, he hadn't felt the need. Now he needed to know what the risks could be to Cori.

TRANSMISSION

If you have genital herpes infection, you can easily pass or transmit the virus to an uninfected partner during sex. Most people get genital herpes by having sex with someone who is shedding the herpes virus either during an outbreak or during a period with no symptoms. People who do not know they have herpes play an important role in transmission.

You can transmit herpes through close contact other than sexual intercourse, through oral sex or close skin-to-skin contact, for example.

The virus is spread rarely, if at all, by objects such as a toilet seat or hot tub.

## REDUCE YOUR RISK OF SPREADING HERPES

People with herpes should follow a few simple steps to avoid spreading the infection to other places on their body or other people:

- Avoid touching the infected area during an outbreak and wash your hands after contact with the area.
- Do not have sexual contact (vaginal, oral, or anal) from the time of first genital symptoms until symptoms are completely gone.

Adam let out a discouraged breath, then clicked on and read a few more sites. They all said the same thing. Nothing guaranteed she wouldn't get herpes, not sticking to oral sex, not even always using condoms. The risk was lower if he didn't have an outbreak, and he'd only had one, but still no guarantees. Before he took the relationship a step further, he needed to find out if she really wanted to be with him. If so, he'd do all he could to make sure sex was done at safe times but she had to realize there were no guarantees.

He stood up and headed with purposeful strides back to his bedroom. Once she awakened, once she sobered up, once he saw her reaction to him, once he apologized to her for believing the crazed Jenna and not believing her...after all that, he'd see if they needed to talk. He'd never been good at conversation but he needed to pull himself together for this.

He kicked off his shoes and lay on the bed beside her. His hand found her soft face and he stroked it with the utmost care.

## Chapter Fourteen

Cori snuggled into the hard, safe, musky smelling object cradling her body.

“You feeling better, babe?”

She opened her eyes and found herself on a bed in a semi-dark room, not her own, staring straight into Adam’s beautiful, expressive aqua eyes. All memories rushed back to her as she pushed to an elbow. Her head throbbed in time to her pounding heart. “Why am I in here with you?” Her voice sounded hoarse and also angry, but she felt more alarmed than angry. How drunk had she been? She vaguely remembered Adam snatching her off Chris’s lap.

He brushed back her hair and, with the moonlight striking his face, she could see his almost tender gaze.

“Why?” she asked when he didn’t answer.

He continued to stroke her hair behind her ear. “I don’t know.”

She thought about Adam’s girlfriend and ripped away from him, showing him her back.

“Shouldn’t you be with what’s-her-name?”

His hand crept towards her breasts and his fingers fell inches short. She tried not to respond to him, begged her body not to give in, but she couldn't control it. "I paid her to pretend she was with me," he said in a quiet voice.

"Why?" She rolled to her back and gaped at him.

He lowered his gaze as his fingers played with her tit. She should slap him but it felt too good. She shivered.

"I wanted to make you jealous. I was insane seeing you with Chris."

She couldn't believe her ears. Her plan had worked. She'd won. Only she hadn't won. Neither of them had won.

"I...I didn't think you cared but I had to try. The silence between us didn't feel right."

"No." His fingers tweaked her nipple and she gasped.

"Cori, can you forgive me for believing Jenna over you? I can't take back what I said, but I hope you'll give me another chance."

She shuddered under his touch but his unexpected words touched her in a different way. Still, she couldn't make it easy. "I'll never forgive you for that." Her attempt at coldness didn't work well. Her body was hot, wanting more of him. Cold and hot didn't mix, and hot, in this case, overwhelmed cold.

Adam dropped his hand to the mattress and looked down at her from his elbow. "If you can't forgive me, then I guess there's nothing more to say." He sounded disgruntled and made a move to roll off the bed.

She quickly gripped his arm, her palm burning at the touch of his flesh against hers. "If you're big enough to apologize, I guess I can be big enough to forgive you."

He rolled back towards her and swept her against his body, breathing into her ear.

She tensed and arched her back into him. Chills and heat climbed down her spine and tingled between her thighs. "Chris is just a friend," she said, cupping a trembling hand against the side of his face, feeling the rough stubble from his five o'clock shadow.

A tired breath escaped his lips, teasing her lips. "I thought he'd seduce you. I couldn't stand the thought."

"No. That was never going to happen." She could feel his swelling manhood pressed between her thighs. If only...

"We get along well, don't we, babe?" His low voice scorched her skin.

"I'm not your..."

"Yes, you are. I realize I love you, sweetheart. I'm sorry. I didn't want this to happen, considering."



She burst into tears, something she hated to do but it happened so fast. Never had she expected to hear those words from him and her own love exploded inside of her. Burying her face against his shoulder, she wept as he held her in a tight grip.

His hand moved to her hair, stroking it. “Shhhhhhhh, babe. I need to know how you feel about that. It’s all right if you don’t love me.”

She thought his voice sounded a little tight. Trying to control her sobs of relief and happiness combined with trepidation, she choked out, “I do love you, Adam. You’re such a good person.” She heard him take in a sharp breath and his strong arms wrapped around her.

They clung together wordlessly for a while. He gripped her so tightly she could barely breathe and she wondered if her own grip had the same effect on him, but she needed to hold onto this moment, this precious moment. Adam had crept into her life and taken control of it. Without her realizing it, he’d stolen her heart and nobody else would ever have it.

A timelessness encased their world. Finally, her eyes dried, her face still buried in his neck, she whispered, “Adam, I want to show you how much I love you. I want that so much. I’ll take any risk. I don’t care.” She felt his body tense.

“That’s foolish.”

“I know.” She did know. It scared her how her desire for him could strip her of common sense, but it frustrated her that she couldn’t give all of herself to this man.

“You need to read all about herpes, the chances of transmission, the ramifications. I read about it for the first time tonight. I want you informed.”

Her stomach clenched. “Adam, I need you.” She didn’t want to frustrate him. She knew he felt as frustrated as she did and probably blamed himself. “I’ll get as close as I can to you. I’d rather be with you, even if we have to be cautious, than with anyone else. In fact, I refuse to let anybody else near me.” Had her voice trembled?

He brushed his lips against her forehead. “I have some toys that can give us a lot of satisfaction and, for now, we can touch in many ways that will let us enjoy each other.”

She perked up.

Adam bounced off the bed and onto to the floor. Cori sat up, looking over the side, wondering what he was doing. He came up with a few boxes and a naughty grin on his face.

“What do you have there?” she asked, as prickly hot stabs of pins and needles jabbed all over her body. She knew that even without penetration, she could always count on Adam to bring her to the edge of sanity.

Adam sat on the edge of the bed and opened one of the boxes, removing something from it. He set it aside and it vanished into darkness. “You deserve payback for driving me crazy,” he said, his voice husky, teasing and seductive. “Naughty payback. Let me take off your clothes.”

She caught her breath as he gently pulled her tank top over her head then let it fall to the floor. He bent over to suck first one breast, then the other and she gasped and thrashed. He came up grinning, then deftly pulled her skirt down her legs and feet. It tumbled off the edge of the bed. His eyes, shining hot in the dim room, looked hungry and predatory. “Your body is unbelievable, Beautiful. Never seen anything so perfect in my life. And before this night is over, I’m going to own it.”

She curled up inside. “I’ll bet you will.”

He lifted her palm and kissed it, making heat race to all her extremities. “We’re going to act out your most secret fantasy.”

She felt chills counteracting the heat. “I don’t have any...”

“Liar.” He laughed at her, running his fingers across her cheek. “Everyone has fantasies.”

“All right!” She laughed, so happy that he loved her, so full of love for him. She could feel him grinning down at her. “I’ll tell you one of them. This isn’t something I’d ever want to happen for real.”

“That’s why it’s called a fantasy, sweetie.” He kept stroking her cheek. “Tell me.”

“I read this book...”

“Oh, no.” He mock groaned.

“Yes! This lady, I think it was in England, was kidnapped by some man who turned out to be a spy for the government...he had to hold her hostage to keep her safe. When she found out he was protecting her and wasn’t the outlaw she’d thought he was, she seduced him.”

“Some exciting fantasy.” His voice teased her.

“It is!” She thought back to the thrill of reading about the chase and the catch. “Adam, he was a good guy but such a bad boy!” She found his gaze and brushed back his errant hair. “Just like you. Kidnap me.”

He laughed.

“I mean it. But first...” She rolled out of bed on the side opposite him and grinned at him. “You’ll need to catch me.”

“Hmmm.”

“Close your eyes.”

“Close my eyes?” He looked amused.

“It’s a game, Adam!” She felt a tickle inside. “I can’t use the entire house. We might wake Jarrod. Your room has a lot of possibilities. I’m going to hide, you find

me and kidnap me...improvise.” She put her hands on her hips, exasperated. “Don’t you have any imagination?”

“I have a good imagination.” He stood, his gaze hot and penetrating.

“Close your eyes and count to sixty. One minute.”

“As you wish.” His eyes shut and he started counting, arms crossed.

Feeling a rush through her belly, she quietly lowered herself to the floor and slid under his bed. She almost coughed on the dust, but slapped a hand over her mouth, feeling the anticipation of a hottie like Adam pretending to kidnap her. Game or not, it aroused her.

When he reached sixty, she clapped her other hand over her mouth as she heard his footsteps. First, he went to his large closet and pulled back the sliding door. She visualized him looking around. Next, he tried his smaller closet and shut the door quickly. Her heart sped up. There weren’t many places left. She heard him go into the bathroom and opened the shower door. Then his tread came closer. “Damn woman!”

He tried using an English accent and she shut her eyes and grinned. “This is a matter of life and death. I need to protect you from yourself. Where are you, wench? Without my protection, they’ll kill you!”

All right, so he’d used his own script. She found it adorable. He was adorable. She spotted his bare feet right before the bed and stopped breathing.

He'd obviously figured it out. Should she wait for him to pull her out? Instead, she reached out tickled his foot and, as he laughed in surprise, she scooted out from under the bed. As he lunged across the bed to grab for her, she laughed and ran to the corner of the room, sliding to the floor, feeling quivers of excitement race through her. He came after her, his expression serious, as he played his role.

"Don't come near me! You're that masked highwayman who killed my neighbor!" She put up her hands to ward him off, the excitement inside of her rising to the surface to sear her skin.

He closed the gap between them and, from the vantage point of her seat on the floor, his hard, straight cock intrigued her more than usual. She shivered with desire.

"I thought I was a good guy." He sounded confused.

She burst into soft laughter. "You are, but I don't know that yet."

"Oh, okay. I see." Grinning, he bent over and grabbed her under her arms, throwing her over his shoulder. She had to slap both hands over her mouth to muffle a scream. As she kicked, he said, "Resistance is futile." Then he tumbled her to the mattress and fell on top of her, pinning her arms and legs with his.

She tried to wiggle away from him, his cock rubbing against all her sensitive spots as she did. "Let me go!"

“If you’re going to try to get away, I’ll have to stop you.” His English accent had taken a turn for the worst. His heavy breathing flamed her skin and indicated his urgent condition.

“How will you stop me?” Chills climbed down her spine, that weird hot and cold sensation again...

His lips tickled her ear. “I could tie you to the bed.”

She laughed, his words sending more strange sensations down her back to the aching need between her thighs.

“Or I can make you want to stay with me.” He kissed her with a desperate, passionate, possessive claim that she’d never felt from him before. She felt him rumbling as he roughly mashed his lips against hers, nothing gentle about him now. She threw her arms around his neck and returned his intensity. He moaned into her mouth and she purred like a kitten. Then he rolled her to her side and pressed his smooth, throbbing cock against her hot spot where she felt the pulsing and warmth of it. If only she could feel it inside of her...

“Tonight,” he whispered above her lips, “I’m giving you all I can. I apologize that it can’t be more, but...” He peeled himself away from her and she cried out in outrage.

“Hey, stud,” she said as he stood at the bedside, “I need you here, in my arms. Why did you leave?” Her arms ached for him. Other parts ached for him.

He gave her a mysterious smile, then turned and sauntered to his dresser as she wondered what he was up to. After a few seconds of wondering, she no longer cared. He possessed the world's most perfect buttocks, tight and firm, and she leaped off the bed herself to chase him and pinch his delicious cheek.

He'd had his hands in a drawer, and whirled around at her touch, his eyes bright. "Attacking me from behind, eh?" The English accent returned with a vengeance.

"What are you doing? You're always up to something."

He reached down to tickle her pussy and managed to slide his fingers over her clit.

Her knees almost buckled, but he caught her with one arm and swung her to his shoulder again. She tried to pound his back and kick her legs. She loved his strength and thought this part of the game hilarious and enticing. She heard him slamming his drawer and, once again, he brought her to the mattress and deposited her on her back.

He slid beside her, as she locked her hands behind his neck and tried to pull him down to her. The masculine design of his hard body, the rippling muscles of six pack, thighs and cock made her pussy quiver and scream. If only...

He dangled something before her eyes.



She didn't understand at first. It didn't gleam in the darkness the way his eyes did.

"What's that?"

He grinned at her. "State-of-the-art condom," he said, still using his English accent. "Expensive. Top-notch." His smile slowly faded. "I don't have an outbreak, dear. I only had one a few years ago. This condom is no regular condom." He grinned again and she was glad to see it. "I spent a fortune on the best condoms. In fact, they come in many colors. You can't see it in here, but it's midnight blue. Do you want to consummate this relationship?"

Her heart leaped to her throat. "Of course," she whispered. "I want you inside of me, Adam. I desperately want to be one with you. I feel we're two halves of a whole, both of us incomplete without the other..."

"Pretty speech."

"I mean it."

"I know."

"I'm hard as a rock already."

"I know that too."

"I'm going to put it on. I wish I didn't need to use the damn thing."

She felt prickles of excitement and couldn't help asking, "Why didn't you do this before?"

“Fear for you. That even with a condom, you could get it.”

“Can I?”

He paused. “Like I said, I don’t have an outbreak, haven’t for ages, and condoms make it pretty safe, but I still worry.” He smoothed down her hair. “You mean the world to me.”

“We’re being safe, Adam, as safe as we can. You mean the world to me too, babe.”

He just continued stroking her hair.

She caught his chin in hers, seeing a scowl on his face. “Adam, listen to me, we’re being careful.”

“I wish we could go skin to skin.”

“Just being this close to you makes me wet.” She felt her breathing speeding up and she inhaled his earthy, male scent, felt the heat from his skin and the sizzle from his eyes. Her body lurched from need of him. She held out her arms to him, and he fell into them, rolling her to the top as he kissed her.

She felt an immediate jolt of electricity and shivered as his damp body pressed against all of her. Nothing on Earth felt as good as Adam Fletcher’s body against hers. She rocked against him. He moaned into her mouth as his hard-on grew. She shuddered into him, a strange, guttural noise coming from her throat. “Take me, Adam. Please, babe.”

He answered with a guttural sound of his own, then rolled her to his side. For a moment, they locked eyes, their stare so hot it could scorch ice and turn it to flame. “I love you,” he finally mumbled and thrust himself inside of her.

The moment his cock entered her, her body tensed and her muscles clamped around the erection. Weak, she allowed him to roll on top of her, deepening his entrance, forcing her pussy to spasm, contract, overflow with delicious sensation.

He didn’t stop until she felt his hips scrape hers. As her eyes filled with tears, he started thrusting inside of her, each plunge more tantalizing than the last.

She felt dizzy and light-headed, as mushy as jelly as insane as...

He thrust again and her fingers raked his back. She wondered in a distant way if she’d drawn blood. If she did, he didn’t seem to mind. His wonderful assault inside of her didn’t end, even when she’d exploded and called his name a hundred times.

He also finally shuddered, mumbling incoherent words. He convulsed a final time, then fell on top of her, breathing heavily, his heart pounding to the same rhythm as hers.

For an eternity they held one another, both drained, both satisfied, both damp with sweat. He stayed inside her as long as he could, then held her against him as they savored the feel of each other. As she lay underneath him, she smelled the faint scent of sweat mixed with male, feeling slightly feral like an animal

claiming her mate. Males usually did that, but in her mind, Adam had just become hers forever.

Her fingers lifted and dropped the damp hair over his neck. “What now, Adam?”

His lips played against the side of her neck, sending new chills down her back. It didn’t take much with Adam...

“We marry. If you’ll have me. You know the challenges.”

She couldn’t help but laugh, even as her insides warmed like hot chocolate. “I’ll have you.”

He lifted his head and smiled at her, looking both dangerous and tender at the same time.

“Did I hurt you? Scratch you too hard?” She reached up to stroke the curls off his forehead.

“Everything you did felt great. No blood drawn, I don’t think. You’re a wild woman, though.” His grin widened and his dimples flashed in all their glory.

God, he was hot!

“When do you want to get married?” she asked.

“Whenever. The only person I want with us is Jordan.”

“Jarrod for me. He’s going to be so excited. He adores you.”

“I’m pretty fond of him too.”

“I know.” She stroked his face, remembering the games they’d played with each other. Hopefully, they’d both won. “Let’s marry soon.”

He nodded, then pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

## Chapter Fifteen

Two weeks of bliss following his engagement to Cori hit Adam between the eyes. Nothing in his life had ever been smooth, and loving Cori would not change that trend. He picked up a magazine, then dropped it back on the table, refusing to make eye contact with the other patients in the room.

Adam hated the smell, look, and sterile environment of doctors' offices and avoided them at all costs. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a physician and didn't have one personally. This doctor had been listed on his insurance plan, so he'd made an appointment, and had only followed through because of Cori.

Shit. After three years of nothing, he'd awakened to another rash. Could stress cause an outbreak? He didn't know. If possible, he'd avoided all talk of herpes since Amy had told him she'd given it to him. Now herpes had come to stare them in the face. Weeks could go by before he could touch her again. How often would this crop up? Would she still want to marry him when she faced the problem head on? He believed in her love for him, but...

"Adam Fletcher."

He sucked in a breath and kept his gaze down as he headed towards the plump, matronly nurse. Avoiding small talk, answering questions in a terse, clipped voice, he felt a weight in the core of his stomach. Seated on the examining table, wearing only a gown, he suddenly wished he'd brought Cori with him...no. He faced things himself.

He knew what he'd hear...it wouldn't shock him. Still, she had a way of soothing him just by her presence...

Dr. Reyes entered the room, a short, portly man with a friendly demeanor. As he shook hands with him, Adam felt vulnerable and...scared? No, Adam Fletcher didn't know fear, had never felt fear.

"And why are you here?" Dr. Reyes asked, his dark eyes catching Adam's lowered gaze.

Adam lowered it further and mumbled his diagnosis in a rough voice, explaining how he'd contracted the hated disease...

"We have much better treatment now," Dr. Reyes said as if that made it all right. "You say you've never been seen for this?"

Adam looked off to one side. "Not by a doctor. I wanted to be anonymous so I went to a free clinic. I did see a nurse." He shrugged. "She agreed I had herpes and gave me some cream."

"Did she test you?"

He shook his head.

“Which clinic was this?”

Adam told him and Dr. Reyes frowned, telling him that the clinic didn’t have a very good reputation. “It may be shut down.”

Adam didn’t care. Just get this over with, he thought.

“Let me see.” Dr. Reyes sounded nonchalant.

Adam felt all of his muscles tensing. He really didn’t like this at all and, at first, just stared at the man.

Dr. Reyes lifted his eyebrows.

Adam shut his eyes and lay back on the table, his legs dangling over the side. Now he was glad Cori hadn’t come. She didn’t need to see him like this, needy, even frightened, waiting for the final verdict to come in...

“Is this what you had last time?”

“Yeah. Why?” He tensed even more, barely able to swallow.

“This isn’t herpes. It’s dermatophytes.”

Adam’s eyes shot open and he raised up to his elbow, his head reeling.

“What...how...?”

“Do you know what herpes looks like?”



He could barely catch his breath. “Well...I thought...I figured if she had it...and I had this terrible rash...it must be...the nurse agreed.” His words died. His heart thudded in his ears. He stared at the doctor in disbelief. “Are...are you sure?”

“I’ll run a test, but it looks like Tinea.” Then he rattled on about it, his words falling on ears that couldn’t make sense out of them. “How did you treat it last time? Just the cream from the center?” That question had meaning, finally.

Adam tried to swallow. “The cream from the center, and I bought something over the counter, forgot what. It helped too. Maybe even more. In a few weeks, it was gone...”

The doctor continued to talk about a mild infection, how to treat it, and how he’d run tests just to make sure. Adam felt as if he stood outside of his body.

Interrupting Dr. Reyes he suddenly said what had been on his mind. “She told me she had herpes...”

“And you believed her.” He shook his head.

Of course he’d believed her. She’d been sexually active and it hadn’t crossed his mind that she’d lie about something like that. How could he have been so stupid that he hadn’t checked to make sure?

As Dr. Reyes did what needed doing, he lay down and thought about it. He’d been too scared and ashamed to see a doctor. He, who always thought

himself so tough, had been a damn coward, and it had cost him. Dearly. Yet now...if the results came back negative...he and Cori...

He was on the road again ten minutes later, his life possibly changed. But until he received the test results, he didn't want to celebrate and certainly wouldn't lay a hand on Cori.

He should go home and share this latest information with Cori but couldn't do that yet. He had old business to settle, questions to ask. Did it matter? He'd suffered for three years.

He at least wanted a final conversation; he wanted closure. Maybe he couldn't get it but wanted to try. Then again, Amy may have moved.

As soon as he pulled in front of the brown, brick townhouse he could see she still drove the same car as before. It sat in the driveway with her smartass license plate, "HOTTT CHIK 235." He smirked then left the car and strode to the door, knocking hard. He didn't know how she'd receive him but he didn't care either. He couldn't remember ever feeling this angry at anybody. If she'd been a man, he'd have come to beat the crap out of him but he'd never hurt a woman, even a vile one like Amy. When nobody answered, he knocked again, then carefully relaxed his features until he felt calm and in control.

The door swung open and Amy stood there, a shocked look on her angelic face. His eyes raked over her. A flimsy, thin white tank top showcased her large

tits and nipples. The top ended above her belly button and her tiny tight black shorts.

“Adam!” She tried to shut the door, but he wedged it open with his arm and slid inside. Baby toys lay around.

“Yours?” he asked.

Amy’s brown eyes bulged. “I...never thought I’d see you again. John will be home soon. You’d better go.”

Adam laughed as he crossed his arms. “Father of your baby?”

“Yes. And my boyfriend of a year and a half.”

“Where’s Daddy? And baby?”

“Daddy’s at work. Baby’s in his room, sleeping.”

Adam noted the smugness on her face, now that the shock had worn off. He wanted to somehow erase that look. “I’m hurt. You got over me fast. And you’d told me you never would.”

“John’s all right. Knocked me up, so he moved in. Wants to marry me. Why do you think I haven’t taken him up on that offer?”

Adam decided to see if he had any cards to play. “Me?”

She stared at him, her eyes suddenly smoldering with both hostility and heat, an interesting combination. “You haven’t changed much. Gorgeous as ever. Maybe a little more mature. It’s becoming.”

So, he had cards to play. “You don’t look so bad yourself. Tell me about John.”

“Why do you care?”

He just stared at her, tapping his foot.

“He’s a good father. He never overwhelmed me like you did.” She cocked her head and her blond hair spilled to one side. “Why did you come here after all this time?”

He could play her game of lies. “I wondered if you were single. Guess not.”

Her eyes rounded, and he saw her face flush. “Well, I’m not single, but I could be. For the right person.”

Adam didn’t want to get into a fight with this John. He had nothing against Amy’s new victim. “Hmmm. Are you sure Lover boy won’t be home soon?”

“He works second shift. He won’t be home until after midnight.” She batted her eyelashes at him.

“I see.” Poor man. He actually felt sorry for him. “So, did you have any problems when you were pregnant?”

“Pretty status quo. Didn’t even gain much weight, see?” She twirled around.

He hoped she didn’t see him rolling his eyes. “You look beautiful.” She probably did, if a man didn’t see her inner ugliness.

“Thanks!” She glowed, her cheeks turning a bright pink. “Adam, do you want to get together for old time’s sake? Is that it?” She brushed the material on top of her breasts.

“Maybe.” He stuck his thumbs in his belt loops and rocked back on his heels. “This is kind of a bad time for me. I have a rash.” He watched her expression. As expected, her eyes rounded and her jaw dropped slightly.

He felt a malicious satisfaction inside, but masked his emotions. “I guess it doesn’t matter in our case.” He flashed his best grin and could see her coloring to red. “We share a lot, including the same problem. I’m not angry with you anymore. I’m over it.” He enjoyed the confusion on her face.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“You...can’t have a...rash.”

“I do. Just came from the doctor. Does that surprise you?”

She laughed uneasily. “Adam, I know what I said to you but I’m kind of puzzled.”

“Because I have an outbreak?” He saw her throat muscles working.

“I don’t really have herpes. I, um, told you I did when you mentioned a rash...to get back at you for not...loving me. I know it was childish but I expected you to check it out and find out it wasn’t true...”

“It’s true, dear. You must have it. How else did I get it? I wasn’t cheating.” Now he had confirmation that she’d lied to him. He watched her reaction to his lie.

She turned white. “You can’t have it. I don’t.”

“Are you sure? Sometimes there aren’t any symptoms.” He had no idea if that were true or untrue.

She looked up at him, her eyes darker than ever in a ghost-like face. “Are you saying you really do have herpes and I need to check it out? My baby is fine! Wouldn’t...something have happened to the baby if I had it?”

Adam wavered inside. Part of him wanted to pay her back by letting her worry and suffer for a while. Most of him couldn’t do that, even though she’d done it to him. She’d given him the information he needed. He wouldn’t have to wait for test results to make love to Cori. Cori mattered, not this pathetic woman.

“Adam?” Her eyes seemed ready to pop. “When I said it...I didn’t mean...do you really have it?”

They stared at each other, the only sound in the room their breathing.

“You don’t play games with someone’s head like that!” Adam’s voice snapped like a whip. He could hear it. “Taught me a lesson though, stay with one woman. Be monogamous, not that I wasn’t with you. But I’m ready to settle down now, and I’m sure the woman won’t go out on me...”

“Do you have it or don’t you have it?” Amy’s tears threatened to fall.

“No. I don’t have it!”

“But you said...”

“Showing you how it felt, but I can’t let you wonder about it, even for ten minutes. You didn’t get anything from me. After three freaken years, I found out you’d lied to me.”

She looked stricken. “You...should have seen a doctor...”

He nodded. “Yes. It was stupid of me not to see one, but I believed you and was ashamed. Not an excuse, but that’s why I didn’t. It wasn’t necessary that I worry about herpes at all but you wanted to get back at me.”

She rubbed an eye. “I...thought you’d think you had to marry me.” The words came out bitter.

“I know.” He stared at her, loathing her, yet almost pitying her. Did she really matter anymore?

“Please forgive me.” Her voice broke and she ran up to him, startling him when she reached up, gripped his shoulders and tried to pull him towards her. “I’ve never stopped loving you. You don’t know how often I’ve thought of calling you...”

“But you didn’t. You never told me the truth.” He removed her hands and threw them at her.

“I told you, I thought you’d go to the doctor...”

“I should have, but that doesn’t excuse that kind of lie. I’m leaving now.”

“No!”

He turned and strode towards the door.

“Adam, visit me again.”

With the door swung open, he turned and gazed down at her. “I have a fiancée. Unlike you, I don’t cheat.” He slammed the door behind him, feeling as if he’d finally put his past behind him. As he drove home, for the first time it sunk in that he didn’t have herpes and no longer had to worry about his sexual relationship with Cori. He couldn’t wait to share the news with her.

Better, he couldn’t wait to make love to her without any restrictions.



## Chapter Sixteen

Cori stood at the front window and tried calling Adam on his cell phone for the third time. Again, she heard his voicemail. Letting out a breath, she rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Adam, where are you, dear? Call me.” Adam must have accidentally shut off his phone. She put her phone in the back pocket of her blue jeans and brushed Princess’s shedding black hairs off her yellow peasant top. With Adam missing and Jarrod at Sara’s house again, she decided to take a walk through the trails.

As she power walked towards what she called ‘The Jungle’, she squinted into a red, setting sun. Her ring, the one Adam had bought her, tingled on her finger. Never did she forget about its presence. The diamond mattered little to her. It was the thought that mattered; the love mattered. Adam mattered. Nobody, except Jarrod, had ever mattered more to her. They planned to marry in a few weeks at a small church with only Jordan, Jarrod, Jackie Stapleton and a few of the crew guys in attendance. Afterwards, Adam had promised her a three-week surprise honeymoon.

Cori couldn’t wait. She felt secure in her decision to spend her entire life with Adam Fletcher. Nobody could surpass him in her heart and she knew he

loved her too. Feeling giddy and light, her feet seemed to lift off the ground. She hummed a nonsense song and waved to people who passed her from the opposite direction. All felt right in her world.

As she strolled through the leafy, grassy trails, she increased her pace. Rounding a bend, she forged ahead with zeal...and suddenly halted...

Shit! Just that quickly, she spun around and started walking in the other direction, hoping she hadn't been spotted.

No such luck.

"Hey, Cori!"

Cori tried to shut her ears and ignore Jenna Corelli.

"Wait up! I want to apologize."

*Sure she did.* Cori kept walking, leery of her claim.

Jenna caught up to her. "Look, I realize I've been acting badly. You have to understand. I love Joe the way you love Adam."

She laughed. "Yet you've been offering yourself to Adam."

"Only to get back at Joe for hurting me. You have no idea what it's like to find out your husband has cheated on you, and I hope you never do."

Cori tossed her a confused glance. For once, she sounded humble and didn't look smug. "I wouldn't have gone near Joe, ever, if I'd know he was married." She hoped she sounded conversational, not defensive or hostile. She had to feel a little

sorry for the woman. Joe was the worst kind of snake. “I think Joe may be cheating again.” Jenna paused. “Please tell me the truth. Is it you?”

Cori let out a breath. “No, Jenna. I don’t want him. I’m sorry he’s up to his old tricks, but leave me and my fiancé out of it. Adam isn’t interested.”

“He made that clear.” She still didn’t sound her normal nasty self and that had to be a good thing.

“Can I see your ring?” Jenna asked, sounding almost timid.

Cori saw no harm in that. She halted, as did Jenna. As she held out her hand, Jenna whistled. “Bet he paid a fortune for that.”

She shrugged and started striding down the blacktop again. Jenna joined her. Cori wanted to shake the woman, but she only had two blocks to go and her home would shield her from Jenna and everything else threatening. Adam would come home and shield her...

“I’d love to teach Joe a lesson,” Jenna said.

“Well, count me out.” She didn’t want anything to do with that.

“He’s so crazy about you. Would serve him right if he thought you were in danger.”

That sent alarm bells ringing in her head. Something wasn’t right with Jenna Corelli. She sped up.

“I thought maybe we could stage something, just to get back at him.”

“How would that help your marriage?” She started to pull away from her. The lady spooked her out.

“It wouldn’t but it would scare the shit out of Joe. I swear he cares more for you than me. It’s not fair. He married me, not you.” Her voice sounded melancholy and pained.

Cori couldn’t help laughing but without mirth. “He doesn’t care about me. His only interest was sex.”

“Well, he talks about you a lot, especially to his friends when he thinks I can’t hear him.”

That gave her the double creeps. They’d reached the end of the trail and she stepped from the blacktop to the sidewalk. “Jenna, sorry I can’t listen to more, I have to go,” she said and turned to head towards the house. She broke into a sprint, eager to shed herself of the woman.

All of a sudden, she felt a sharp chop on the back of her neck.

She felt herself falling in slow motion, and before she could cry out, her body hit the concrete and her world went black.



When Cori woke up, she felt woozy and disoriented. After a few moments of trying to figure out where she was, she found herself sitting on a chair in a dark, musty room, her hands bound tightly behind her back with rope and her ankles

tied together in similar fashion. A dirty rag that gagged her mouth was tied behind her head. She retched a few times, but the sound was muffled.

Before Cori could try to make sense of her surroundings, which she tried to see in the blackness, a flashlight hit her face and she saw Jenna Corelli standing before her, a frosty look in her narrowed, darkened eyes. Cori had to fight lingering foggiess in her brain, but she suddenly remembered the quick chop to the back of her neck by the trails.

Jenna moved closer and Cori could see a tic in her jaw. Her lips pursed together before she spoke. When her voice emerged, she spoke in cold, crisp bites.

“You sold me short. Adam sold me short. Joe too. You all think I’m a ditzy woman, but I’m pretty smart.” She smirked.

Cori wiggled to free herself, but the ropes burned her wrists and ankles. She stilled and waited to hear what came next. She’d need to hang onto every word. Maybe something would help her...

“I didn’t expect to run into you tonight, but my plan was in place for whenever I saw you. I knew I would, eventually.” She sounded pleased with herself. “Glad it was sooner, rather than later. I’m not a patient person.”

Cori tried to struggle again. She accomplished nothing.

”You’ll get terrible rope burns, dear. Not that I care.” Jenna smiled sweetly. Then her lips slashed to a straight line. “Let me tell you what happened. I’m sure

you're curious." She lifted her hands and flexed them. "I have a friend who's an instructor in martial arts. I don't know much about them, but I did learn how to knock somebody senseless with a chop and I used it on you. Nobody saw me do it. Two people did see you on the ground afterwards, so I said you'd passed out and that my husband is a doctor. I told them I wanted to bring you to my home so my physician husband could examine you. It worked in my favor to elevate Joe's credentials." She let out an eerie laugh. "The man always did have good hands, as you know."

Cori shuddered inside.

Jenna sidestepped to a small table. A tall glass of something orange sat there and she swallowed a long drink, then continued talking. "The good Samaritans were more than happy to help get you to my house. One had a car so they carried you into it. Those nice men even helped me carry you into my room too. My room." She set narrowed, almost slanted, eyes on Cori's gaze, sending a shiver through her. "Joe and I don't share a room anymore. His choice. Told me I'm too crazy to fuck." She scowled and Cori felt her stomach lurch. She could feel the insanity radiating from her. For once, she agreed with Joe.

Jenna took another drink and Cori started slowly trying to loosen the ropes that bound her hands behind her. Discreetly, of course.

“After the nice men left, and don’t expect them to be able to identify where you are, they were just visiting from out of town, and were on their way home, I dragged you into the basement. That’s why your bottom may be sore. I’m sorry about that.” She shook her head. “Got plenty of bruises myself trying to get you down here. I’ll have to make up a story for Joe. Anyway, this room you’re in is a little storage room off the basement. We never use it and it’s fairly soundproof.”

Cori felt her heart racing. How would she get out here? She refused, refused, to give up, even as Jenna said, in a matter-of-fact voice, “You’ll die here, of course. You’ll just disappear and nobody will know what happened. I’ll think of how to dispose of your body later on. Joe will be despondent, but he’ll get over it and come back to me and only me.” Her lips turned up. “Without you, Joe will have no distractions and he’ll let me touch him again.” Her smile melted. “Adam will suffer too, of course. He deserves it for rejecting me. I don’t take rejection well.”

Shit. Cori couldn’t believe this. Delusional Jenna wanted her dead for crazy reasons. She couldn’t die. Her life had just begun. She couldn’t leave Adam and Jarrod. Somehow, she’d get out of this mess. Somehow...

“After I shut this door, I’ll never come back. You’ll die in your chair, unable to move. No food. No water. I’m too squeamish to kill you in a bloody way. Plus, I’ll kind of enjoy knowing Joe is walking around here with no clue that you’re dying in our storage room. I’ll have a secret...you! And every time I see Adam

mounting a community campaign to find you, I'll fuss over how sorry I am but I'll secretly be glad that he's lost the one he loves. Nobody does things to me. Nobody!" Her voice rose. "I've been dismissed as stupid all my life, from the time I was a little girl! I won't be able to brag about doing away with you, but I'll know that I outsmarted you, Joe, and Adam. And it will sustain me forever."

Cori tried to keep her head. She'd have no chance at all if she panicked. Behind the chair, she again tried to loosen the ropes that bound her hands. As she did, her mind raced. *If I free my hands and ankles, which is a long shot, then what? Could anyone hear me if I called for help or banged against the door?*

As if reading her thoughts, Jenna said, "This room is below the lower family room, attached to the basement. It has solid walls. I'm pretty confident that nobody can hear you, no matter what, unless they did come downstairs and stood right near this room. But you can't speak, can you?" She laughed. "I took care of that, didn't I?" She sobered. "I'm not a bad person. I just needed to teach all three of you a lesson. Do you forgive me?"

Cori refused to nod her head to that ludicrous question.

Jenna's smile wavered. "I see. Well, God will forgive me. He understands. Good-bye, Cori. Joe will be home eventually. Even though he hasn't touched me in over a year, I have high hopes now that you won't be around anymore. I hope he



lets me comfort him and that we can recapture the love we once had. You should never have messed with my man. I'm very possessive.”

Cori felt her heart sink as Jenna's heels clicked against what sounded like tile. She wanted to call out to her but her gag didn't allow it.

Jenna opened a heavy door, and for a moment, light spilled into the room. Then she shut it and Cori heard a lock turn. Blackness prevailed. So did soundlessness. If any sounds took place in the house, Cori couldn't hear them.

Feeling desperate, frightened, and hopeless, she dropped her head and cried. But only for a moment. She had to try to loosen her bonds so she could poke around the room. Maybe there were ways out that Jenna didn't know about. She hadn't lived here for very long.

Adam! Would he think of Jenna when he discovered her missing? If so, Adam knew every nook and cranny in this house and all the houses he built. But first, he had to suspect Jenna of foul play.

Any way she looked at it, she seemed so screwed.

But her nature didn't allow her to concede defeat so she gritted her teeth again as she strained against the rope.

## Chapter Seventeen

Adam stepped into the house pumped and ready to grab Cori and throw her on the bed. His plans were momentarily curtailed by Jarrod sitting on one of the leather recliners, doing his homework in front of the television. Adam strode up to him and shut it off.

“Awww, come on,” Jarrod scowled.

“Not cool to do your homework while watching a sitcom,” Adam said. “Your grades have been great. I don’t want them to fall.”

“Sure, now you’re marrying my sister, you’re getting bossy.” He glared at Adam.

Adam nodded. “And I have to take on the father role. I’ll only get bossier. Where’s Cori? She home?” His loins twitched.

“No, I thought she was with you.”

Adam felt the first stirrings of alarm. “She hasn’t been home?”

“Not since I got back from Sara’s. I made my own dinner.”

Adam’s intuition kicked in, sending him waves of uneasiness. “No dinner?” That wasn’t like Cori. Not at all.

“You think something happened?” Jarrod looked up at him, his face etched with concern.

“No. Finish what you’re doing. She’ll come home soon.” He winked at Jarrod then turned and headed towards the kitchen. Once there, he sat on a stool and stared. Cori had left him several messages on his cell phone telling him she’d be waiting for him.

He’d never wanted to see her more and that spoke volumes. Where the hell was Cori? He’d have a beer and if Cori hadn’t come home by then, he’d go out looking for her. Maybe she’d taken a walk. Her car was in the driveway so she couldn’t have gone far.

As he sipped his beer, he cursed himself. Why hadn’t he come straight home from the doctor? Why had he felt it so damn important to confront Amy? If he’d come right home...it didn’t help to dwell on things that couldn’t be changed. Leaving his beer can and half his beer, he shot to a stand and set his jaw. If he strolled around the neighborhood, he’d likely run into her. She loved to take walks or sprint. He could ask the people he saw along the way and find out if anyone had seen her.

As he checked his watch, 6:55. She usually sat down for dinner with him around this time, dragging Jarrod with them. Something felt ‘off’. When a predictable person varied routine, it always made sense to check it out in a

thorough fashion. He loved Cori above his own life. Even if it turned out to be nothing, he needed to put his hands on her and see for himself that she was fine.

After that, they'd have the night of their life. He headed toward the jogging trail, hoping to find her there, afraid that he wouldn't.



Cori spent what seemed like hours straining against the ropes. They tore into her skin, yet she didn't feel she'd made much progress. Jenna had tied them tighter than hell. But rope would give if she only kept at it long enough. After struggling for what she guessed was an hour, she let out a tired sigh and blinked in the darkness. She shut her eyes to visualize Adam, his unruly hair, his tender yet hot aqua eyes, his wicked sensual lips, that dimple, his powerful throat, his massive chest, his flat abdomen, his beautiful, smooth, straight sword of a cock, and took a shuddering breath. Would she never touch Adam again? No, she needed to. She wouldn't let Jenna defeat her. She'd take turns loosening her ropes, then soothing herself with thoughts of Adam.

She slumped in the chair as sleep overtook her.



Adam had sent Jarrod to a school friend's house for the night, unsure if he'd go back home. Now, at 9:05, he knew for sure that something was wrong. He'd

checked the trails a few times and seen few people and nothing unusual. Now that darkness covered the sky, he needed to intensify his search. In the back of his mind, he'd thought about Jenna from the beginning. And Joe. But when he'd knocked on the door, nobody had answered.

He needed to go back again. He remembered Jenna a few weeks ago, insisting that Joe and Cori were together. Could it be? No, Cori wouldn't do that to him. He knew that now. Yet, as he gazed across the rows of houses, he wondered, would Joe take her? Jenna had indicated he was still obsessed with her.

He forced himself away from the tree and tensed. He had to check. He had ways to get answers from people and, by the time he was finished with Joe and Jenna, he'd know if either of them knew anything. He lifted his cell phone, knowing he'd need Jordan to help him.

## Chapter Eighteen

An hour had passed since Adam's quest to find Cori began. He'd gone to the Corelli house first, but the cars had been gone and nobody had answered. He'd decided to run through the trails and question people next. It made sense that Cori would take a walk. But as he talked to everyone he could find with no results, he started thinking about the Corellis again. Jenna's car now sat in the driveway. He knocked on the door hard.

Jenna answered. When she saw him, her face lit up and she started batting her eyes. Women! First Amy, now this bitch. As if anybody could move him after Cori! He stepped inside and pinned her with his gaze. "Is Joe here?"

Her smile faded. "He's never here anymore."

A toddler ran up to Jenna and hugged her leg, so he tried to temper his words in front of the child. "Cori's missing. Do you know anything about it?"

Jenna patted her little girl on the head. "Oh! I have no idea!" She lifted her daughter. "The kids were at Joe's mom's house so I had dinner there. Just got back a little while ago."

"Where's Joe?"

“I couldn’t tell you. I really need to hire that PI again. He may be...” she glanced at her daughter, “...indisposed with somebody.”

Adam’s muscles jerked taut as another child, an older boy, joined them, his eyes dark and penetrating. He wished the kids would go away. “Call Joe,” he said.

“I did! He’s not answering his cell phone.”

Adam felt something in the air. His instincts were good. Bad vibes assailed him. “Would Joe take Cori?” He glanced at the little boy standing next to his mother.

“Of course not.” Jenna’s voice was tight. “If they’re together, it’s voluntarily. You trust your little tart too much.”

Adam inhaled a sharp breath. It was a lie, but he wouldn’t argue. What the hell could he do? He couldn’t call the cops, they’d laugh at him, reporting an adult missing after just three hours. “Any idea where Joe could be? If I catch him with Cori, I’ll beat the shit out of him and throw her out.” He knew he’d said the right thing when Jenna inappropriately smiled.

“Try work.”

“Cori says his company is an hour away.”

“It is, but he may be there. He does...more than work there.” She smirked at him.

Damn! It could be a big waste of two hours, driving up and back. He needed to look here first. “Can I look around the house?”

“Why?” Jenna sounded so alarmed that Adam went on high alert. His heart thudded in his chest.

“I want to see if she’s here.”

“What?” She laughed, not a pretty sound.

“Can I look around?” He spotted a tic in her jaw. A sign?

“Sure.” She lifted her chin. “But hurry up.”

Adam checked all the rooms in the house in addition to the basement. While downstairs, he felt an odd pull to the storage room and went to it, turning the knob. It was locked. He knocked on the door. Nothing. “Cori?” he called.

No answer.

Disgruntled, he climbed the stairs back to the main floor. “Jenna, could you unlock that storage room in the basement?”

“As soon as Joe gets home, sure.”

“Why wait?”

“It’s been locked since we moved in. Joe has a key. I don’t. Why? Do you think I have her there?” She laughed so loud and long that her baby put her hands over her ears.

Adam wasn’t sure what he thought. Something was pulling him to it.



“Get out or I’m calling the cops!” she said, her nose flaring.

Adam didn’t want to leave, but decided to placate her so that she didn’t involve the police and leave him wasting time talking to them. He needed to get to Joe in order to plan his next move. Fortunately, he’d already sent Jordan to Joe’s workplace, having been told where it was by Cori. He’d have time to check around the neighborhood again and then come back with more information, if necessary.

Not feeling one hundred percent good about leaving, he nodded at her and opened the door. “My cell number is the same as my business number so I know you have it. Call me if you remember anything. If anything happens to Cori, the people responsible are going to be damned sorry.” She tried to look blasé, but her lips twitched. He hoped his warning scared her. As he slammed the door shut, he felt helpless, something he hated. As time passed, he started thinking more and more that one of the Corellis had something to do with it. One thing he knew, Cori’s car was in his driveway, yet she was gone. He started up his car and raced away.



Cori’s head jerked up and she shuddered, remembering all as she jolted awake. Had she heard Adam or had that been a dream? Just as the thought hit her, the door swung open and Jenna stepped inside. Her heart thudded. Maybe Jenna had changed her mind...would let her go...she’d said she wasn’t coming back...

“You’re an inconvenience, Cori.” Jenna’s words struck her like needles. “Had to make my kids go to sleep early just to sneak down here to see you. I may have to rid myself of you quickly. Your boyfriend just left. He even checked the house. I’m glad I gagged you. Did you hear him?”

Cori felt her eyes water. So Adam had been there.

“He left. I suggested he check with Joe at work. Of course, that will take two hours up and back since it’s so far. Your knight in shining armor failed you.” She broke into laughter. “I can tell he’s a nice guy, not a cheater like Joey. You would have been so happy but that won’t happen now.”

Cori wished she could speak. She knew she could stall Jenna, keep her talking, try to get her to release her, but she couldn’t. Feeling a wave of vulnerability, a tear slid down her cheek.

A flashlight suddenly lit, its beam hitting her face. “Oh! Are you crying?” Jenna grinned at her in a maniacal way. “So sorry. I’m actually just as happy as you are sad! With you out of the way, I know my Joey will let me touch him again. I may even also get Adam in the bargain as a boy toy. It would be such sweet revenge to do your men. I have to go now. Time to read Victor a bedtime story, be a good mama. That’s also something you’ll never experience.”

Cori gritted her teeth. If she died, she wouldn’t be a coward about it.

Jenna dropped the key to the floor. “I don’t want to tempt myself to come back here. That way I really can’t visit you again. I have a soft heart. I’m afraid I’ll want to give you water or feed you. Can’t have that!”

Cori would let her tears fall later. Right now, she blinked them away.

Jenna shut off her flashlight and the room was covered in darkness once more. “Its kind of fun to visit, seeing you this way at last after what you did, slut. Toodles!” She left, slamming the door behind her.

Cori trembled and the tears fell faster. Now that she could cry, she did.



Joe was hard at it with a woman, wasn’t even sure of her name. He grunted and groaned as he shoved his cock into her pussy.

“Oh, Joey!” she cried in a soprano voice.

“Shut up.” Joe thrust into her. His loins sang with pleasure. Hell, he had to finish fast or Jenna would be all over his ass about being out late. She didn’t buy his crap about working late, not a bit. Screw foreplay. The lady, whatever-her-name, seemed to enjoy him without much of it.

The door to his office broke off the hinges and a tall, dark figure kicked him in the ribs. He rolled off of Lulu, yeah, Lulu was her name he remembered, and Lulu stood up, screamed and headed for the hills.

“What the fuck...” Joe said but a booted foot found his neck. Joe couldn’t believe this, but who was this man? He had a ski mask over his face. Would this nutjob kill him?

“Where’s Cori?” the man asked roughly and Joe recognized the voice but couldn’t place it. It definitely wasn’t Adam. He was starting to lose consciousness as breathing became difficult.

“I’ll only ask once more. Where’s Cori?”

“Who are you?” he managed in a strangled voice.

“You don’t need to know that. Answer me! She’s missing.”

Joe tried to inhale. Not easy. He thought of Jenna. The woman grew loonier by the day. Soon he’d have no choice but to commit her, which suited him fine. Then he could divorce her and she couldn’t get half his assets, not if she was nuts.

The boot kicked him in the head and he groaned.

“Where?”

“Jenna! Try Jenna! She hates Cori! She’s been making crazy talk about killing her.”

“Really! She wasn’t at your house.”

Joe wanted this big lug to leave him alone, and he didn’t really care if Jenna got thrown in the big house, either jail or a sanitarium. If Cori was gone, he bet

Jenna had somehow managed to take her. “You checked everywhere? Don’t kick me again, man!”

The heel of the boot rested on the floor, the sole on the side of his face. “Talk!”

Joe’s mouth suddenly went dry. She meant it! The bitch had been serious when she’d told him he planned on killing Cori. He’d thought she’d just been ranting more of her crazy threats. “Shit,” he said, scared as hell now. “She’ll implicate me...I never dreamed she’d really do anything...”

The tall, sturdy man sank to the ground and pulled him up by the neck of his shirt and Joe got to see the knife in his hand. He swallowed hard, no hero and in no hurry to die.

“The attic? I really didn’t think...”

“I don’t give a shit what you didn’t think.” He pressed the blade against Joe’s neck. “Any other ideas? Time is precious.”

“Try the storage room downstairs. I—it’s under the basement! She even mentioned using the damn storage room. Maybe the crazy fuck actually did it. Please don’t kick me! I don’t have anything to do with it!”

The tall guy fiddled with his cell phone, sitting heavily on top of the out-of-shape Joe. He couldn’t make a run for it. “You may have mentioned to somebody

how she was talking.” The man’s hard, cold voice scared Joe, but thankfully he swung around to dropped eye contact as he began talking on the phone.

“Hi. Listen, Adam,” he said, his words rapid fire. “Go back. Try the attic or that storage room. She’s talked about using the storage room. I got Joe here at knife point.”

“Good work.” Adam felt his adrenalin start to pump. He was watching the Corelli house from an alley behind it, waiting for Jordan to give him a reason to break in. He’d looked everywhere else, knocked on everyone’s door, even called the cops who, as he’d suspected, wouldn’t help him.

If Cori were in the storage room or attic, she hadn’t answered his call to her. Tears filled his eyes. Had crazy Jenna killed her?

“Have Joe talk to the cops, tell them he suspects Jenna. Then they’ll come and give me a hand. I have to go.” He snapped his phone shut and ran the few feet from the alley behind the Corelli’s yard to the fence. Climbing over the white stakes, he landed in the grass, then sprinted to the back door, slamming all of his weight against it. The door tore off the hinges and almost hit Jenna’s oldest kid. She started crying just as Jenna ran in the kitchen. “You again! Get out of here!” she demanded.

He brushed by both and ran down a narrow staircase then another one below the basement. The storage room had an extra-heavy door, unlike the regular doors. He smashed his body against it several times, but it wouldn't give. Clenching his teeth in a fury, he tried again and again but it still wouldn't give. Jenna came down and tried to pull him by the arm but he shook her off and kept trying. "Cori!" he called. "Cori, are you in there?"

Jenna started crying. "Damn it, I'll never have him as long as she's alive! I had to do it, Adam! I did you a favor too! She would have hurt you!"

Adam froze, then turned to her gripping her arms and staring into her tear-streaked face. "Did you kill her?"

Jenna turned away from him. Her child started screaming. "She still may be alive in there!" she yelled so loud that the walls rattle. "Damn it, you fucken ruined everything!" The scream that followed seemed to permeate the universe, but Adam turned around and, with superhuman strength, karate kicked the door until it started to give and finally flew open. Jenna was still screaming when he ran inside. Along with Jenna's eerie scream, he heard the welcome sound of police sirens. Adam didn't pay much attention to them. Cori and her horrific condition stole all of him and hot tears sprung to his eyes as he ran to untie her. Later, he didn't remember how she ended up in his arms, but as the police came storming downstairs, the two of them clung together, their tears mingling with their kisses.

## Chapter Nineteen

Cori's body seemed to jolt and at first, she didn't know where she was. Her eyes opened and she smiled and laid her head over the taut denim jean material covering the muscles of Adam's thigh. He wore no shirt and his hair was mussed and damp. "What day is it?" She snuggled closer to him, feeling the comforting heat from his body. "How long did I sleep?"

"Two days. The meds were strong."

"You were here the whole time, weren't you?" Her voice sounded hoarse.

"I only left to use the bathroom."

He smiled at her and his expression looked so tender, so precious.

She forced herself up to her forearm and he lifted her up the rest of the way until her head snuggled under his stubbed chin. "What happened to..."

"She's in the hospital. Unlikely to get out soon. Joe is an s.o.b but he didn't have anything to do with it."

She shuddered against him and he tightened his hold on her.

"Joe won't bother you again," Adam said patting her on the back. "We reached an understanding."



“How?”

He nuzzled his face in her hair and chuckled. “Trust me.”

“I do.” She pulled away to get a good look at him, and his eyes, those penetrating eyes, seemed to stare through her to her soul. His lashes were so long, they almost caressed her cheeks. She reached up to touch his face. “You found me.”

“Not fast enough. I almost screwed up. Again.”

“Again? Stop it.”

She didn’t want to hear negatives. All she wanted to do was have him. Her tired body wanted to feel him all over and wipe away the bad memories.

“I should have seen a doctor when Amy told me she’d given me herpes. The nurse didn’t know anything.”

She didn’t quite understand but he looked disgruntled so she stroked back his hair.

“I don’t have herpes. I never did. Amy never did. She lied to me. I spent three years in torment over nothing, and I almost gave you up.”

She stared at him. Was it a joke? No, she could tell he meant it. “What was it then?”

“Mild fungus infection. I’ll tell you the long version at another time.”

“How...how could she have let you think...”

“Who cares? I can’t do anything about Amy, the past, or my own stupidity. All I can do is make a better future.” His big hand cupped her chin and she sizzled inside.

“With you, babe.” He shot her a tender, adorable smile.

“I’m not your babe.”

He lifted his eyebrows.

She grinned. “I’m your future wife.”

His mouth eased into a wide, dimpled smile. “You are. And I believe you’re missing something. Shut your eyes.”

She did. Her eyes watered as he slid a ring on the second finger of her left hand, then lifted her hand to his lips for a kiss. When her eyes opened, he looked a little blurry. “Jenna took it. How did you get it?”

“When the cops came and subdued her, I noticed it on her finger. It’s on your finger forever now.”

His words sent shivers down her spine as his hot eyes raked over her.

“Yes.” She hugged his neck. “No herpes! Wow!”

“You know what that means?” His lips nibbled on her earlobe and prickles of heat rippled though her. “It means freedom to do whatever we want.”

She turned her head towards his neck and planted wet kisses against his skin. She could feel his breathing speed up and his heartbeat accelerating.

He voice whispered into her ear, low and seductive. “I want to come inside of you. Nothing between us.”

She felt an inner thrill. “And if I get pregnant?”

He pulled back and stared at her. “You’re on the pill.”

She grinned and shook her head. “Not anymore. I quit. I knew I’d never let anyone but you touch me and I thought you had herpes, that you’d always use protection, so why worry?”

He pushed back some strands of her hair and her belly quivered like jelly. “You can get pregnant?”

Suddenly her mounting excitement quelled. She nodded.

“We’re marrying at the end of this week.”

“We are?” It startled her, and filled her with unexplainable joy.

He nodded. “I’ve waited all I can.”

“Me too.”

His presence seemed to raise the temperature in the room. “Let’s have sex,” she said, giddy and aroused.

The look in his eyes, the expression on his face, the tightness of his muscles, made a scorching blaze rage through her like a pond of lava. “Let’s make love. It’s more than sex for us, sugar.” He kissed her and pinned her down on the mattress. Her legs wrapped around him as she pushed up against his body; she felt his hot,

growing cock. It throbbed against her and shot arrows up to the follicles in her hair, down to her toes and through her own throbbing pussy.

His lips broke from her mouth and traveled south, tickling her on the way down as she shivered and shuddered beneath him. She kept a grip on his shoulder and in his damp hair. Remembering the way the vibrator had made her feel, she arched and dampened even before his mouth passed her belly. She could feel her stomach tighten and soften, alternately.

As his lips touched her curls, he mumbled, hot against her mound, but she couldn't quite hear what he was saying. Her thighs were shaking, her pussy tingling, when his tongue swept up and down her wet cleavage. She threw her head back, arched, scratched his back and whimpered. He laughed in a wicked way and his breath fueled her flames

His heated tongue flicked across her hardened clit and she heard somebody screaming as she floated and whirled above herself, thrown into another world, one only filled with the fireworks of sensation, passion, and love. She convulsed over and over as his busy tongue brushed her hot spot. He granted her no mercy, even when she didn't think she'd survive any more of him. She even thought she heard him chuckling as she spun through the heavens. Then, sweating, breathing heavily, heart pounding, she relaxed and he pushed himself beside her. She could feel his damn eyes on her, those hot, hot, hot eyes.

After a few minutes lying next to him, her body arousing all over again, Adam lifted his head, smiled down at her and gently took her hand, placing it on his hard cock. She sat up as he lay back, and she slid down between his thighs. His elegant manhood throbbed against his abdomen so she took it in between her palms and admired it.

He said nothing. She saw his steady, quickened breathing. His eyes had shut. She stroked his cock, up and down, up and down. He groaned. Suddenly she wanted to devour him. She filled her mouth with his cock, almost unable to accommodate him because of his size, then sucked him like a baby, her shoulders quivering, her stomach tightening, her excitement mounting. A few drops of his liquid slipped on her tongue and she swallowed it and thought her heart would stop. She was making him hers. This act would make him hers forever.

She wanted him to spill. Her tongue and lips worked busily on his cock and he moaned again, spoke incoherently, and stiffened. She worked faster and faster then, on impulse, lifted one hand to play with his nipple. As she manipulated the nub, he let out a guttural sound and his body erupted as he emptied his tribute inside of her. She swallowed and swallowed, his warm fluid sliding down her throat. When he finished, he grabbed her under the arms and pulled her close to him. She held him with all her strength. Their damp bodies meshed and she felt his

breathing, pressing gently into her. Nothing had ever felt better than every inch of Adam Fletcher.



Adam held her soft body close to his thinking about how completely he loved Cori. She satisfied him emotionally and physically. Lord, she really got his rocks off, but also had his heart. He thought about her swallowing and his cock stirred with need. To think, he would have her the rest of his life and not have to worry about giving her any diseases. It was time to make them complete.XX

He gazed down at the sweet smelling body curled into his and smiled. She'd made a kitten out of a man who prided himself on his toughness. He wanted to spoil her, to give her anything and everything. He wanted to show her how much she meant to him, over and over again, but for now, he'd settle for one time. His cock jerked with desire and he took in a deep breath.

"You awake down there, love?" he teased, knowing she was.

She looked up at him with adoring dark eyes, heavy-lidded. "Yeah, just enjoying the feel of my man."

He loved how she gazed at him.

"I want you, Adam," she said. "Let's fuck until we can't any more...er...I mean make love."

His hunger for her went straight to his erection, stiffening it. "Sexy minx."

“Just around you. Do you object?”

“No.” He claimed her lips and slipped his tongue as far back as he could, then swept across her mouth. This was good. Suddenly his muscles tensed and he clutched her to his body, then rolled her to his side. Scowling at her, he said, “I’ve corrupted you, I’m afraid.”

She grinned and nodded.

“I need to complete my corruption.”

“I think you did that a long time ago.” Cori was in heaven, waiting for her ultimate reward. She sniffed in his manly, sweaty scent and ran a hand through his soft, messy hair. Tracing his scar with her finger, she marveled that she never even saw it anymore. When had it disappeared? “Adam, make us one.”

“Yes.” He kissed her lips and fell over her, the pressure of his hot, hard, smooth flesh exciting; tentalizing. He pressed his cock against her sensitive, sizzling pussy and it heated more. He deepened the kiss with a passion that sent shivers down to her pussy and ass. She thrashed her legs, going boneless, and retaliated by lightly pinching and stroking his buns. She’d discovered he was sensitive there. Her nimble fingers roused him and his kiss grew rough and frantic.

The heat and desperation of his lips and tongue zinged through her body, as did his slippery fingers that slid back and forth down below, strumming her slit. She quivered and grasped him so tightly that he wiggled a little to free himself, but

not too much as his hungry mouth traveled down the side of her face to her neck. She threw back her head, moaned and panted, all the while teasing the skin on his buttocks and pressing her body upward into his cock. “Lordy, you are fine, Adam.”

He nipped her neck, keeping up his assault on her damp pussy.

“Promise...promise you won’t ever leave me.”

“Never.”

His warm breath singed her flesh. His fingers kept busy. His teeth moved down until he nipped her breast and she found her hand around his pulsing shaft, sliding her heated palm back and forth, loving the feel of it, loving the heat, contact, friction, and scent of him. This man she loved, this man who could wake all her senses and send them screaming to the surface until she felt insane. “Take me. Please.”

His fingers tweaked her clit and she stiffened, arched, gasped, and saw stars. “Now, Adam! Now!” She squeezed his sweaty body against her, felt his rapid breathing in her ear. He set his knee between her thighs and forced them further apart, burning her insides, forcing her body to feel a burning tension that wept for relief...as did Cori. She felt him entering her, this time his flesh, his hot, pulsing, flaming cock, and her muscles clamped down on him, claiming him, owning him. He moaned. She moaned. She gasped as his hard, thick manhood slid inside of her. He



was riding up her slowly, every moment, every bit of progress made her shudder and cry out. “Hurry, Adam.”

He pulled out and she protested only to have him quickly ram back inside of her, to her womb, and her body exploded into a million pieces. She’d never felt so filled, complete, yet so out of control. Her bones didn’t exist. Her muscles turned to mush. The fireworks shot through her and she felt her body quivering, shuddering, convulsing against her will, and her nails dug into his back as she arched herself madly.

At the same time as her, Adam shuddered and his hot liquid filled her, bathed her, surged inside of her. Then her pussy milked more of his luscious reward out of his dick. Her body floated in an abyss of paradise as she quivered one last time. As did he. Then their bodies went limp except for their arms, which held them together. His deadweight ended up on top of her, his rapid breathing, and hers, the only sounds in the darkened room. She could barely move, but forced her fingers to entwine in his dampened hair.

He mumbled something about how he’d never reach his next birthday and groaned. She patted his sweaty back, overwhelmed with love for Adam Fletcher. When her breathing slowed somewhat, she managed to say, “I own you now. You belong to me.”

“We are one.” His panting continued.

She stroked his hair. “Let’s make this legal very soon.”

He lifted his head and kissed her ear. “Very soon. Very, very soon.”

And she trembled one more time.

## Epilogue

“So tell us about your new boyfriend, Adrienne,” Adam said as he cradled his newborn baby in his arms. Cori snuggled beside him, marveling at their son who looked so small with his large, broad-chested father holding him.

Adrienne, sitting across from them in a leather recliner, grinned. “I didn’t even seduce him. He approached me first. He’s so sweet.”

“No using your assets to get him?” Cori asked as she tickled Adam Jr.’s belly. The baby made a contented sound and turned his face.

“No, wasn’t even dressed slutty,” Adrienne said, laughing. “It was after work and I was having a drink alone. Just wearing a t-shirt and old jeans and he sat beside me. He’s so different from other men. Actually told me we didn’t have to make love until I was ready.”

Cori glanced at Adam who looked amused. “And?” Adam prompted.

She grinned wider. “I told him we could wait...until the second date.”

They both chuckled.

“Actually, we haven’t even done the deed yet. He says he respects me.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll bring him over soon. I think he’s The One. I just hope we’re as

happy as you are. Although I've truly never seen a couple like you guys. It's disgusting how much you love each other. Don't you know that after a year, the honeymoon should be over?"

Adam put an arm around Cori. "Our honeymoon will never be over."

"It won't." Cori stroked her baby's face, then lifted her palm to cup Adam's. Who'd have guessed her life could have turned out so perfect?

"Hey," Adrienne said, "I saw Joe's house up for sale...?"

"He didn't consult us about that," Cori said, "but I'm glad. Jenna's still in the hospital and maybe he wants a new beginning." She shrugged. "I'm just relieved."

Jarrold entered the room barely holding four cans of soda to his chest. He handed them out, then sat down beside Cori.

"How do you feel about your family?" Adrienne asked him.

"Great!" Cori patted him on the shoulder.

As Adam, Adrienne, and Jarrold bantered, Cori lost herself in her thoughts and her bliss. She snuggled into Adam's hard body and sighed with contentment. Her path to happiness hadn't been smooth or easy, but maybe that's what made it so precious.

Adam was every bit the great husband, friend, and lover she'd figured he'd be. Adam Jr. looked just like him only with gorgeous caramel skin and golden eyes.

He was a model baby, sweet and good-natured. Jarrod had come into his own, got good grades, and had an active social life. She put her hand on her belly and smiled.

“Do you want a girl next time?” Adrienne asked, breaking through the fog.

Cori’s smile widened and she turned her head to kiss Adam’s stubbled jaw.

“It would be nice but not necessary. My life is absolutely perfect.”

Adam caught her gaze and they shared a hot stare that spoke of promises to fulfill later on.

“Yes,” Adam said staring into her eyes. “No one is happier than us.” He handed Adam Jr. to Adrienne, then sat back down and took Cori into his strong, muscled arms.

She threw her arms around his neck and he kissed her. Her body screamed for him, the same way it had the very first time.

And the way it always would.

*The End*

Raven Knight has always loved to read books, especially IR books and decided one day to try her hand at it. While she also busy raising kids and normal life, Raven thinks it is important to always take time to read a good book. Her mother reports that she drew pictures and printed words in an attempt to tell stories, even at the tender age of two. As a born storyteller, she kept writing and won awards for creative writing, becoming known as "The Writer" by peers. Having married at 20, she put writing on the backburner and worked in many interesting fields, including a position at The Chicago Tribune.

When all her children were finally in grade school, Nicole started writing again. She had always been a voracious reader of the genre and decided to focus on writing romance. Ms. Knight is a member of [Romance Writers of America](#) and [WisRWA](#).

Raven's special interests include adoption, Bipolar Disorder, Domestic Abuse, Animals, and Autism as they have all touched her life. She currently resides in central Wisconsin with her loving husband and their children.

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