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out
of
uniform

Heat of the Night

Elle Kennedy

When the heat is on, anything that can happen...will.

Out of Uniform, Book 5

When her long-time fiancé breaks off their engagement, saying he needs to “explore other avenues”, Annabelle Holmes has no trouble reading between the lines. Bryce thinks she’s a prude. Funny, since when it comes to acting out sexual fantasies, he’s always been the squeamish one.

Determined to prove him wrong, she sublets an apartment in San Diego, grabs pen and paper, and lists all her sexual fantasies. Intending to surprise Bryce with it as soon as possible. Only the list winds up in the wrong hands—or are they the right ones?

Navy SEAL Ryan Evans is expecting a little impromptu fun with his always-willing, blonde-and-leggy neighbor. But when he slides into her bed, he finds horrified, brunette-and-curvy Annabelle instead—along with her naughty list.

Embarrassment doesn’t begin to cover it when Annabelle realizes where her list has ended up. But then Ryan makes her a delicious offer: The chance to check off every last wild, wicked item—with the help of his equally hot SEAL team buddy, Matt.

A harmless fling is easy to add to her list. Then something unexpected happens that’s not so easy to cross off...

Warning: This title features a sassy heroine, a Navy SEAL hero, and a sex list—being organized has never been so much fun! Be prepared for hot sex on the floor, in public, and even with someone watching...

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Heat of the Night

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Dedication

This one's for Amanda Nicole White, the best friend a girl could have!

Chapter One

“So this is the new place,” Jane Harrison remarked, glancing around the courtyard of the low-rise apartment building. She admired the perfectly kept lawn and colorful flowerbeds around the edge, adding, “I like it.”

“Me too,” Ryan Evans admitted.

His gaze strayed to the large, rectangular pool, where his teammate, best friend and new roommate, Matt O’Connor, was swimming laps. He and Matt had moved in three weeks ago, and so far the arrangement was working out pretty nicely. They’d always gotten along famously, being the two youngest members of SEAL Team Fifteen, and now its two remaining bachelors. All the other men had settled down over the past few years, handing the lady-killer torch to Ryan and Matt, who used it to burn the sheets with the endless supply of willing women in San Diego.

Heck, he and Matt had only been in the building three weeks and already they’d wound up in bed with their upstairs neighbor, Christina, a sexy blonde looking for some fun after a break-up with her beau. Ryan’s teammates, Carson Scott in particular, constantly told him he should think about finding one woman to settle down with, how “rewarding” it was, but Ryan wasn’t interested. Not now anyway. The only woman he spent more than a week with was standing right beside him, and she happened to be engaged to his commanding officer.

“Beck and I are thinking of finding a house in this area,” Jane said, her long red ponytail bouncing as she continued looking around.

“Didn’t he just buy a house near the base?” Ryan asked.

“No, he’s renting. He didn’t want to buy until he knew whether I’d be leaving L.A. Now that I left the magazine, we’re ready to find a place.”

Ryan frowned. “You left the magazine? Since when?”

He couldn’t believe Jane would even consider leaving her job at *Today’s World*. Since the moment he’d met her, he could tell she loved her work. In fact, that was the main obstacle for her and Lieutenant Becker, the fact that Jane’s ambitions meant she wouldn’t be a housewife any time soon. Ryan still didn’t get why Beck had been so turned off by that. Jane Harrison was the most enchanting, intelligent woman Ryan had ever met. Hell, if he’d met her first, maybe he wouldn’t be having threesomes with Matt and their new neighbor. But Jane was head over heels in love with Beck, and Ryan respected that. He just hoped Becker hadn’t pressured her to quit her job or anything.

"It was my choice," Jane added, reading his mind. "I'll do some freelance work until the baby comes."

Ryan's gaze flew to hers. "The *baby*? Holy shit, you're pregnant?"

A dry expression filled Jane's big blue eyes. "Seriously, you're telling me you didn't notice that my boobs got enormous?"

"They were enormous to begin with."

"Yeah, but now they're extra enormous." Her eyes sparkled. "It's worth it, though."

He softened his tone. "You sure about that? Six months ago you had no intention of being a wife and mom. Don't tell me you planned this."

"No, it wasn't planned," she admitted. "But the second I looked down at that pregnancy pee stick and saw the pink plus sign, something changed. Honestly, Ry, I'm so freaking excited about this baby. I never thought I'd be this happy, but I am. And before you ask, yes, Beck and I plan to get married. Maybe in a few months."

Ryan studied her face, looking for any hint that she might not be completely honest, but Jane's expression conveyed pure bliss. Shit. She was actually cool with all this. Which meant he had to be cool, too, no matter how apprehensive the news made him. Hit a little too close to home, that's all. His mother never wanted a kid—she got rushed into it by Ryan's father—and she'd been miserable and angry during Ryan's entire childhood. He sincerely hoped Jane was certain this was what she wanted.

But again, he couldn't question her. She was his best friend, after all, and Becker was his lieutenant. He wasn't about to butt his nose into their business.

"So..." Jane eyed him expectantly. "Do I get a hug, or what?"

Ryan found himself experiencing a pang of longing as he pulled the petite redhead into his arms and held her close. Damn. Why hadn't he met her first? It bothered him, this inappropriate yearning he felt for her.

"I'm happy for you," Ryan murmured, planting a quick kiss on her forehead.

Jane was beaming as she pulled back. "Thanks, Ry. That means a lot."

"Hey! Where's my hug?" came Matt's gruff voice. A moment later, he ascended the ladder at the edge of the water and hopped up on the warm pool deck. Water dripped down his bare chest and off his navy-blue swim trunks, and his shaved head glistened under the hot afternoon sun.

"Janie's preggers," Ryan called as Matt reached for the towel on the nearby chaise lounge.

"No shit!" Rubbing the towel over himself, Matt made his way over to them, shooting Jane a big, genuine smile. "Congrats, darlin'."

Jane grinned back, pretending to fan herself. "I love it when you call me darlin'. Where you from again, Matty? Georgia?"

“Tennessee,” Matt drawled, thickening his accent, which barely made an appearance after all his years of living out west. “I’m flying out there in a couple hours, actually. It’s my mom’s birthday tomorrow so I’m heading there for a visit.”

“Nice, have fun. I should get going too,” Jane said, shifting her purse to her other shoulder. “Beck and I are going to look at a few places.”

She gave each of them a hug and kiss on the cheek, even Matt, who was still all wet. Then she offered her usual cheerful wave and flounced off, while Ryan watched after her, feeling slightly dismayed.

“Get that look off your face,” Matt sighed, slinging his towel around his neck. “She’s off-limits.”

“I know she’s off-limits.” Ryan’s lips tightened. “You don’t have to remind me of that every time she’s around.”

“Yeah, I do. Because I see the way you look at her, and it’s not healthy, man. She’s having a baby with Beck, for God’s sake.”

Ryan didn’t answer. Fuck, he should have never told Matt about his attraction to Jane, but the guy was his best friend. Besides, Matt had the uncanny ability of knowing things without Ryan even telling him. They’d gotten drunk a few months ago and when Ryan mentioned Jane’s name in some random, unimportant sentence, Matt had quietly set down his beer and said, “You have a thing for her, don’t you?” Just like that. Ryan ended up confessing his completely improper feelings, which he now regretted, seeing as Matt rode him about the issue whenever he could.

“You need to distract yourself,” Matt said as they drifted toward the back entrance of the building. “Go out tonight or something.”

Ryan shrugged. “Don’t feel like going out.”

“Then visit the lovely Christina.” Matt grinned. “I mean, I know she likes me better, but since I won’t be around, I’m sure she’d be willing to settle for second best.”

“Funny.”

They entered the stairwell landing and climbed the two floors to their apartment. Matt immediately made a beeline for his bedroom, calling out, “Gotta finish packing” while Ryan headed to the small kitchen and grabbed a beer from the fridge before flopping down on the living room couch. He untwisted the cap and took a long swig of alcohol, hoping it would soothe the lump of sadness and faint bitterness stuck in the back of his throat. Damn, he was pathetic. He had absolutely no business wanting Jane. She was his friend. She was Becker’s pregnant fiancée. And besides, what could he really offer her, even if she was available? He’d never been in a long-term relationship before, wasn’t sure he even wanted one.

Matt was right. He needed a distraction.

The red numerals on the DVD player’s clock read four thirty. Christina volunteered at the hospital every afternoon until five, then worked as a bartender at a local bar until midnight. She wouldn’t get home until close to one, which meant he had about, oh, eight hours to kill before he could pay her a visit.

Ryan leaned his head back on the sofa cushion and forced all thoughts of Jane, Becker and their new baby from his head. Fuck, it was going to be a long night.

Annabelle Holmes took another sip of her vanilla and lavender tea and glanced down at the lined sheet of paper in front of her. She'd torn the page from the legal pad sitting on the nightstand, and now she stared at her own loopy handwriting, wishing she hadn't written anything down. It made the words feel a little too...real. And they weren't real. They were fiction, fantasy, just a silly exercise meant to prove to Bryce that the speech he'd unleashed on her two days ago was pure and total bullshit.

I need to walk on the wild side, Annabelle.

Translation: the vanilla sex we've been indulging in is boring the shit out of me.

It wouldn't hurt either one of us to experiment.

Translation: you're a prude in bed and I'd like to screw around with someone a tad more adventurous.

The funny thing was, there was only one prude in the bed she and Bryce had shared for five years, and it sure as hell wasn't her. She couldn't remember how many times she'd suggested they spice things up, how many hints she'd dropped about straying from the missionary and exploring the raw, wild and indecent.

How quickly Bryce forgot. He'd implied that she was the one holding back, promptly following that zinger with the admission that he wanted to take a break, play the field and let loose before they made any serious decisions about their relationship. She'd been tempted to laugh, because, really, they'd pretty much been engaged since they were six years old—their relationship had never been anything *but* serious.

How could he be so freaking insulting? At first she'd been hurt and depressed, but after Bryce left the spacious San Francisco condo they'd shared for five years, leaving her alone and upset, she'd gotten pissed off. And now here she was, two days later, staying in a strange apartment in San Diego and jotting down a list of every naughty act she'd ever fantasized about. She still wasn't sure what she was going to do with the list. Rip it up? Deliver it to her insensitive fiancé?

Annabelle looked at the list again, feeling her cheeks grow warm as she read the last item she'd written. *Having sex with someone else—while you watch.*

She took another sip of tea and added another item. *Sex in public (preferably a place without security cameras).*

Now that would be a lark, seeing the suddenly-uninhibited Bryce pull down his Armani trousers and risk a random passerby seeing his cock.

She snorted. Yeah, right.

The cell phone next to her glass began to ring. She didn't need to look at the caller ID to know who was on the other end of the line. Her parents nearly had joint coronaries when she'd announced she was

going to San Diego for a few weeks. They hated the fact that she was “slumming it”, though Christina’s apartment was hardly a hovel. The apartment building was small, but pretty and clean, and Annabelle was looking forward to taking a dip in the pool tomorrow morning. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone swimming anywhere other than her father’s country club.

“Hello,” she said as she put her cell to her ear.

“When are you coming home?” came her mother’s shrill voice.

“I already told you, Mom. I’ll be here for a few weeks.”

Sandra Holmes sounded crushed. “But what about the anniversary dinner?”

“I said I’d be home for that,” she reminded her mother. “I’ll be back for the weekend, and then fly back to San Diego, okay?”

Her mom let out a loud, over-exaggerated sigh. “I don’t like knowing you’re all alone out there, living in a hippie’s apartment, carousing around in an uncivilized city.”

Annabelle snorted. “First of all, Christina is not a hippie. She’s studying to be a doctor. Secondly, San Diego is a perfectly civilized place. Chill out, Mom. I won’t be here forever. Christina comes back in a month, so I’ll have to leave then anyway.”

Never satisfied, her mother went on for a few more minutes about all the hazards Annabelle would face in such a dangerous city, but Annabelle tuned it all out. Thank God for Christina. If she hadn’t run into Christina’s parents at the market two days ago, she wouldn’t have known their daughter would be out of town for the month, and then she would’ve had to move in with her parents. Eek.

“And why would she just leave you there in that apartment alone?” her mother was reprimanding.

She suppressed a sigh. “I told you, Christina eloped with her boyfriend. When I spoke to her on the phone, she said I could have the place until she gets back.”

“I never liked that girl,” Sandra said in a frosty tone.

No kidding. Sandra disliked all of Annabelle’s college friends, including Christina. She also disliked Annabelle’s co-workers, her boss, and pretty much anyone her daughter got close to. Except for Bryce, of course. Sandra *loved* Bryce. The Holmes and Worthington families had been close for years, and throughout Annabelle’s entire childhood and adolescence, all she’d heard from her mom was what a wonderful husband Bryce would make.

“Christina is a great girl,” Annabelle said in her friend’s defense.

Her mom ignored the remark. “Your father and I want you to come home. Oh, and Paulette Worthington and I wanted to sit down with you to talk about the details for the wedding.”

Annabelle held her tongue. She hadn’t told her mother about her and Bryce, so Sandra was still under the impression a wedding was in the foreseeable future. No point bursting that dream yet, not until she figured out for sure what she wanted to do about Bryce.

“I’ll call you when I know when I’ll be home,” she said instead. “Talk to you later, Mom.”

“Annab—”

She hung up, then quickly powered off the cell phone so her mother wouldn't be able to call back. Jeez. Talk about overbearing. Although she knew her parents loved her, sometimes she wanted to strangle them. They were snobby, overprotective, presumptuous, and had total tunnel vision when it came to Annabelle's future. Marry Bryce, move into a mansion on Nob Hill, spend the afternoons at the country club, the evenings entertaining San Francisco's elite. If it weren't for her job, Annabelle might have left San Francisco years ago, but she'd been lucky to land a position at one of the top event planning firms in the Bay Area, and as much as she hated her parents' interference in her life, she loved her work.

Fortunately, her boss had given her the month off, which meant she could take a breather and really think about what she wanted out of a relationship. Yeah, Bryce had dumped her, but their lives had been intertwined since they were children, and she knew eventually he'd try to win his way back into her life.

Question was—did she want to let him back in?

Sighing, Annabelle folded up the silly list she'd been constructing and tossed it on the hardwood floor beside the bed. This was stupid. She wasn't going to give the list to Bryce. A list of fantasies wouldn't erase the hurtful words he'd spoken two days ago, and it sure as heck wouldn't help her figure out what she truly wanted from a relationship.

Rising from the bed, she headed into Christina's small bathroom and got ready for bed. Brushed her teeth, exfoliated, combed her unruly brown waves, and then she slid into bed and settled beneath the covers.

She planned on using this time off to really think about her life and the choices she'd made. Particularly her choice in men.

Did she really love Bryce? His break-up words had upset her, but was that because she was genuinely in love with him, or because the fairytale life her parents had outlined for her since she was a kid had now gone up in flames?

She rolled over, gritting her teeth. *Don't think about it now. Figure it out in the morning.*

Her muscles instantly relaxed as she willed her mind to go blank. Ten minutes later, she drifted into a deep, relaxed sleep.

Christina's apartment was dark when Ryan let himself in with the key tucked on top of the doorframe. Christina might very well be the coolest chick he'd ever hooked up with. She had just broken up with her boyfriend when Ryan and Matt met her, and she was so completely comfortable with her sexuality it almost scared him. She hadn't had any qualms about engaging in a hot threesome with him and Matt the night after they'd met, and she never seemed to mind if one or both of them dropped by when she got home from work, no matter how early she had to get up in the morning.

He crept down the narrow hallway toward her bedroom, his groin hardening the closer he came to the door. Fuck, this was exactly what he needed. A night of hot, no-strings sex was guaranteed to make him forget all about Jane's startling announcement. A baby. God. Not that he'd ever really thought there would be a chance for him and Jane—she was madly in love with Becker—but this pregnancy pretty much snuffed out even the faintest spark of hope.

Ryan pulled his T-shirt over his head as he entered Christina's bedroom. His faded jeans were next, dropping to the weathered hardwood next to his discarded shirt. He could make out Christina's form in the shadows, curled up on her side under a puffy blue comforter.

He grinned in the darkness. These were his favorite kind of wake-up calls.

He moved to the bed and lifted up the edge of the comforter, easing his way under the heavy cover and spooning against Christina from behind. Lowering his head to her neck, he breathed in the appealing scent of...orange blossoms? She usually smelled like plain old Ivory soap, but Ryan wasn't complaining. He liked this new scent. A lot.

"You smell delicious," he rasped into her ear, one arm reaching around her waist to pull her closer.

She whimpered in her sleep, wiggling her ass against his now-throbbing erection. Wow. He was wildly aroused. Not that Christina didn't usually turn him on, but this was...different. Every muscle in his body was taut, coiled tight like a rattlesnake ready to strike, and his pulse drummed in his ears in sharp, rapid beats. She felt soft and warm against him, and that scent drove him crazy. He suddenly couldn't wait to be inside her.

"Come on, baby, roll over," he murmured.

She shifted, and he helped her along by cupping her ass cheeks and moving her onto her back. He frowned as he ran his hands over that ass, which was much rounder and sweeter than he remembered. And come to think of it, her hair was longer too. Five days ago, when he'd last seen her, she'd had a short blonde bob. Now her hair cascaded down her shoulders in soft waves. And the tits beneath that thin tank top seemed bigger too—

Clarity sliced through his mind at the same time the woman beneath him blinked open her eyes. A pair of brown—not blue—eyes stared up at him in shock.

Ryan shot up into a sitting position, a wave of surprise slamming into his chest. Fuck. Oh, fuck. This was *not* Christina.

"Oh my God," came a high, terrified voice.

Nope, definitely not Christina.

He opened his mouth to apologize just as the curvy, curly-haired female bounded to the edge of the bed, shoved the comforter up to her neck, and said, "Please don't rape me!"

Chapter Two

Ryan was off the bed so fast he nearly tripped over his own feet. He didn't embarrass easily, but the sight of the terrified woman on the bed brought a wave of mortification to his gut. Shit. He'd accosted a complete stranger. Where the *hell* was Christina?

He opened his mouth to explain but the stranger he'd just felt up was suddenly on her feet too, and the next thing he knew, she hurled the little lamp on the bed table at his head.

Ryan caught it easily. "Hey, listen!" he shouted. "I'm not here to—"

But the woman wasn't listening. Instead, she'd started babbling. "Seriously, you don't want to do this. I have, like, eight different types of STDs, so your health is at risk and really, who wants to be at risk?" Her words kept popping out like coins from a slot machine. "I'm actually doing you a favor here, Mister. You should go find someone else to rape—wait, that's not what I mean, because you shouldn't be doing this to any woman, ever, I'm not encouraging this at all, I'm just saying..." Her voice trailed off, and that spark of fear returned to her face. She looked around wildly, as if scanning the room for another weapon.

Ryan stared at her for a moment, bewildered.

Then he burst out laughing.

A pair of chocolate-brown eyes glared at him. "Seriously? You're *laughing* at me?" Her tone hardened with anger, while one slender arm stuck out and fumbled for something on the nightstand. "I'm giving you five seconds to get the hell out of here, you...you sexual predator!" She made a victorious sound as she found what she was looking for—a cell phone. "I'm calling the police, asshole!"

Ryan's laughter died in his throat. No matter how entertaining he found this woman, he wasn't in the mood to be dragged off to jail. "Hey, now, wait," he said immediately, setting the lamp she'd thrown at him down on the floor then holding his hands up as if he were surrendering. "This is just a misunderstanding, babe."

"Babe? I am *not* your babe." Her finger jammed on a button on the phone. "Nor will I be your rape victim so—"

"I'm not here to rape you," he cut in, running one hand through his hair in frustration. "Would you just shut up for a second so I can explain?"

Her eyes flashed, but her mouth promptly closed. Ryan drew in a calming breath, collecting himself, all the while noticing just how freaking hot the woman in front of him was. Along with those vibrant brown eyes and amazing dark hair, she had delicate features that included a cute upturned nose, high cheekbones

and sexy pink lips, the bottom one fuller and poutier than the top. Was she a friend of Christina's? And if so, why had Christina never introduced them?

"You're not explaining," she said, shooting him a dirty look.

Ryan sighed. "Look, I came here to see Christina, okay? I thought you were her when I got into bed with you."

"Christina?" she echoed.

"Yes. Christina. You know, the woman who lives here." He frowned. "So who the hell are you and why are you in her bed?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Who the hell are *you* and what are *you* doing in her bed?" she shot back.

More frustration crept up his spine. "Are you always this fucking difficult?"

"Are you?"

Ryan released another breath. He suddenly felt extremely awkward, standing there in his blue and white checkered boxers, but he made no move to pick up his clothes. He was scared to turn away from this woman. Who knew what she'd do if he took his eyes off of her.

"Okay. Let's calm down here," he said quietly. "I'm Ryan, all right? I live downstairs. What about you?"

"I'm Annabelle," she answered, sounding reluctant. "Christina's letting me stay here for a few weeks."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "See how easy that was? So, where exactly did Christina go?"

"Vegas. She eloped with her boyfriend Joe."

Surprise jolted through him. "She told me they broke up."

"They did." Annabelle shrugged. "But she said he sent her all these flowers and then this super sweet card begging her to take him back, so she did, and then he proposed, so she said yes, and now they're in Vegas. Anything else you want to know?"

The disappointment he experienced at the news that Christina was back with her boyfriend wasn't all that great. That was the nice thing about flings. You didn't get attached, didn't feel crushed when the other person left. If anything, he was happy for Christina. She'd admitted to him that she still loved her ex, but the guy had been too much of a selfish jerk to appreciate the good thing they had. Evidently the guy smartened up.

Still holding the phone in her hand, Annabelle took a couple of steps toward him, her bare feet slapping against the hardwood floor. Her pink tank top did nothing to contain the soft jiggling of her stupendous tits. And those little boxer shorts she wore hugged her firm thighs, revealing smooth, shapely legs and tiny feet with red painted toenails.

Despite himself, Ryan's cock twitched inside his boxers. He was ridiculously turned on, and in his state of undress, he couldn't really hide it either. His dick poked against the front of boxers, providing a tent that could accommodate an entire campsite. Annabelle's brown eyes widened slightly as her gaze dropped south.

"Seriously?" she blurted out. "Can't you keep that thing in control?"

Another laugh bubbled out of his throat. "You should take it as a compliment."

Her cheeks turned bright red. "Look, as fun as this entire encounter is," she said, sarcasm ringing in her voice, "could you please leave? I was trying to sleep before you burst in here like you own the place." Her eyes narrowed. "Were you involved with Christina?"

"Kind of. Nothing serious, though." He shot her a dry smile. "Actually, not serious at all, seeing as she eloped to Vegas with another man."

"You don't look too beat up about it."

Ryan shrugged. "I'm not. Like I said, it wasn't serious."

"Good. Great. Now that we've cleared that up, could you please go?"

He knew she was making a very good point here. He should go. Now that his plans for a night of steamy wild sex had shot up in smoke, he had no reason to stick around and chat with Christina's weird houseguest. Still, Annabelle was super hot, and he was super horny, so...

As if reading his mind, Annabelle held up the cell phone and said, "Don't even think about it, pal. Touch me and I'll call 911."

He grinned. "Come on, you know you're tempted."

Her cheeks grew redder. "Tempted to do what?"

"To get back in bed. With me." He cocked one brow. "And I can assure you, we'd have a really good time..."

She stared at him for a moment, then let out a high, melodic laugh. "Oh God. Do women actually fall for that stuff?"

He frowned. "Yes."

"Yeah, well, I don't." She rested one hand on a curvy hip and nodded at the pile of clothes next to the bed. "Okay, time for you to go, Robert."

"Ryan."

"Whatever."

He found himself grinning again. Damn, he liked her. It was rare to come across a woman that was immune to his charm, even rarer to find one that managed to keep his interest for more than five minutes. He had no idea where Annabelle had come from, or how long she planned on staying in the building, but he hoped she stuck around for a while. Or at least long enough for him to get his hands on those delectable curves again.

“Why are you still here?” she grumbled, jolting him from his thoughts. “I’d like to get some sleep sometime this century.”

His lips twitched. He wondered if she brought that sexy sarcasm of hers to bed with her. “I’ll get right out of your way,” Ryan said, rolling his eyes. He strode to the side of the bed, making sure his bare arm rubbed against *her* bare arm as he walked by. He heard a soft intake of breath, but when he glanced over, she just looked annoyed.

Bending down, he collected his jeans and T-shirt from the floor and tucked the pile of clothes under his arm. Somehow he doubted she would grant him the time to get dressed.

“Do you have a key or did you break in?” she asked sternly.

“Spare key. I left it in the living room.” Impulsively, he looked her way and cast a devilish grin. “What do you say I keep the key and come by tomorrow night?”

Annabelle laughed.

He pursed his lips. “Was that a yes?”

Another laugh, this time with the words, “Hell, no” mingled in there.

“Your loss,” he said with a sigh.

Those liquid brown eyes glimmered with amusement. “Yeah, I’m sure it is.”

He found it difficult to walk to the door, particularly since his cock was still rock-hard and refusing to go down. But monster erection aside, he found it difficult to walk away from *her*. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had this much fun with a woman. Unfortunately, the fun was one-sided. Annabelle was now tapping her foot all sexy-like, eager to see him go.

She trailed after him down the dark hallway toward the front door, then said, “G’night now, it was awesome meeting you.”

His eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Uh, no. I was being fake nice.” She huffed. “Honestly, Roger—”

“Ryan—”

“—I’m not trying to be rude, but I’m exhausted. I want to go to bed—” She raised a hand before he could open his mouth. “Alone. I want to go to bed alone, and fall asleep alone, and wake up in the morning, alone. Okay?”

“Like I said, your loss.”

The corners of her pouty mouth lifted, just a little. Oh yeah. She liked him. He could always tell when a girl liked him, and this one, no matter how prickly and off-putting she was trying to be, *totally* liked him.

“How long are you staying here?” he couldn’t help but ask, pausing in the doorway before she could boot him out.

She eyed him suspiciously. “Why do you want to know? Are you planning on sliding into bed with me tomorrow night?”

“Will you be here tomorrow night?” he countered.

Annabelle hesitated. “Yes. I’m here for a few weeks.”

Ryan gave himself a mental high-five. Oh yeah. Three weeks. He could definitely work his magic on her in three weeks. Hell, he’d probably only need three days, maybe less, to win over this woman. *Why* he wanted to win her over so badly eluded him, but who cared why? As long as it distracted him from the fact that Jane was having a baby with Becker, he was cool.

“Well, I look forward to seeing you again then,” Ryan said, letting his gaze sweep from her face down to her cleavage and then back up.

She rolled her eyes. “We’re not going to see each other again. I plan to diligently avoid you.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Good night, Rick.”

“*Ryan.*”

With a sweet smile, she gave his butt a little shove and pushed him out the door. “Good night,” she said again, and then the door closed in his face.

Ryan’s mouth stretched out in a grin as he stared at the door and listened to the sound of the lock clicking. “Night, Annabelle,” he called sweetly before turning toward the stairwell.

Still holding onto his clothes, he climbed down the stairs to his own apartment, still smiling to himself when he strode inside. Matt had left hours ago, and the apartment was dark and quiet as he locked up and headed for his bedroom. He was too keyed up to sleep, meeting Annabelle had been way too much fun, and his erection refused to subside. Sighing, he dropped his clothes on the chair near the bed, and just as he was debating whether to jerk off or watch TV, a flash of yellow caught his eye. Furrowing his eyebrows, he stepped toward the chair and picked up his jeans. Shook them out a couple of times, then watched as a piece of paper fluttered to the hardwood floor.

He bent down to pick it up, noticing that the paper had been torn from one of those yellow legal pads. Feminine handwriting was scrawled across the page, and, unable to fight his curiosity, he smoothed out the sheet and read the first line.

His jaw twitched, then fell open as the words on the page assaulted his eyes. It wasn’t only the intriguing heading that caught his attention—*I’m Up For This. Are You?*—but the dirty little items that followed. He read each one. Twice.

Still staring at the list, Ryan broke out in a slow smile. Well...damn.

Hot fucking damn.

No matter how hard she tried, Annabelle couldn’t get her late-night visitor out of her mind. She spent the morning answering emails and trying to not think about Ryan, but every five seconds, the memory of

his gorgeous face and drool-worthy body would float into her mind like a piece of driftwood. Hands down, he was the hottest guy she'd ever met. She still couldn't believe he was even real. When she'd woken up to find those playful blue eyes on her and that lean, muscular body pressed against her, she'd thought she was dreaming.

During their entire exchange, she'd been fighting little sparks of desire. That spot between her legs had ached in the strangest way and her breasts had felt so heavy and tingly she'd had to cross her arms over her chest. If he'd stayed for even five more minutes, she probably would've jumped him.

So why did you throw him out?

Uh, Bryce? she reminded the voice in her head.

You mean the guy who dumped you?

She ignored the taunting reply and headed for the bathroom to get a towel. Fine, so maybe she didn't owe anything to her as-of-two-days-ago ex, but she wasn't the type of girl to hop into bed with a stranger. She was Annabelle Holmes, for Pete's sake. Her parents had raised her to be a perfect lady, and ladies didn't have sex with random men, no matter how appealing they might be.

She found the towel and slung it over her shoulder, then left Christina's apartment and walked downstairs. The courtyard was empty when she stepped out into the hot afternoon air, and the pool looked so inviting she had her shorts and tank off before she even reached the deck. Tilting her head, she let the sun's rays heat her face. Beads of sweat formed between her breasts, but she welcomed the heat, and she was happy to finally get a chance to wear this teeny yellow string bikini. It never got this hot in San Francisco, and the change of scenery was refreshing. Kicking off her flip-flops, she moved to the edge of the pool, took a breath, and dived cleanly into the deep end.

The cold water engulfed her, feeling like heaven as she swam underwater for a few moments. God, what a gorgeous day. Despite the fact that she missed her job, she was looking forward to a few weeks of downtime. Doing nothing but swimming and tanning and exploring San Diego. She closed her eyes and floated on her back for a while, relishing the solitude, but her me-time was cut short at the sound of footsteps.

Her eyes popped open just in time to see Ryan approaching the pool deck, his sexy blue eyes seeking her out and dancing playfully.

She was so surprised she sank in the water like a stone. Sputtering, she broke the surface, droplets dripping from her hair and into her eyes. "You," she squeaked.

"Me," Ryan confirmed.

She was suddenly grateful to be submerged in cold water, because the sight of Ryan made her extremely hot. He wore blue surf shorts and a sleeveless basketball jersey, and his chin was dotted with dark stubble. God, why did men look so good when they were all scruffy? Bryce never sported any

scruff—the guy shaved like three times a day just to make sure his aristocratic face remained pretty-boy smooth. But Ryan...oh boy.

Putting on an indifferent voice, Annabelle raised a brow at him and said, “Didn’t we say everything we needed to say last night? You know, when I asked you to leave?”

He shot her a lazy smile. “You may have said what you needed to, but I have one more thing to say.”

“Oh, really? And what’s that?”

“Yes.”

Treading water, she shoved wet strands of hair off her forehead. “Yes what?”

Slowly, he reached into the back pocket of his shorts and removed a wrinkled piece of paper. Annabelle’s eyes widened at the familiar scrap of yellow. No. That couldn’t be the same sheet she’d been using when...shit. Shit, where had she put the list? She searched her brain, finally remembering she’d tossed the fantasy list on the floor before she went to bed. The floor...on which Ryan had dropped his clothes before he’d crawled into bed with her.

“Yes to this question,” he said pleasantly, holding up the paper. “I’m Up For This. Are You? Well, babe, *yes*. I am definitely up for it.”

Horror climbed up her spine, mingling with the humiliation scorching her cheeks. Scrambling up the metal ladder at the edge of the pool, she hauled herself to her feet and shot a wet arm in his direction, trying to grab the list. Grinning, he held it out of her reach. “Finders keepers,” he said mockingly.

“What are you, five? Give it back. That’s personal property,” she snapped.

Rolling his eyes, he obligingly handed her the list, which got soaked the second her wet hand clutched it. The ink began to smear, and for some asinine reason, she fanned the sheet to stop the smearing. What was the matter with her? A total stranger had just become privy to all her secret fantasies and she was trying to *preserve* the words? She ought to be burning the damn thing.

“Don’t worry,” Ryan said graciously. “I memorized it.”

She set her jaw. “You had no business reading that.”

“Maybe not, but I did, and now it’s branded into my memory.” He sighed. “It kept me up all night, you know. There I was, tossing and turning, wondering where we should go to take care of number four. A park? Out here in the pool? The back alley of a bar? Damn, the possibilities are endless, Annabelle.”

Number four? What was he—her cheeks burned. *Sex in public (preferably a place without security cameras)*. Oh God. She couldn’t believe he’d actually memorized it. The last time she’d been this embarrassed was back in the third grade, when her frenemy Joan poured water on Annabelle’s crotch and proceeded to tell the entire class she’d peed her pants.

“We are not going anywhere,” she said stiffly. “I, on the other hand, am leaving now.” Her back was ramrod straight as she stomped toward the chair where she’d dropped her towel.

She felt Ryan's eyes on her as she dried off, and she knew he was ogling her tiny bikini. A sick part of her was even a little flattered, but the embarrassed part overruled it, pushing her to dry off faster and wrap the towel around herself.

"So is that a no?" Ryan asked, cocking his head casually.

"Huh?"

"You won't let me help you?" he clarified.

She frowned. "Help me do what?"

"Cross out all those dirty items on your dirty list." He offered a charming smile. "Look, it's obvious you can't carry out some of those, uh, activities, alone. I'm just offering my services, babe."

"Again with the babe?" She huffed out a breath. "I don't want or need your help. That list was intended for someone else."

He paused. "You've got a boyfriend?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "No. Well, maybe."

"Which is it, yes, no or maybe?"

She fought a wave of exasperation. "All of them, okay! I have a boyfriend, a sort of fiancé, but we're on a break right now. Not that it's any of your business."

"A sort of fiancé?" he echoed.

"It's a long story." She grabbed her clothes from the chair, then slipped her wet feet into her flip-flops. "You are the pushiest guy I've ever met, you know that?"

A thoughtful expression flitted over his face. "I've never been called pushy before. Endearing, sure. Charismatic. Drop-dead gorgeous. A real-life Michelangelo's *David*. But never pushy."

A laugh slipped out of her throat before she could stop herself. "A real-life Michelangelo's *David*? Wow. You are so full of yourself, I don't even know what to do with that."

"You could do me," he said glibly.

Her thighs quivered. Just a little. Oh, for Pete's sake. She needed to get away from this guy. He was too freaking tempting, and right now, she needed to avoid temptation. She'd left San Francisco to think about her relationship with Bryce, not jump into a fling with a guy who had major over-confidence issues.

"I won't even dignify that with an answer," she said, taking a step toward the lawn. "I'm leaving now."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

She was halfway across the grass when he called, "Annabelle!"

Reluctantly, she turned. "Yeah?"

"If you change your mind, I'm in 2B." His handsome features were the epitome of cocky.

Without answering, she kept walking, not allowing herself to breathe until she was inside the building. Her breath came out in a shaky puff. Jeez, why did he have to be so damn attractive? If she were

here under different circumstances, then maybe...maybe she'd act out all of her wildest fantasies with this guy. But her heart still belonged to Bryce. Kind of. God, she wasn't the least bit sure how she felt about Bryce. They'd been in a serious relationship since she was eighteen years old, living together when she turned twenty, officially engaged when she was twenty-three. And yet he'd broken things off, as if their entire relationship didn't mean a thing to him.

Not a break-up, time off, a condescending voice reminded her.

Right, time off was how he'd phrased it. Well, she hadn't wanted time off. He'd gone and made that decision for the both of them.

With an unhappy sigh, she went back to Christina's apartment, suddenly cursing Ryan for ruining her day. All she'd wanted to do was lounge around in the pool, and now she was back in the apartment, sulking again. A tiny beeping caught her attention before she could head into the bedroom to change. Her cell phone sat on the kitchen counter, making annoying sounds that informed her she had a new voicemail. She figured it was her parents, as usual, but when she glanced at the caller ID, she noticed the call had come from Melinda, one of the assistants at the event company where she worked.

"Shit," she muttered, draping her towel on the back of one of the tall stools by the counter and picking up the phone. She hoped there wasn't some big emergency at work. Her boss had assured her she wouldn't be missed, since October was a slow month for them.

She dialed into her inbox and waited for the message to come on. When it did, her entire body turned to ice.

"Hey, Annabelle," came Melinda's somewhat hesitant voice. "I know you're on vacation, and I hate to bother you, especially with something like this." A pause. "I was hoping you'd pick up, I hate to mention this in a voicemail, but...um, did you and Bryce break up? I only ask because I saw him last night at the Sheppard event and he was, um, with someone. They looked pretty *close*, too. I wasn't sure if you knew about it and I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, you know, but I just thought you should know. Anyway...uh, I'll see you when you get back."

Click.

"To delete this message," a mechanical voice chirped, "press one. To save, press two. To—"

Annabelle hit the *end* button, then stared down at the phone for several long moments. Anger clawed up her spine, settling in the back of her throat in a thick, bitter lump. He'd already started seeing other people? What the *hell*? They were engaged to be married! Sure, he hadn't bought her the ring yet, but he'd proposed, and their respective parents were already planning the damn wedding. How could Bryce do this?

Gulping down the fury coating her throat, Annabelle drew in a deep calming breath, willing her muscles to relax. She couldn't believe it. Obviously he'd been dead serious when he said he wanted to see other people. He was already gallivanting all over San Francisco, getting *close* to some woman at a nightclub event *her* company had planned. What. An. Asshole.

And here she was, fighting off the advances of a ridiculously cute and appealing guy, out of respect for Bryce.

Well, screw him. He didn't deserve her respect.

If anything, he deserved a healthy dose of payback.

Dropping the cell phone back on the counter, Annabelle straightened her shoulders and headed back to the front door. She didn't bother getting her towel. Instead, she walked out the door wearing her teeny-weeny bikini, her bare feet slapping against the tiled floor out in the hall. She hurried down the stairs and when she reached the second floor, she glanced up and down the hall until she saw it. 2B. She made a beeline for the apartment, then stood in front of the door for a second, steadying her breathing and collecting some courage.

She could totally do this. In fact, she *wanted* to do it. She wanted it very, very badly.

Lifting her hand in determination, she knocked on the door.

Chapter Three

Ryan was not at all surprised to find Annabelle standing on his doorstep. If anything, he was wondering what took her so long. He had enough experience with women to know when someone was into him, and no matter how many times Annabelle tried to brush him off, he had no doubt that she wanted to jump his bones. Still, he wasn't going to let her off the hook so easily.

"Finished playing hard to get?" he asked pleasantly.

Annabelle's mouth tightened. "You're going to make this hard for me, aren't you?"

"Yep."

He opened the door wider and gestured for her to come in. She did, but looked very reluctant doing so. Wary, she glanced around the apartment, taking in the leather couch, the state-of-the-art entertainment system and the two beer bottles on the glass coffee table. Above the couch was an Angelina Jolie calendar, flipped open to the October snapshot showing Angie stretched across a recliner. It was the typical bachelor pad, but Ryan didn't care. He was, after all, a bachelor.

"Do you have a stripper pole in the bedroom?" Annabelle asked dryly.

"If I did, would you do a sexy dance for me?"

"Nope."

"Figured I'd ask."

Looking awkward, she leaned against the arm of the sofa, her abundant curves practically pouring out of her indecent yellow bikini. She looked good enough to eat, but Ryan kept his distance. Women always needed to set some ground rules, and this particular woman probably had a whole slew of them. He already knew she liked to make lists.

"Three weeks," she began. "I'm here for three weeks, so that's all you're going to get from me."

He couldn't help but laugh. "You make it sound like you're doing *me* a favor. I think it's the other way around, Annie."

She bristled. "Don't call me Annie."

"Whatever you want, babe."

"Don't call me babe either." She rested her hand on the couch and tapped her fingers nervously. "So, um, about the list..."

He patiently waited for her to continue.

"It wasn't serious or anything." Her brown eyes avoided his. "I was just joking around."

“Liar. You’re dying to do each and every thing on that list,” Ryan said, laughing again.

He could see her biting the inside of her cheek. “Maybe some things.”

Ryan took a step closer, noticing that her breath hitched as he did so. He could see her pulse throbbing in her throat, and a faint flush had spread just above her breasts. Oh yeah. She was totally turned on. Good. “How about we start with good old number one then?”

He stopped when they were only inches away. Her breasts were practically touching his T-shirt, and he couldn’t wait to feel her nipples poking against his bare chest. “What’s number one again?” she asked, sounding breathless.

“Sex somewhere other than a bed,” he recited.

She sighed. “Jeez, you really did memorize it.”

“Couldn’t help it. I have a photographic memory.”

“Or you’re just a pervert.”

“That too.” He flashed her a grin. “You like me, though.”

“Maybe.”

He eliminated the last inch between them, pressing his body against hers. A shaky breath flew out of her mouth. “Maybe?” he teased.

“Fine, I like you,” she blurted out. She paused for a second, then tilted her head to meet his eyes. “So, um, how do we do this?”

He froze. “Don’t tell me you’re a virgin.”

“I’m not a virgin,” she huffed. “I just haven’t had sex with many strangers, okay?” She hesitated again. “Do you want me to take my bikini off?”

Ryan let out a low laugh. “That’s a good start.”

His pulse sped up as he watched her raise her arms and reach for the tie behind her neck. Anticipation coiled in his gut. Annabelle, however—and why wasn’t he surprised?—prolonged that anticipation. Rather than untying her bikini top, she narrowed her eyes and said, “I think you should do it first.”

“Do what?”

“Get naked. Because really, why should the girl always undress first? You’re so sexist, Roger.”

He sighed. “Do you always have to overanalyze every last detail?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Then overanalyze this.”

Before she could respond, he dipped his head and captured her mouth with his. The kiss shut her up completely, and soon she was rubbing her breasts against his chest like a contented cat. Fuck, she tasted sweet. Ryan slipped his tongue in her mouth, licking and exploring, while his hands drifted south to rest on her firm ass. She made a little whimper sound, then deepened the kiss. When her tongue entered his mouth, he groaned, as blood pooled in his groin and his cock thickened against her belly.

She reached down between them and rubbed him over his shorts, eliciting another groan from deep in his throat. The who-undresses-first debate went up in flames and soon they were both tugging at their own clothes. Her bathing suit was flung across the room, his shorts ended up under the couch, and who knew what happened to his T-shirt. Ryan didn't care. His entire body was on fire. So was Annabelle's, judging by the rosy flush rising on her smooth, golden skin.

"Fuck, you're sexy," he rasped, his gaze taking in every inch of her naked body.

She had an hourglass figure, with a curvy little ass he couldn't help but dig his fingers into. He squeezed her buttocks, then feasted his eyes on her smooth mound. Her pussy was completely bare, which made his mouth go dry and his tongue tingle. Damn, he couldn't wait to taste her. His cock bobbed against her stomach as he drew her close again, kissing her hard and deep, and then he slid down to his knees and pressed a soft kiss right between her legs.

Annabelle gasped, teetering on her feet. "Oh, God. That's...so good."

Steadying her with his hands, he brought her to his mouth again, dragging his tongue up and down her slit in featherlight strokes. Her soft moans egged him on. He loved hearing a woman moan for him.

He hated taking his mouth away, but Annabelle kept swaying like she might keel over, so, with a laugh, he gripped her hips with his hands and said, "Get down here."

The living room floor probably wasn't the most comfortable site in the world, but Annabelle didn't even blink as she stretched out on her back, her curvy body spread out beneath him like a juicy holiday dinner.

"I feel like such a slut," she breathed, looking half-amused and half-worried. "We don't even know each other."

"Yeah, but I'm dying to get to know you," he replied, settling himself between her thighs.

His cock ached to slide inside her, but he wasn't finished with her yet. Straddling her, he bent down to kiss one of her distended nipples, sucking it deep in his mouth. She made a sexy little sound and then tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled him even closer. He suckled and licked, cupping her breasts with both hands and kissing all that smooth, silky flesh.

"You are such a tease," Annabelle said, sounding breathless and excited and of course, slightly irritated. "Will you just get inside me already?"

"Sure." He slipped one hand between her legs and pushed two fingers deep in her pussy.

They both groaned.

She was soaking wet, and he quickly slid down her body again, his mouth desperate to lap up all those sweet juices. He swirled his tongue over her clit, then dragged it down her wet folds and thrust it deep inside her.

Annabelle moaned, her hips moving restlessly as he went down on her. “God, you’re good at that,” she mumbled. She made a wheezing sound. “And if you say it’s because you’ve had a lot of practice, I’ll slap you.”

He laughed against her pussy. Yep, sarcastic even during sex. He’d known she would be, and damn, but he loved it. He also loved driving her wild, which he continued to do, flicking his tongue over her clit, licking every inch of her until she was moaning uncontrollably. He sucked her clit deep in his mouth. Her sweet taste made him dizzy with lust, and his cock throbbed, hard and full and dying for release.

Annabelle moved her hips faster, her breathing heavy, but just as he felt her clit pulse against his lips, he drew back. He had a crazy urge to see her eyes when she came. Abruptly, he shot to his feet, his cock poking out like an angry sword.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Annabelle grumbled.

“Condom,” he said hoarsely.

He went from the living room to the bathroom and back to the living room in less than a minute. Ten seconds after that, he had a rubber on and was entering Annabelle with one swift thrust.

“Oh Jesus,” he hissed out. She was so tight he nearly exploded from the feel of her inner muscles clamped around his dick like a vise. “Are you always this tight?”

“Probably. You want me to poll my other lovers?”

A laugh lodged in his throat. “No, please don’t.”

“Okay.” She pressed her palm on his chest and stroked his pecs. “Can we stop talking now?”

Her touch seared his skin, causing beads of sweat to pop out on his forehead. Damn, he liked her touch. He liked everything about her—her dark-brown hair fanned out on the floor, her rigid dark-pink nipples, the leg she’d hooked around his waist, the kung-fu grip of her pussy. She looked so fucking hot lying there beneath him, and he had no problem shutting up. In fact, he lost all capacity for speech as he started to move inside her.

Annabelle moved with him, lifting her ass and meeting him thrust for thrust, while her fingernails dug into his back, eliciting little sparks of pain mingled with pleasure.

“I need...fuck,” he swore. “I need to be deeper.”

With a husky growl, he grabbed hold of one of her legs and lifted it up to his shoulder, pushing his cock into her as deep as it would go. Annabelle cried out, a wild throaty sound ringing with pleasure. He nearly came right there and then as he watched her slide her own hand down her body so she could rub her clit.

Biting her full bottom lip, she met his gaze, then parted her lips, moaned and orgasmed.

It was the sexiest sight he’d ever seen, and he wasn’t far behind her, especially when she lifted her head to his shoulder and bit into his flesh, still whimpering and rocking beneath him. Ryan let go, shuddering as a burst of sheer pleasure rocketed through his body, sizzling through his blood and nearly

stopping his heart. His climax made the world spin, and by the time his shoulders sagged and his chest collapsed onto Annabelle, he felt ravaged and exhausted and so fucking sated.

Under him, Annabelle was breathing as heavily as he was, and he suddenly realized he was probably crushing her. He gingerly rolled onto his side and, wincing, peeled the condom off his still-hard dick, then raised himself up on one elbow so he could peer down at her. He grinned at the dazed cloud of arousal still glimmering in her eyes.

“I guess we can cross number one off the list,” he said roughly.

“Oh yeah,” she agreed, still sounding breathless. “That was surprisingly good.”

“Surprisingly?” he echoed in mock anger.

“There was always the chance you were all talk and no action,” she replied sweetly. “Overconfident men usually suck in bed.”

“I do not suck in bed.”

“I know. Like I said, you’re surprisingly good.”

“More like incredibly awesome.”

She shot him a sugary smile. “It’s nice to have a healthy ego.”

He bent down and planted a quick kiss on her lips, then pulled back and admired her perfect features. “You really are beautiful, you know that, Annabelle?”

Her cheeks turned pink. “You already got me in bed—well, on floor—so you don’t need to sweet talk me.”

“I’m not sweet talking. It’s true. You’re beautiful.”

He figured she’d object again—all she ever seemed to do was object—but instead she smiled shyly and said, “Thank you.”

Those two words were laced with so much wonder that he had to ask, “Hasn’t anyone ever told you that before?”

A tiny frown marred her forehead. “No. My parents, sure, but you’re the first man who’s ever said that.”

“Then the men you’ve dated before are complete morons.” He dragged his fingers down her bare arm, then rested his palm on her stomach and rubbed the soft skin there. “You’re gorgeous, Annie.”

“So are you, Rick.”

He chuckled. Man, he really liked this chick. Her well of sarcasm never seemed to run dry, and he found himself laughing constantly when she was around. And who could forget the mind-blowing sex they’d just had. When was the last time he’d felt this sated?

Next to him, Annabelle shifted, arching her back to form a little bridge with her naked body. “God, my back kills.”

“Isn’t it worth it, though?”

She mulled it over. “Yeah, I guess it is.” She raised herself up on her elbows, her breasts jutting out enticingly. “I should probably take off.”

“What’s the rush?” he asked, wrinkling his forehead.

Discomfort flitted through her brown eyes. “I figured you had, I don’t know, things to do or something.” She paused. “And it just occurred to me I don’t know a thing about you, except that you live in the building and were sort of involved with Christina.”

“I’ll tell you what, if you stay, I’ll tell you every last thing about myself.”

He sensed her reluctance, and an odd spark of panic lit in his gut. He didn’t want her to go. Weird, since they’d only met yesterday, but for some reason, he wanted her to stick around.

“Come on,” he urged. “It’ll be fun. We’ll order some pizza or Chinese food, spend the afternoon and night naked, and get to know each other.”

The corner of her lush mouth lifted. “That does sound pretty appealing.”

“It’ll be fun,” he reiterated.

Her smile widened. “How much fun?”

Grinning, Ryan placed his palm on her thigh and stroked gently. “A *lot* of fun.”

The shrill ringing of the phone woke Annabelle up at five in the morning. And it wouldn’t stop. It kept ringing and ringing and ringing, and next to her, Ryan made no move to pick it up. Groaning, she buried her head under the pillow, as Ryan shifted beside her, letting out a groan of his own.

“Who the fuck is that?” he mumbled.

“This isn’t fun,” Annabelle mumbled back. “You promised me a fun sleepover and then stuck me with a five o’clock wake-up call. I’m very unhappy at the moment.”

The phone mercilessly stopped ringing. For half a second.

Then it started right back up again.

Annabelle shot up into a sitting position. “If you don’t answer it, I will kill you.”

Groaning again, Ryan stuck out his arm and began rummaging around for the cordless phone. He finally got it off its cradle, jammed on the talk button and lifted it to his ear. “What?” he barked into the receiver.

Annabelle heard a male voice talking excitedly, but couldn’t make out any of the words. Ryan, however, was instantly awake. He sat up abruptly, a wide sleepy grin filling his face. “Seriously? *Now*?” He paused. “Okay. Yeah, definitely. We’re on our way.”

“We?” Annabelle burst out, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

Ryan ignored her. “Huh? No, that’s Annabelle...yeah, long story...she’s kind of strange but—”

“Kind of strange?” she yelled.

“—pretty cool,” Ryan finished. “Yeah...okay, see you in twenty. Tell her to hold it in until I get there because I totally want to see the head when it—hello?” He glanced at Annabelle. “Bastard hung up.”

Shoving the sheets off the bed, Ryan got up, suddenly as alert as a watchful guard dog. He moved around the bedroom, grabbing pieces of clothing, as Annabelle sat on the bed, shaking her head in confusion. “What on earth is happening?” she demanded.

“Shelby’s having her baby,” he said without breaking his stride.

“Who?” She went pale. “Don’t you dare tell me you got some girl pregnant.”

“She’s Garrett’s wife,” Ryan replied, sinking down on the edge of the bed so he could roll on a pair of socks. “Garrett’s on my SEAL team, I mentioned him yesterday, remember?”

She only sort of remembered. She was still having a tough time reconciling the fact that Ryan was a Navy SEAL. In between having super awesome sex, they’d spent all of yesterday talking about their lives, and when she asked him what he did for a living, she figured he’d say something like “pro surfer” or “personal trainer” or maybe “gigolo”. The Navy, she did not expect. Sure, he had the most extraordinary body ever, all toned and muscled and hard just about everywhere, but she couldn’t imagine him holding a gun, or creeping through the jungle, blowing things up, taking down terrorists...it was actually kind of hot when she thought about it. She’d never slept with GI Joe before.

“His wife is having their baby and Carson says it’ll be any minute now,” Ryan said, jarring her from her thoughts. “I’m gonna be an uncle, babe!”

Although she didn’t know Shelby or Garrett or Carson, Ryan’s enthusiasm was contagious. “God help that baby,” she said with a laugh.

He stood at the foot of the bed, shooting her an expectant look. “Well, come on, get up. We have to go to the hospital.”

Her enthusiasm faded. “Why? I don’t even know these people, Ryan. I don’t want to intrude.”

“You won’t be intruding.” He waved a dismissive hand. “They’ll all be happy to see you, especially Holly.”

“Who’s Holly?”

“I’ll tell you in the car. Now get up already.”

Annabelle slid out of bed, then paused, realizing she was totally naked. Almost immediately, Ryan’s eyes darkened to a midnight blue, and she could see the flicker of arousal in his gaze. Funny enough, she didn’t feel self-conscious. She never walked around naked in the condo she shared with Bryce. Neither did Bryce, for that matter. As their moving-in present, he’d bought them matching robes. To preserve her modesty, she’d thought, but that was before she’d discovered he was a prude.

“I need to go upstairs to Christina’s to get some clothes. I only have my bikini here,” she reminded him.

Ryan offered a wolfish grin. “Wear it to the hospital.”

"You wish," she said with a snort.

"I do wish. All my friends would be jealous."

Laughing, she went over to the chair near the bed and picked up one of the T-shirts lying there. "Can I wear this?" Without waiting for him to agree—he'd be an asshole not to—she slipped the shirt over her head. It hung down to her knees, and as she walked toward Ryan, he had a devilish look in his eyes.

"You look seriously cute in that shirt," he said, then elicited a startled squeak from her mouth by planting his hands on her waist, pulling her close and kissing her.

His lips were so soft, so warm. Annabelle's toes curled as his mouth moved over hers in a teasing caress. God, he knew how to kiss. He knew how to do everything, in fact. They'd had sex three times already, and each time he pushed that thick cock into her, it took her breath away. Not that she was surprised. Just looking at him, you knew he'd be good in bed. What would Bryce think if he could see her now?

The notion brought a pang of guilt to her belly, followed by a jolt of anger. Screw Bryce. Who cared what he thought. He hadn't thought twice before hooking up with someone else, so why should she?

"Okay," Ryan groaned, breaking the kiss. "If we keep doing that, we'll never get to the hospital." He reached his arm around her and gave her butt a little slap. "Let's get a move on."

"Do we have to?"

"Yep. Don't worry, Annie, it'll be fun."

She didn't bother to correct him this time. He'd simply pick another annoying nickname if she said anything, and truth be told, she was beginning to like it. Nobody had ever called her Annie before. Her mother maintained that the nickname sounded too "common". Annabelle, on the other hand, now that was a name that screamed wealth, according to Sandra Holmes.

Ryan waited somewhat impatiently as Annabelle got dressed upstairs, but she refused to rush. She still wasn't sure why he insisted she come with him. She didn't know any of his friends, and the birth of a child seemed like a rather inappropriate place to bring a girl you'd only known for two days. Yet for some reason, she wanted to go. She liked Ryan. She was drawn to him. And she couldn't help but be curious about his life, about *him*.

They left the building fifteen minutes later, and Ryan led her to an olive-green Jeep parked at the back of the lot. He didn't open the passenger door for her, and she resisted making a sarcastic remark about chivalry. Bryce always opened her door, and it drove her crazy. She was perfectly capable of opening her own door, and when Bryce did it, there was nothing chivalrous about it. It felt more patronizing if anything.

"So what's the deal with this Bryce guy?" Ryan asked as he started the engine. "Am I helping you cheat on him? 'Cuz I'm not sure how I feel about that. I do have a moral code, you know."

She grinned. "Yeah, I'm sure you do." The smile faded as she pondered his question. She'd told him about Bryce earlier, but mostly skimmed over the details. "I guess Bryce and I are broken up."

He shot her a sideways look before turning his attention back to the road ahead. “Were you really engaged?”

“Pretty much since we were six years old,” she said wryly. “He officially asked me two years ago. Our parents were thrilled.”

“Your parents aren’t the ones getting married. How did *you* feel about it?” Ryan asked quietly.

She bit her bottom lip. “I...was happy, I guess. I’ve wanted to marry Bryce since we were kids. I thought he was a wonderful guy.”

“Thought?” Ryan echoed, picking up on the past tense.

To her dismay, they reached a red light, which allowed him to turn his head and study her. His blue eyes flickered with curiosity, and discomfort rose up her spine. The last thing she wanted to do was tell Ryan about Bryce’s parting words, about what a priss she supposedly was.

“He said some mean things before he left,” she finally admitted.

Ryan’s jaw hardened. “What kind of mean things?”

She shrugged and casually glanced out the window. “You know, about me, and our sex life, and...” She suddenly gritted her teeth. To hell with it. “He pretty much called me a prude, okay?”

Ryan was silent for a few seconds. Then he burst out laughing.

“It’s not funny,” she said, her cheeks burning up.

“Sure it is.” He chuckled again. “It’s also not *true*. Don’t tell me you believed him, babe.”

Annabelle didn’t answer.

“You did, didn’t you?” Ryan said, sounding amazed. “Is that why you wrote that list? Come on, Annabelle, you should know better than to listen to some asshole. I just spent the entire day and night with you, and I can assure you, you’re no prude.”

“Um, thanks?”

They reached the hospital and Ryan parked the Jeep. Shutting off the engine, he looked at her and shook his head. “Don’t even think about that ass anymore, okay? Because I know for a fact that you’re the sexiest, hottest, wildest fuck a guy could ever have.”

Despite the lewd description, she found herself laughing. Her heart may have skipped a couple of beats too. She liked knowing that she’d provided this gorgeous military man with a sexy, hot and wild time.

Ryan hopped out of the Jeep to grab a parking ticket from the machine in the lot. When he came back, he shoved the ticket on the dashboard, as Annabelle got out of the vehicle, slinging her purse over her shoulder. “Are you sure they won’t mind that I’m here?” she asked once more.

“Trust me, they’ll be ecstatic.”

Chapter Four

Strangely enough, he was right. When the two of them entered the large waiting room in the fifth-floor maternity ward, a brunette with bright green eyes and a blue-eyed redhead jumped up and swarmed Ryan and Annabelle like two excited bees. Ryan made the introductions, but the two women kept babbling about how exciting this was and how happy they were for Shelby that Annabelle had a tough time keeping up. The brunette was Holly, and the blond man with the killer smile who rose from one of the plastic chairs was Carson, her fiancé. Jane was the redhead, and she introduced Annabelle to *her* fiancé, Thomas Becker, a man with short brown hair and a body that belonged in an action movie.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to them,” Becker said dryly as Holly and Jane continued to talk Ryan’s ear off.

“She’s only three centimeters dilated,” Holly was explaining. “Garrett came out an hour ago and said the doctor thinks it might be a while.”

“Are Will and Mac coming?” Ryan asked.

“They’ll be here in a few hours,” Carson supplied. “Mac wasn’t feeling well last night, so Will wants to let her sleep a while longer.”

“She’s pregnant,” Holly told Annabelle. “And Will is totally overprotective. He thinks she’ll lose the baby if she sneezes, but we keep telling him to quit worrying. Unless she has a vision of it or something, *then* he should worry.”

Annabelle was lost again. She figured Will was another SEAL, but all this talk of pregnancy and visions made her head spin. It spun even more when Ryan suddenly shook hands with Becker and congratulated him for apparently getting Jane pregnant, though something in that exchange felt...stiff. Ryan was smiling, his voice ringing with sincerity, but for a moment, Annabelle could swear she’d heard a twinge of sadness. She discreetly glanced from Ryan to Jane, but the redhead was staring up at her soon-to-be husband adoringly and Ryan looked perfectly unruffled.

Huh. Maybe she’d just imagined it.

“Shit, I’m starving,” Carson mumbled. “Anyone want to make a trip down to the cafeteria?”

Ryan and Becker chimed in. Annabelle didn’t have a chance. Her stomach had grumbled the second Carson said *cafeteria*, but Holly was suddenly gripping her hand. “Bring us some sandwiches or something,” Holly chirped to the men, then tugged on Annabelle’s hand and practically forced her butt into a chair. “Sit with us, Annabelle.”

Annabelle found herself sandwiched between Holly and Jane, who stared at her in curiosity. “How did you and Ryan meet?” Jane asked.

“Is it serious?” Holly demanded.

“Uh...it’s only been two days,” she said awkwardly.

“But you like him?” Holly pressed.

“Yeah, definitely.” Before they could grill her again, she swiftly changed the subject. “How did you and Carson meet?” she asked Holly.

With a grin, Holly launched into the whole sordid story, revealing that she and Carson had indulged in a one-night stand at a nightclub only to run into each other weeks later at Shelby and Garrett’s wedding. Then Jane chimed in, confessing that she’d met Becker in an elevator, in which the two of them passed the time having hot sex.

Annabelle laughed, thinking of her first meeting with Ryan. Unable to stop herself, she told the two women the story of how she’d woken up to find a total stranger in bed with her. Both of them hooted with delight when she finished. “Oh, that’s priceless,” Jane said, pushing a loose strand of red hair from her ponytail. “I can’t believe you threw a lamp at him.”

“He deserves it,” Holly said, rolling her eyes. “I’ve wanted to throw a lamp at Evans since the day I met him.” Annabelle knew Holly was just teasing; the affection in her voice when she spoke of Ryan was easy to pick up on.

“Yeah,” Jane agreed with a grin. “He’s incorrigible. I’ve been tempted to do some lamp-throwing myself.”

“So, have you and Carson set a date?” Annabelle asked Holly.

“Not yet.” Holly made a face. “We’re too busy arguing about who’ll cater the wedding.”

“Having trouble picking a catering company?”

“No, he won’t let *me* do it,” Holly complained.

“The bride can’t cater her own damn wedding,” came Carson’s annoyed voice. He stepped into the waiting room, with Ryan and Becker in tow, and glared at his soon-to-be wife. “You’re just going to have to pay someone else to do it.”

“I’ll prepare everything the night before,” Holly insisted.

Annabelle smothered a laugh as she listened to them argue. She could tell they were madly in love, which brought a tiny pang of envy to her chest. Had she and Bryce ever acted that way with each other, loving and teasing and so obviously infatuated with each other?

“I got turkey and ham,” Ryan said, holding up two sandwiches covered in plastic wrap. “Pick one.”

She reached for the ham and unwrapped the sandwich, as Jane got up to sit with Becker, digging into the potato chips he’d brought her, and Holly and Carson split a tuna sandwich.

John Garrett walked into the waiting room while the women were eating, looking completely frazzled. Annabelle noted he was an extremely good-looking man, with dark hair, intense eyes and a long sexy bod. Even the lines of exhaustion creasing his face didn't take away from his handsomeness. Jeez, did the Navy only allow sex gods to enlist or something?

"Six centimeters," Garrett announced, raking both hands through his hair. "Shit, I'm dying in there."

"Is she okay?" Holly asked, her green eyes wide with concern.

"She's fine, considering." Garrett looked like he was going to keel over any second. "But she keeps yelling at me, and I'm pretty sure she broke one of my fingers during the last contraction." He held up his hand and sure enough, his pinkie was red, swollen and bent at a slight angle. And yet he didn't seem the least bit concerned about it, and a few minutes later, he said he'd keep them posted and went to be with his wife again, broken finger and all.

Annabelle was impressed. Maybe it was a military thing, but she'd never seen a man look so calm. She shot a sidelong glance at Ryan, wondering how he'd react in this type of situation. His wife yelling and in pain, clinging to his hand so tightly she broke one of his fingers. She got the feeling he'd be calm too.

"So," Ryan said after Garrett left the room. "How long do you think this'll take?"

"Not long," Carson said at the same time Holly replied, "Probably hours."

Ryan groaned, evidently smart enough to know that the woman was always right. And right Holly was. Two hours passed before they knew it. Then three and four. By the time hour number five ticked by, the waiting room became substantially quiet. Annabelle yawned and stretched her legs out, leaning closer to Ryan. In the corner of the room, Jane had fallen asleep on Becker's shoulder and he was absently running his fingers through her hair. Carson was asleep too, head lolled to the side, while his fiancée buried her nose in a paperback novel.

Annabelle jumped when she felt Ryan's lips brush across her earlobe. "This is so boring," he whispered in her ear.

She smiled. "It's hard work pushing out a baby. I doubt Shelby is finding it boring at all."

"Yeah, well, Will and his wife have the right idea. They're going to show up in a few hours, all bright-eyed and ready to hold the baby, and they'll laugh at us for our six-hour wait."

"It could be worse," Annabelle pointed out. "My mother was in labor with me for thirty-two hours."

"That does not surprise me," Ryan said solemnly. "You went from a difficult infant to a difficult adult."

"Ha ha."

He shifted close again, his tongue darting out to lick her ear. "I have an idea," he rasped.

"Oh really?"

Planting a little kiss on her neck, he met her gaze and said, "Number four."

She coughed in surprise, instantly catching his drift. "At the *hospital*? No way."

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“You really need to stop promising me fun.” She gestured around the quiet waiting room. “So far, I’m not having fun.”

“But you will.” Before she could blink, he was on his feet and pulling her up. “Let’s go make some memories, babe.”

At the sound of movement, Holly looked up from her book. “Going to stretch your legs?” she asked, the amusement in her green eyes revealing that she knew precisely what they were about to do.

“Sure are,” Ryan said easily. “Want anything from the vending machine?”

“No, thanks.” Holly winked at Annabelle as Ryan linked his arm loosely through hers as if they were going on a leisurely stroll.

It was past ten, and the hospital corridor was bustling. Nurses in bright pink scrubs hurried by, doctors stood in the hallway studying patient charts, and they passed several family members with either pink or blue balloons going into rooms to visit the new moms. They walked past the nursery, and at the sound of a newborn wailing, Annabelle glared at Ryan. “I refuse to have sex near babies.”

He seemed to mull that over, then sighed. “Me too. Let’s go downstairs.”

This was crazy. Annabelle wanted to object as she followed Ryan to the stairwell, where they climbed the stairs up to the next floor. When she’d written that list, she hadn’t planned on actually doing any of the things on it. Fantasized about them, sure, but doing them? Again, crazy.

Yet her heart was pounding wildly as Ryan dragged her down the fluorescent-lit corridor of the respiratory ward, and her knees shook when he discovered an empty closet and ushered her inside. Darkness instantly engulfed them, but she could make out a metal rack stacked with boxes of...she squinted...latex gloves. Ryan followed her gaze and laughed. “Can I please, please fuck you while wearing latex gloves?”

“You are a sick man.”

He encircled her waist with hands and bent down to nip at her neck. “Think about how cold and slimy it would feel.”

“I am a firm believer that sex should *not* be cold and slimy.”

Ryan’s mouth moved from her neck to her jaw. He kissed his way to her mouth, his morning stubble tickling her chin. They both froze at the sound of muffled footsteps, but whoever it was walked right past the closet. “Are we really going to do this?” she whispered.

He took one of her hands and placed it directly over his crotch, which sported a thick ridge of arousal. “Hell yeah.”

Annabelle sighed. “Fine, do your worst.”

“My best, you mean,” he murmured as he slid his hand between her legs.

He stroked her gently, as if he had all the time in the world, but Annabelle was very much aware of their surroundings. “If we do this, we do it fast,” she murmured back.

“If you say so.”

Before she could blink, he spun her around so that she was facing the wall, as he ground his lower body against her ass. She moaned, the delicious friction causing a ribbon of pleasure to uncurl through her body and settle in her aching core.

Ryan reached around to cup her breasts, his breath warm against her neck. “Hey, I just thought of something,” he said, sounding delighted.

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“We can cross off numbers two, four and eight, all at once. It’s the trifecta...the perfect storm, if you will.”

It was hard to concentrate on his words when his hands were fondling her breasts. He meant the list, obviously. She strained to remember the items. Sex in public, sex standing up, and...her face heated up. Oh right. From behind.

“I’ve gotta tell you, babe, I’m loving this list of yours,” he rasped, sliding his hands down her belly to unbutton her jeans.

He didn’t take them off, just let them fall down to her ankles, and then his hand was between her legs, stroking the crotch of her panties. Annabelle’s entire body was on fire. The dark closet, the sound of footsteps out in the hall, Ryan’s talented fingers poking underneath her panties to rub her clit...it all aroused the hell out of her.

“Close your eyes,” Ryan whispered.

She obliged, listening to the sound of plastic tearing—he’d remembered to bring a condom—and then a zipper hissing open. A moment later, she felt his cock pressing between her ass cheeks, teasing her puckered hole. Her heart did a somersault. For a second she thought he would venture into the forbidden, but to her relief—and odd disappointment—he moved aside the crotch of her panties and pushed into her wet core with one smooth thrust.

God, it felt good. She tried to think about the last time she’d made love to Bryce, tried to remember if it had felt as good as this, but her brain promptly stopped functioning as Ryan began to move.

It didn’t last long at all. Four, maybe five strokes, and then she was coming, a fast, pounding orgasm that seem to come out of nowhere. Annabelle gasped as pleasure rocketed through her. Her breasts tingled, her clit throbbing as waves of ecstasy pulsated in her core. She ground her ass against Ryan, milking him, taking everything she could get, and his husky groans heightened her pleasure.

His fingers dug into her waist as he pistoned his hips, fucking her hard, his balls slapping against her ass with each deep thrust.

“Fuck,” he wheezed, and then he released a harsh cry and shuddered inside her.

She loved feeling him come, loved the guttural sounds he made, the way he nuzzled her neck, heating her skin with his ragged breaths. She wanted to cry out in disappointment when he finally withdrew, leaving her empty and sated and wanting more. So much more.

It had never been this way with Bryce. Never.

Her legs were still shaking as she bent down to pull up her jeans. She buttoned them up, turning to face Ryan. His blue eyes glimmered in the darkness, satisfaction etched into his handsome features. He removed the condom, tossed it in the metal garbage can near the door, then zipped up his pants and stepped toward her.

“So...was *that* fun?” he teased.

A breathy laugh exited her mouth. “Oh yeah.”

Chapter Five

“So what do you want to watch tonight?” Ryan asked, holding up two DVD cases.

From her spot on the couch, Annabelle snorted. “Rambo one or Rambo two? Seriously, those are my options?”

“It’s my pick, remember?” he said defensively. “Last night I sat through *P.S. I Love You*. I think my sperm count dropped in half.”

“Don’t worry, you looked very manly when you teared up.”

“I did not tear up—”

“You did!” she chortled. “Right after Gerard Butler died. It was like ten minutes into the movie.”

“You were imagining it.” He waved the DVDs. “So which Rambo do you want?”

“Neither. You choose, and I’ll just go into the bathroom and slit my wrists.”

As usual, her sarcasm never failed to make him burst into laughter. They’d spent an entire week together, and each time she unleashed one of her biting remarks, he liked her even more. He was used to women treating him like he was some sort of god, especially when they found out he was in the Navy, but Annabelle remained completely indifferent to what he did. She didn’t take any crap, from him, or anyone, he suspected, and he loved that. His friends loved her too, even Shelby, who’d given birth to an eight-pound girl bound to be the apple of her daddy’s eye. Annabelle and Ryan had gone in to see the baby, and when they were leaving, Shelby, looking sleepy and relaxed, had pulled him aside and said, “She’s a keeper.”

Shelby might be right. Ryan had never felt this way about anyone, except maybe Jane, but he was trying very hard to banish those inappropriate thoughts. He and Jane would never be together. He knew that. But his heart simply needed to get the memo.

Annabelle was helping, though. He loved being with her, and Jane was never on his mind when Annabelle was around.

He smiled as he watched her stretch her legs out. She looked so cute sprawled there on the couch, wearing a pair of tiny black shorts and a yellow halter top. Her long brown hair was tied up in a high ponytail, which made her look like a little girl. Except there was nothing girlish about her body. All curves, all sex appeal.

His cock stirred in his loose shorts, and just as he was about to toss the movies aside and suggest they have hot sex instead, the door to the apartment swung open and Matt walked in.

“Thank the Lord that’s over,” Matt said with a groan. He dropped the blue duffel bag he was holding and it landed on the floor with a thud. “I swear, I love my sweet mother to death but sometimes I could just strangle—oh, hello there,” Matt drawled, noticing Annabelle on the couch.

She sat up awkwardly. “Um. Hi.”

Ryan wasn’t surprised to see her eyes widen at the sight of his roommate. O’Connor usually evoked that wide-eyed response from females. Probably the shaved head. It made him look all tough and lethal. Most chicks totally dug it, and it looked like Annabelle wasn’t the exception. Ryan noticed her checking Matt out, her brown eyes moving up and down Matt’s tall, muscular body. He didn’t mind, though. He’d never been the jealous type, and he and Matt had indulged in enough threesomes that he was used to sharing the attention.

“Annabelle, Matt, Matt, Annabelle,” Ryan introduced.

Matt flashed Annabelle a grin. “It’s nice to meet you, darlin’.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Oh no, he darlin’ed you. That means he likes you.”

“Where are you from?” Annabelle asked curiously. “The South, I assume.”

“Nashville,” Matt confirmed. He looked from her to Ryan. “Mind if I hang out with you guys for a while? I need to be around people my own age.”

Ryan laughed. “I take it Nana O’Connor drove you nuts.”

“As usual.” Matt drifted toward the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, “Anyone want a beer?”

“Me,” Ryan called back. He glanced at Annabelle. “You?”

She sighed. “What the hell.”

Matt came back with three bottles, gave two away, and flopped down on one of the comfortable leather recliners flanking the couch. Ryan took the other chair, while Annabelle stayed sprawled on the couch, leaning forward a little to take a sip of the beer Matt handed her.

It didn’t take long for Matt and Annabelle to hit it off, though Ryan wasn’t surprised. Matt was the most laidback guy Ryan had ever met, and Annabelle, well, she was thoroughly entertaining. By the time the next round of beers was polished off, the three of them were laughing like old friends. Matt regaled them with stories about his trip home, and Annabelle told them about one of the worst weddings her company had ever planned, something involving feathers and swans and a very drunk uncle.

Annabelle’s cheeks were flushed from the alcohol, but Ryan knew she wasn’t drunk. Tipsy, maybe, but not drunk. Neither was he, and he’d noticed Annabelle admiring Matt several times in the past hour. Again, he wasn’t concerned. He was, however, curious to see how far she was willing to go. He’d meant what he said in the hospital—he was having fun acting out all the fantasies on her list. And he knew she was having fun too. Except that she kept insisting the list didn’t mean anything.

Which he knew was a total lie.

When Matt left the room to take a quick shower, claiming he was grimy from his trip and now sweaty from the three beers he'd consumed, Ryan joined Annabelle on the sofa and said, "Do you think he's attractive?"

She set down her beer bottle, furrowing her eyebrows. "Matt? Well, sure. Why are you asking?"

Ryan slid closer and placed his hand on her thigh. "I thought maybe he'd be a good candidate for number three."

His remark got him a pair of wide brown eyes. "Are you crazy? That's...just wrong."

He offered a wry look. "And why is that wrong?"

Annabelle squirmed a little, and he wondered if she was squirming from discomfort or arousal. Probably the latter, though she probably wouldn't admit it. "Threesomes are...sleazy. No?"

"Technically, what you wrote isn't a threesome." He bent close to her ear and said, "You said you wanted to get fucked by another man while I watch."

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. "I didn't say I wanted that... I just..." She looked away.

Ryan grasped her chin with one hand and made her look at him. "Why did you write the list, Annabelle?"

"I told you already." Her cheeks turned pink again. "I wanted to show Bryce all the things I'd be willing to do."

"Willing to do, or *dying* to do?"

Her blush deepened.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to do wicked things," he teased.

"Okay, yeah, maybe *some* wicked things, like sex in the hospital, or on the floor, but having sex with another guy...that's so slutty." Embarrassment flickered in her eyes.

"Says who? Who decides what's slutty, what's right or wrong when it comes to sex?" Ryan shook his head. "As long as all the parties involved are consenting adults, why should it matter?"

Annabelle gulped. "Have you...and Matt...done stuff together before, with a woman?"

"Yes," he said honestly. "Does that bother you?"

Annabelle's heart was pounding hard in her chest. How did Ryan always manage to catch her off-guard? She hadn't doubted he was a ladies man, or that he'd probably slept with dozens of women, but somehow she hadn't imagined him in any threeways.

"No. I mean, I don't think so." She froze for a moment. "Wait—did you and Matt and *Christina*...?"

"Yeah."

She bit the inside of her cheek. Wow. She couldn't picture Christina with Ryan and Matt. Christina didn't seem like the type. But along with surprise, Annabelle experienced a wave of envy. Jeez, was she actually jealous that her friend had been fucked by two guys at once?

Annabelle glanced at Ryan, then Matt, who had just strolled back into the living room wearing a pair of faded jeans and no shirt. No, it wasn't just two guys that appealed to her. It was *these* two in particular.

"It turns you on, doesn't it?" Ryan said in a low voice.

But not low enough. "What turns you on?" Matt asked instantly, swiveling his head toward Annabelle as he sank back into his chair.

To her horror, Ryan answered for her. "Doing you while I watch," he said to his roommate.

Matt's jaw fell open. Then a sexy little smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "For real?"

Annabelle met his deep green eyes. She found herself nodding.

Matt looked intrigued. "Huh. Okay then. Let's do it."

Her breath jammed in her throat like a wad of chewing gum. Oh God. She couldn't believe he'd just said that. And she couldn't believe how quickly her body responded. Her nipples hardened into two tight buds, straining against her halter top. Both men immediately zeroed in on the sight, which only made the tingling worse. She wished she'd worn a bra. She wished Ryan had never seen that list.

"Well?" Ryan said, meeting her eyes. "What do you think?"

Think? Her head wasn't capable of producing thoughts right now. She'd turned into a pile of mush on the couch, her pussy aching so badly she squeezed her legs together. What was happening to her? Ever since she'd met Ryan, she'd become a total sex addict. And Matt wasn't helping her condition. He was as gorgeous as Ryan, and...yep, just as well-endowed, she noted as she saw an impressive hard-on pushing against his jeans.

"I...this is crazy," she finally blurted out.

"What's wrong with crazy?" Matt said in that charming Southern accent.

"Um...nothing, I guess?"

Laughing, Matt got off his chair and moved to the couch. He flopped down right beside her, his hard thigh touching her bare one. "I just spent the entire week in Nashville, listening to my mother nag me about why I'm not married yet and following my grandmother to every fabric store in the city so she could pick out wool to crochet me a sweater I will never wear." He placed his hand on her knee. "I could use some crazy right now, Annabelle."

"You're as bad as he is," she grumbled, hooking a thumb at Ryan.

"Yeah, but I think you want to be bad with us," Matt said with grin.

He was right. She *did* want to be bad. She was twenty-five years old and she'd only had sex with one other man, Bryce, who she'd lost her virginity to. Now that she'd been with Ryan, her eyes had opened to all the sexual possibilities out there. Sex didn't have to be planned, it didn't have to be a three-times-a-week routine and last for ten minutes before Bryce rolled himself off her. This kind of sex was *way* more exciting.

Taking a breath, she looked over at Ryan, who had moved back to sit in one of the chairs and was watching them with amused blue eyes. “Come on, Annie, kiss him. Be bad for a while.”

She stared at Matt’s mouth. She wanted to. God, she wanted to kiss him and touch him and sleep with him. As if a magnet was pulling her toward him, she leaned into that waiting mouth, gasping when his lips closed over hers. His mouth was firmer than Ryan’s, his tongue more insistent, and she was breathless by the time the kiss ended. Little sparks of heat danced along her skin, growing hotter when she noticed the desire glimmering in Matt’s green eyes.

“Undo my pants,” Matt said gruffly, locking his gaze with hers.

She found it hard to breathe as she followed his instructions. Her fingers trembled over the button at his jeans. She undid it, then pulled the zipper down, and her entire body burned up when his long, thick cock sprang up into her waiting hand. No boxers. God, that was hot.

Annabelle felt Ryan’s eyes on her as she stroked his roommate’s erection. She turned her head, meeting his gaze, and the fire she saw in his eyes stole her breath. It was good fire, aroused not angry, and when she glanced south, she noticed he was hard too. Licking his bottom lip, he undid his jeans and pulled out his own cock, stroking himself while she stroked his friend. She looked down at the thick erection in her hand, her heart pounding so fast she feared it would explode.

“What are you waiting for?” Ryan said in a low, slightly mocking voice. “Take him in your mouth.”

As her pulse shrieked in her ears, she slid off the couch onto her knees and did as Ryan asked. Matt groaned softly as she wrapped her lips around his tip, dragging her tongue over the velvety flesh. He fisted her hair, guiding her along his shaft, thrusting impossibly deep. She relaxed her throat and took him in, all the while feeling Ryan’s gaze burning into the back of her head.

“God, darlin’, that’s so good.” Matt’s husky voice made her shiver. She loved that faint accent of his, loved the way he moved his hips as she sucked him.

She was just getting into the blowjob, enjoying the rough sounds he made, when he withdrew from her mouth and hauled her up into his lap. His warm hands snaked underneath her shirt, tugging it up and over her head. Matt’s green eyes glittered with appreciation at the sight of her bare breasts.

“You are beautiful,” he said softly.

He dipped his head and covered one nipple with his hot mouth, kissing it gently. Annabelle tilted her head to the side, watching Ryan as he watched them. She saw his pulse throbbing in his throat, his lips parted slightly as he moved his fist up and down his cock.

Matt flicked his tongue over her aching nipple, then looked up at her from under unbelievably long eyelashes. “Do you like having him watch?”

She swallowed. “Yes.”

Smiling, Matt turned his attention to her other breast, while moving one hand between her legs to cup her mound. She moaned, rubbed herself against him, cradled his head with her hands and brought him

closer to her breast. Her skin was scorching hot, her mouth desert-dry. Matt gently pushed her onto her back, his big hands sliding her shorts down her legs. He tossed them aside, spread her thighs and then his tongue was on her clit. He licked her, eagerly, relentlessly, until her mind fragmented and she climaxed with a loud cry. Her eyes were wide open, locked with Ryan's as she came from Matt's talented machinations.

"Is he good?" Ryan murmured, still working his own erection.

She offered a breathless yes, which turned into a deep moan as Matt pushed two fingers into her and started working on her clit again.

"Do you want him to fuck you?" Ryan asked.

Another breathy yes.

"Did you hear that, O'Connor?" Ryan said. "She wants you to fuck her."

Matt raised his head from her pussy, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Five more minutes. I'm having far too much fun down here."

Annabelle choked out a laugh as he continued to tease her into oblivion. He sucked on her clit, his fingers plunging in and out of her, and she came again, less than two minutes into the allocated five. Groaning, Matt lapped at her pussy, then gave her one last kiss before climbing up her body. He was bigger than Ryan, his chest massive, his thighs rock-hard as he straddled her, and there wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere on that body of his. He was incredible.

So was Ryan, who, from the corner of her eye, she saw rise from the easy chair. A pang of disappointment, along with a spark of panic, filled her stomach. Was he leaving? He'd made such a big deal about this stupid list and—nope, he was only gone for a few seconds. He strode back into the living room, his jeans undone, his dick at full-salute, and tossed a small foil packet in Matt's direction.

Matt caught the condom skillfully, unwrapped it, and had the thing on before Annabelle knew it. Ryan settled in his chair again, staring at her as she spread her legs for Matt, as she let his friend enter her. Annabelle gasped as Matt filled her to the hilt. This entire experience was surreal. Surreal but unbelievably hot. Made hotter by the fact that Ryan sat a few feet away, watching her with another guy on top of her, listening to her moans and the sound of Matt's flesh slapping against hers.

"How do you like it?" Matt asked, brushing his lips over hers in a fleeting kiss. "Slow, fast, rough...I'm yours to please, Annie."

She swallowed, aimlessly pushing up him with her lower body. "Anything. Do anything," she squeezed out.

He grinned, then latched his mouth on hers, kissing her senseless as he pounded into her with his cock. She wrapped her arms around his strong, corded neck, holding on to him while he drove into her, again and again, but she kept her eyes open. Kept her eyes on Ryan. Pleasure began to rise in her belly, ripples of climax gathering and coiling tight, waiting to be released.

“More,” she begged, lifting her ass to take him in deeper.

“Like this,” Matt rasped, slamming into her harder.

“God...yes...like that...”

Each word was a struggle. Every muscle in her body was taut, burning with anticipation. Matt reached for one of her legs, lifting it up to his shoulder, and suddenly he was hitting a spot deep inside her that made her cry out in delight. And through it all, Ryan just watched. His blue eyes glimmering with heat, his fist tight around his cock.

Annabelle couldn't take it anymore. It felt too good, too...good...the tension in her body snapped, a powerful orgasm exploding inside her and sizzling through each and every nerve ending. “That's it, darlin', come for me,” Matt said hoarsely, moving even faster. His features tightened, his green eyes a bottomless pool of pleasure, and then he let go too, his groans matching Annabelle's as they came together.

When she finally crashed down to Earth, she found both Matt and Ryan grinning at her. And Ryan had climaxed too, wiping his stomach up with a tissue, she noticed with an odd burst of giddiness. He saw her watching, and laughed softly. “Couldn't help myself,” he confessed.

She returned the laugh, though hers was kind of shaky. She was still stunned by what just happened. Matt gently climbed off her, his impressive chest glossy with perspiration, his mouth sporting a crooked grin. “That was...unexpected,” he finally said, starting to laugh too.

Annabelle felt strangely modest as she found her shorts and top and hurriedly got dressed. “Um, yeah...so...” her voice trailed off. What did one say in these situations anyway? *Thanks for doing me, Matt? It was nice to meet you?*

Fortunately, Ryan knew exactly what to say. “So, Rambo one or Rambo two?”

“I can't believe I did that,” Annabelle murmured several hours later, as the two of them settled under the covers of Christina's bed.

Ryan hid a smile. He was still surprised too, though from the moment he'd met her, he'd known Annabelle possessed a wild side. What did surprise him was the way he'd felt while watching his best friend screw her brains out. It hadn't been jealousy, per se. More like...protectiveness. Matt had the tendency to be rough, and Annabelle had looked so small and vulnerable lying there. For a moment Ryan had been tempted to whisk her in his arms and tell Matt to back off, but in the end he let it happen. Annabelle needed to have fun, to let loose and realize that sex didn't have to be so boring. He wanted to show her how good it could be when you let go. He suspected her ex didn't let go much. The guy sounded like a total douchebag, in fact.

“You had fun, no?” he teased.

She snuggled closer, making a contented sound. “Yeah, but this is more fun. I like sleeping with you.”

“Me too,” he said, surprised by how much he meant those words. He *did* like it, though, holding her in his arms, listening to her soft breathing, feeling her warm breath against his bare chest.

“Ryan, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why did you join the Navy?” She nestled her head against his shoulder. “I mean, you’re obviously in awesome physical shape, but it’s weird, I can’t see you taking orders. You’re so impulsive and kind of wild, and the military is so strict. I can’t picture you following the rules.”

“Why did I join the Navy...” he echoed, letting his voice trail. “Honestly? I just wanted to get the fuck away from my parents.”

“Bad childhood?” she said, sounding sympathetic.

“You could say that.” He let out a heavy breath. “Neither of them wanted me, I was a total accident, and the two of them hated each other. I don’t even know why they’re still married.”

“I’m sure they love you,” she said softly.

“Sometimes I wonder.” He swallowed. “My mother never said a nice word to me, my entire life. She’s stuck in her own miserable world, constantly whining about how terrible her life ended up. My dad just yells a lot. He never beat either of us, but I swear, sometimes I could see him thinking about it, just kicking the shit out of her so she’d stop complaining.”

Annabelle sounded horrified. “That’s awful, Ryan.”

He shrugged, and the movement sent a strand of her brown hair onto his chin. He grasped the lock of hair between his fingers, twining it gently. “It wasn’t that bad. I was your typical troublemaker as a kid, and I tried to be out of the house whenever I could. And when I was there, I learned to ignore all the yelling and bitching and drinking. We were dirt-poor, too, and kids at school constantly made fun of me for showing up in clothes with holes in them or not bringing a lunch. Don’t worry, I used to beat them up whenever they started up, and eventually they knew better.”

A sigh slipped out of his throat. “My grades weren’t that great, so college wasn’t an option—not that we had the money for it anyway—so when I turned eighteen, I enlisted.” He grinned in the darkness. “I’d always loved the water, so I figured the Navy would be the most fun of all the military branches.”

“And you became a SEAL,” she finished. “And now you go all over the world on dangerous assignments and risk getting killed.”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

She lifted her head and met his eyes. “So how does it work? You get a call telling you to pack up and then you leave the country?”

“Pretty much,” he said again. “I’m on leave for three weeks, though, all of us are, so don’t worry, I won’t be getting any late night calls.”

“Unless another one of your friends is having a baby,” she said dryly.

“Jane and Mackenzie are only in their first trimester, so I think we’re safe.”

“I like Jane. She was really cool.”

A wave of discomfort swelled in his gut. Shit. Why had he brought up Jane’s name? Just the sound of it made him cringe a little, mostly because he hated himself for these ridiculous feelings he had for the woman.

“Is something going on with you two?” Annabelle asked, her voice wary.

“Me and Jane? Of course not,” he replied. “She’s marrying my Lieutenant.”

Annabelle was quiet for a moment, and then, sounding very perceptive, she said, “You have a little thing for her, don’t you? I kind of suspected at the hospital, when I saw you talking to her, but I wasn’t sure, not until now anyway.”

“I don’t have a thing for her,” he said quietly. “I *had* a thing for her.”

She propped herself up on her elbow, her brown eyes sparkling with curiosity. “I knew it. Tell me the details.”

He avoided her intrigued eyes. “There aren’t any. I met her when she and Becker first started hooking up, and the two of us went out for drinks when they were kind of broken up. Nothing happened,” he added quickly.

“But you wanted it to happen.” Again, she had that perceptive look on her face.

“Maybe. But it didn’t. And I got over it.” He kept his voice firm, hoping he sounded sincere. He and Annabelle were only having a fling, but he didn’t want to hurt her feelings or anything by admitting he might still have a tiny, teeny thing for a woman who was off-limits.

“Honestly? You’re really over it?”

He met her inquisitive gaze head-on. “Yes.”

She offered a faint smile. “Good.”

He smiled back, enjoying the possessive note in her soft voice. He shifted onto his side so they were face to face, then slowly brought his lips to hers in a long, lazy kiss. Annabelle hooked her leg over his, her warm body curling into his as she kissed him back. And when she slipped his hands between them and encircled his hardening cock, he wasn’t thinking about anyone but Annabelle.

Chapter Six

Okay, so she was in deep trouble. Annabelle sat at the edge of Christina's bed, staring at the cell phone in her hand. For the past five minutes, she'd been debating calling her parents and telling them she couldn't make it for their anniversary dinner, but she knew her mother would kill her if she didn't show up. But going back to San Francisco was the last thing she wanted to do at the moment.

She didn't want to leave Ryan.

And that's why she was in trouble.

When they'd first started seeing each other, she'd told herself it was just temporary, that they were simply acting out a few fantasies, having some really great sex, and eventually she'd head home, go back to her job and look back on her time with him as a fun vacation fling. But deep in her heart she knew it was far from a fling. They'd spent two weeks together, and each day that passed, she only liked him more. He made her laugh. Treated her like she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Put up with her endless sarcasm. Bryce hated her sense of humor—he constantly told her she was too negative. And he hardly ever complimented her. In front of parents, sure, but alone, he often acted like Annabelle was there simply to cater to his needs.

What kind of relationship was that?

Truth of the matter was, she had no desire to see Bryce again. She didn't want to rekindle their relationship, not after the way he'd dumped her so callously. But she knew she'd have to see him when she went home. Her parents were hosting a small but formal dinner party in honor of their thirty-year anniversary, and Bryce would surely be there. He was the CEO of her father's company, after all.

God, she didn't want to face him. What if he was an asshole and brought a date to the dinner? She quickly pushed away the thought. No, Bryce was smart. If he wanted to remain in her father's good graces, he would be on his best behavior tomorrow night.

"Annabelle?"

Ryan's playful voice sounded from the living room. Her heart immediately skipped a beat, as it now did whenever she saw him. He and Matt had gone to see Shelby's baby girl, but Annabelle had opted to stay home. She hadn't wanted to intrude on Shelby and her husband, even though Ryan insisted they wouldn't have minded. Besides, she felt kind of awkward around Matt, ever since the night she had sex with him. For a while she thought he'd act all weird around her, or maybe try to sleep with her again, but he treated her like a good pal and nothing more. She wondered if Ryan had spoken with him and told him it

was a one-time deal. Because for her, it *was* a one-time thing. As great as the sex had been, as attractive as she found Matt, the only man she wanted was Ryan.

Again, trouble.

"I'm in here," she called in response to his shout.

He poked his head in the bedroom doorway a moment later, smiling broadly. "Penny smiled at me today!"

Annabelle rolled her eyes. "She's a week old, it takes like a month for that to happen. It was probably gas."

Ryan looked offended. "Why does everyone keep saying that? I told Garrett he needs to accept it—his baby likes me more than him."

She laughed. "Uh-huh, sure thing."

Ryan flopped down beside her on the bed. "So what do you want to do tonight?" He wiggled his eyebrows. "We only have two more items on the list left."

"And they'll have to wait," she said with a sigh. "I was about to call the airline to make a flight reservation."

"You're leaving?"

The dismayed look on his face brought a smile to her lips. "I'm flying to San Francisco this afternoon. Remember the anniversary party I told you about? But I'll be back tomorrow night, and stay here for another week or two, until Christina gets back."

He relaxed. "Right, I forgot about that. Are you excited to see your folks?"

"Uh, no."

Leaning back on his elbows, he shot her a curious look. "You don't talk about them much. What are they like?"

"Come with me and see for yourself."

The request flew out before she could stop it, surprising them both. What was she thinking? She couldn't bring Ryan home with her. Her parents would flip out. And it would pretty much be like waving a big sign that said "Bryce and I are over!" But they *were* over, and her parents had to accept it sooner or later.

And it *would* be nice, having Ryan along for moral support. Her parents drove her nuts most of the time.

"Are you serious?" Ryan said, raising one brow.

"Yeah, I guess I am." She shifted, lying down next to him and resting her head on his chest. "Sometimes I hate going home. My parents can be really difficult."

"They can't be as difficult as mine. Unless they're both raging alcoholics too," Ryan said dryly.

"No, not alcoholics. Just rich snobs."

“How rich?”

Discomfort rose up her chest. “My dad owns the largest shipping company in the country.” She sighed. “Last year for my mother’s birthday, he bought her an island in the Mediterranean.”

“Liar.”

“I wish I was lying.”

Ryan whistled softly. “Wow. So that rich, huh?”

“Yep.” She hesitated, then decided to tell him. “And for the sake of full disclosure here, you should know that my ex runs my dad’s company, and my parents still think we’re getting married.”

His chest rumbled beneath her ear as he laughed. “Gee, I can’t wait to go home with you, Annie. It sounds like it’ll be a blast.”

“You don’t have to go,” she said quickly. “I’ll manage.”

Ryan rolled her over, so that she was on her back and he was leaning above her. His blue eyes searched her face, questioning, tender. “Do you want me to go home with you, Annabelle?”

She swallowed. “Yes,” she finally admitted.

“Then let’s call the airline.”

Okay, so he was in deep trouble. Ryan tried not to react as he slid into the plush leather backseat of the limousine Annabelle’s parents had sent for them. She’d called them with their flight information, and although she insisted they could take a cab to the Holmes house, Gregory and Sandra Holmes refused to be talked out of sending her a car. Yeah, some car.

He barely noticed the scenery whizzing past them outside, he was too busy staring at all the ridiculous luxuries in the back of the limo, like the two separate phone lines, the small plasma TV screen, oh, and the mini fridge. He’d been to the Bay Area a few times in his life, once to visit his grandmother, who’d lived there for a few years before moving to Florida, and once with some of the guys in his training class when he’d first joined the Navy. But he had a feeling Annabelle’s San Francisco was a lot different than the one he’d experienced.

He still wasn’t certain why he’d agreed to come with her. Never in his life had he met a girl’s family. Never. And Annabelle had already warned him that one, her parents wouldn’t be thrilled to see him, and two, her ex-fiancé would be there. Yet for some stupid reason, he’d come along anyway.

Okay, maybe not for a stupid reason. He’d come for Annabelle. Because she’d looked so panicked at the thought of coming home alone and facing Bryce, and Ryan hated seeing her in any kind of distress.

Which meant he was in trouble.

Usually, when he started caring too much about a woman, he cut and ran. He didn’t want a relationship—he’d seen firsthand how relationships destroyed people. His parents hated each other, they

both drank themselves into a stupor just to tolerate each other's company. Why would he ever want to put himself in that position? Yeah, maybe all relationships didn't end up like his parents', but why take the risk?

And now here he was, sitting in a limo on the way to Annabelle's parents' home, which was a total relationship move.

"We're almost there," Annabelle said, sounding unenthused as she gestured out the window.

Ryan followed her pointed finger, his eyes widening as the limo entered a gorgeous neighborhood overlooking the bay. Annabelle's folks lived in Pacific Heights, an area filled with ritzy shops and stately homes that had survived the earthquake and fire of 1906. The entire area screamed *money*, and as the limo slowed in front of an enormous mansion that looked like a museum, Ryan knew he was officially out of his element.

Annabelle thanked the driver, while a speechless Ryan grabbed his overnight bag and followed her out of the limo. She hadn't bothered to pack, saying all her "fancy" clothes were here at the house she'd grown up in. Now, Ryan looked at that house, unable to fathom the colossal palace before him. It was made of white limestone, and resembled a French chateau, with a pillared entrance and a million gleaming windows.

"Holy shit," he muttered under his breath.

"Don't let the house intimidate you," Annabelle said. Then she made a face. "My parents are the ones you should be scared of."

And what do you know, she was absolutely right. A housekeeper wearing a black dress and white apron let them in at the massive front doors, and as they stepped onto the marble floor in the front parlor, a tall brunette wearing a cocktail dress and pearls floated down a winding staircase.

She was obviously Annabelle's mother; the resemblance was uncanny. Only while her daughter's eyes were full of fire and mischief, Sandra Holmes' gaze was cool and appraising.

"Thank heavens you're here," Sandra said in a shrill voice, making no move to hug or kiss her daughter. "Dinner starts in an hour. You need to—" Annabelle's mother wrinkled her nose in distaste, suddenly noticing Ryan. "And who might this be?"

"Mom, this is Ryan Evans, a friend of mine from San Diego." Annabelle's voice was sugary-sweet as she added, "I hope you don't mind, but I invited him to dinner."

It was amazing—although Sandra's expression never changed, Ryan could practically feel an ice-cold wave of horror pour out of the woman and slam into him. Oh, she totally minded, and he suddenly wished he could disappear into a puff of smoke. Damn it. Why the hell did he offer to come here?

"Oh, how nice." Sandra's voice was polite, but the fury under the surface was unmistakable. She flicked her gaze to the maid hovering discreetly nearby. "Magdalena, why don't you show Mr. Evans up to one of the guest rooms so he can freshen up and get ready for dinner. I'd like a word with my daughter."

Ryan reluctantly followed the dark-haired maid up the spiral staircase, forcing his jaw to stay closed as he stared at his surroundings. Pieces of art, mostly oil paintings, hung on the cream-colored walls in the hallway, and he could have sworn he saw one that looked a hell of a lot like one of the Monets he'd seen in a book once. He followed the maid, and they passed nearly a dozen doors before she paused in front of one and opened it for him. "Right this way, sir," she said politely.

"How many rooms does this place have?" he asked curiously.

"Twenty-eight," she said in a brisk voice. "And fifteen bathrooms." Magdalena pointed to a door a few feet away. "The restroom is in there. Enjoy your visit, sir."

After the maid left, Ryan looked around the guest room in wonder. It was twice the size of his and Matt's living room, with a huge bed, a gleaming hardwood floor and a large armoire near the window that looked like it belonged in Queen Elizabeth's bedroom. *It's just a fucking house*, a little voice said. *Relax*.

Okay, he could relax. Taking a breath, Ryan headed into the bathroom and splashed some water on his face. He wished Annabelle would hurry the hell up and come find him, because he had no clue how to find his way back downstairs. The second floor was a freaking maze.

Fortunately, he heard footsteps just as he left the bathroom and a moment later, Annabelle bounded in the room, looking extremely frustrated. "Let me guess," Ryan quipped. "She's not happy."

"Not happy at all," Annabelle confirmed. "But she's also the best actress on the planet, so don't worry, she'll pretend to adore you during dinner."

He laughed. "I can't wait."

Annabelle stepped closer and lifted her arms, wrapping them around his neck. "Seriously, though, don't worry," she said softly. "My parents are all bark and no bite. And I'm so happy you came here with me. My mom just told me Bryce and his parents will be here in an hour."

"Do your families know you broke up yet?"

She nodded. "Apparently Bryce told them last week. My mother didn't even call me to find out what happened."

"Maybe she thinks it won't last."

"Well, she'll be wrong." Annabelle stood up on her tip-toes and brushed her lips over his. "I have no interest in getting back together with that jerk."

Ryan kissed her back, rubbing the small of her back then pulling her closer. His groin tightened, desire rising inside him, and he forced himself to break the kiss. He needed to bring his A-game tonight, to stay alert, and Annabelle was too damn distracting sometimes.

"I wish you'd told them I was coming," he said ruefully. "I feel like a party crasher."

"You're my date," Annabelle said firmly. "And they're just going to have to deal with the fact that I want to be with you."

Ryan's heart nearly stopped, then sped up in sharp beats. "You want to be with me?" he echoed. A pang of discomfort filled his body, along with a strange jolt of pleasure. He didn't know how to react to her confession. He should've been scared shitless. He didn't do relationships, never had. So why wasn't he scared? And why were the words *I want to be with you too* biting at his lips?

"I haven't left your side in two weeks," Annabelle said, oblivious to his distress. "Doesn't that say something?"

"It says...a lot." He swallowed, then took a step backwards. "I think that suit you made me pack isn't fancy enough, babe. Last time I wore it was to Garrett's wedding, but that was a casual beach thing."

"It's fine," she assured him. Her eyes twinkled. "I'll just rip it off you tonight anyway."

He looked around the extravagant room. "I won't have to sleep here alone, will I?"

"Don't fret, I'll sneak in here later to keep you company." Annabelle headed for the door. "I'm going to get dressed. So should you. I'll come back and get you in twenty minutes?"

He nodded, then watched her go, suddenly longing for his bachelor pad in San Diego. Fuck. This was so not his scene. He'd grown up in the slums of LA, in a seedy two-bedroom apartment across the street from a liquor store that got robbed at least twice a week. His parents were pathetic excuses for human beings, and his childhood was one he wanted nothing more than to forget. Sure, his life was great now. He'd joined the Navy, found a family with the guys on his team, had his own place. But that didn't mean he belonged here, with Annabelle's wealthy-ass parents in their wealthy-ass castle.

Shit, would there be ten kinds of silverware at the dinner table tonight? He suddenly felt like throwing up.

It was a relief when Annabelle finally returned a half an hour later, taking his breath away in a long, emerald-green dress. The neckline was modest, but the skirt had a slit that revealed a lot of thigh. Her hair was swept up in a complicated-looking updo, she wore very little make-up, and her only piece of jewelry was a sparkling diamond pendant nestled in her cleavage.

"You look like a princess," he said hoarsely.

She grinned. "Does that make you my prince?"

He glanced down at his two-hundred-dollar suit, a suit that would probably make most women all mushy and hot, but would in no way impress Annabelle's parents. "A prince I am not," he sighed.

"Cheer up. It's just dinner, and tomorrow we can explore the city before we fly back to San Diego." She mimicked the words he constantly tossed her way. "It'll be fun."

"Whatever you say," he said noncommittally, all the while knowing that what awaited them downstairs would not, in any way, shape or form, be fun.

And he wasn't wrong. Annabelle's parents met them in the sitting room, which looked exactly like a living room but rich people were funny that way. Annabelle's dad was a commanding man with a head of salt-and-pepper hair and deep wrinkles around his mouth, probably because all he did was frown. He

frowned when Annabelle introduced them, frowned when Ryan shook his hand, frowned when he offered him a drink. Neither Sandra or Gregory spoke to him during the fifteen minutes the four of them spent in the sitting room, so when Gregory pulled him aside after Sandra announced it was time to congregate in the dining room, Ryan was thoroughly surprised.

“I’d like a word with you, if you don’t mind,” Gregory said cordially.

Ryan glanced at Annabelle, who offered a tiny shrug. So he said, “Yes, sir” and followed the older man, while the two women headed off, Annabelle’s mom chattering on about the new silverware she’d ordered from Paris.

Gregory led him into a large study with oak-paneled walls and an expensive burgundy carpet. There was a huge stone fireplace on one side of the room, with two plush chairs in front of it. “Have a seat,” Mr. Holmes said graciously, gesturing to one of the chairs.

Ryan didn’t want to sit, but he did, and a moment later Annabelle’s dad took the seat across from him. The older man unbuttoned his pristine navy-blue suit jacket, then clasped his hands in his lap and said, “How did you meet my daughter?”

Ryan gulped. “Annabelle told you in the other room, sir. She’s staying in my building.”

Gregory frowned. “And what exactly is the nature of your relationship, Mr. Evans?”

He suddenly felt like he was in the interrogation room at a police station. He swallowed again, his mouth too dry to work. “We’re, uh, seeing each other, I guess.”

Jeez, why the hell was he so intimidated by this man? He was a Navy SEAL, for fuck’s sake. He was good under pressure, and more than used to getting yelled at. Yet despite his training and background, he found himself extremely uneasy around Annabelle’s dad.

“Are you aware that my daughter is engaged to be married?” Gregory asked coldly.

“I was under the impression the engagement is off, sir.”

“For the moment, perhaps, but there is no doubt in my mind that my daughter will marry Bryce Worthington.” Another frown, this one deeper. “This marriage was decided on when Annabelle was a child, and Bryce is a worthy match for her.”

Ryan bristled. All right, he saw where this was going. Bryce was worthy, Ryan was not. Well, fuck that.

“I have to disagree,” he said politely. “Annabelle was unhappy with Bryce.”

Gregory smirked. “And she’s happy with you?”

“Yes, sir, she is.”

“What is it you do again?” Gregory asked, as if Ryan hadn’t just told him five minutes ago in the sitting room.

“I’m in the Navy,” he answered through clenched teeth.

“Right, the Navy. I take that to mean you travel frequently, sometimes at a moment’s notice?”

“Sometimes,” he said warily.

“Then how do you expect to provide my daughter with a stable, comfortable life?”

“With all due respect, Mr. Holmes, I’ve only known your daughter two weeks. We’re not really at the point where we’re discussing our future.”

Frown number three made an appearance. “Well, you see, I *am* thinking about the future. My daughter deserves a man who can support her, who can provide her with the life to which she’s accustomed, and I don’t believe that man is you. Frankly, young man, I don’t believe you are good enough for my daughter.” Gregory leaned forward, a calculated glint in his brown eyes, the same shade of brown as his daughter’s. “So, with that said, let’s get down to business. How much?”

Ryan faltered. “What?”

“*How much*, Mr. Evans?”

Was this some kind of code? He had no fucking idea what this man was talking about, and he was tempted to unleash a right hook in the older man’s jaw. Nobody had ever spoken to Ryan this way, in such a chilly, disgusted voice, as if he were nothing more than dog shit under the guy’s shoe. Even his drill sergeant in the Navy had been nicer than this, and that guy had been a total dick.

Gregory sighed. “How much will it cost me for you to say goodbye to my daughter and walk out the door right now?”

It finally dawned on Ryan. The son of a bitch was trying to bribe him. *Bribe* him. Who the hell did this man think he was, the Godfather?

“Nothing.” His jaw was so stiff he could barely spit out the word. “It will cost you nothing, because I’m not going anywhere.”

Gregory’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t be difficult, son. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“I’m not your son,” Ryan said coldly. He slowly rose to his feet. His hands were icy with rage, and he pressed them to his sides, resisting the urge to take his fists and pummel the other man’s jaw. “I think we’re done here.”

As if on cue, a soft knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” Gregory barked.

Magdalena the maid appeared in the doorway. “Mr. Holmes, the Worthingtons have arrived, along with Mr. Kildaire and his guest.”

“Make sure everyone is seated correctly,” Gregory said briskly. “And send young Mr. Worthington in here, please.” He glanced at Ryan. “Mr. Evans was just leaving. Take him to the dining room.”

Ryan shot Annabelle’s dad an overly bright smile. “Great chat, sir. Thanks so much for inviting me to dinner.” He made for the door. “Oh, and happy anniversary, by the way.”

The moment he was out of the study, Ryan discreetly released the breath he'd been holding, forcing his body to relax. Yet a gust of rage continued blowing inside him. The fucking nerve of that man. Did Annabelle know what a bastard her father was? Should he tell her?

Trying to steady his breathing, he trailed after the maid. The sound of voices drifted from the dining room, and he heard Annabelle laugh, not quite genuine but still melodic. He slowly unclenched his fists and tried to paste on a smile. He had to get through this dinner. He had to do it for her.

"Did Dad give you a hard time?" Annabelle asked quietly when he approached her.

"No, just the usual 'what-are-your-intentions' chat," he said in a light tone.

She slipped her hand into his, gently stroking his fingers. "I'm sorry."

So was he. He wished he could tell her what her father had just tried to do, but now was neither the time nor the place. The dining room was as enormous as every other room in the house, boasting a table that could easily seat fifty. Tonight it was a small party, only the Holmeses, the Worthingtons, who looked like complete pricks, and Joe Kildaire, a wealthy investment something-or-other whose date looked like she'd had at least thirty-five plastic surgeries.

Fuck, what was he *doing* here?

He snuck a sidelong glance at Annabelle, admiring her gorgeous profile, but not even the sight of her could dim his panic. He looked around the room, from the gleaming crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling to the perfectly set table with an endless amount of silverware and wine glasses.

It didn't take a genius to figure out he didn't belong here.

And he never would.

Chapter Seven

Ryan looked miserable. Annabelle felt terrible as she watched him pick at the filet mignon on his plate, his dark head bent slightly. He'd barely said a word since his talk with her dad, and she could tell he felt like an outsider as the guests chatted with her parents at the dinner table. He'd only raised his head a few times since sitting down, each time to send a scowl in Bryce's direction.

Annabelle wanted to scowl too. Bryce had strolled into the dining room with her father, pulling her into his arms for a warm hug as if nothing had happened between them. She had to admit, he did look good in his pin-striped black suit, with his blond hair perfectly cut. His chiseled features focused on her every few seconds, and he kept shooting her endearing little smiles. She had no idea what he was up to, but she didn't like it, whatever it was.

"So, are you enjoying your vacation, Annabelle?" Bryce asked pleasantly, lifting his wine glass to his lips and taking a long sip.

"Yes, San Diego is beautiful," she replied in a polite voice.

"Not as beautiful as you look tonight, I'm sure," he teased.

She noticed her parents exchange a pleased look. She stifled a sigh. Why was Bryce acting like Mr. Charming all of a sudden? He'd dumped her, for Pete's sake.

The dinner dragged on. Bryce continued to flirt with her, Ryan continued to sulk, and Annabelle's parents chatted with the Worthingtons and Kildaires as if nothing was out of sorts. By the time the small catering staff Sandra Holmes had hired cleared the dinner plates and brought dessert out, Annabelle was ready to tear her hair out. She tried to draw Ryan out of his shell, but he barely paid any attention to her.

His blue eyes became instantly alert, though, when Bryce suddenly cleared his throat and stood up. "All right, I think it's time to put an end to all the tension," he said cheerfully, holding the stem of his wine glass.

The adults at the table looked intrigued.

"Sandra, Greg, I know you were both upset to hear that Annabelle and I broke up," he said to her parents, "but I want you both to know that Annabelle and I have seen the error of our ways."

Huh?

Beaming, Bryce went on. "I'm happy to announce that the wedding is back on."

As Annabelle's mother clapped her hands together in delight, Bryce walked around the table to where Annabelle was sitting and reached for her hand. A sick feeling rose up her chest, settling into a lump in the back of her throat. What the *hell* was he doing?

"Stand up, sweetheart," Bryce urged. "Let's toast to our happiness."

"What? No, Bryce, this is not—"

Without letting her finish, he took her arm and pretty much forced her to her feet. Annabelle's gaze sought out Ryan's, but he refused to meet her eyes. His broad shoulders were as stiff as a board and she noticed a muscle in his jaw twitching. Oh God. This was a disaster.

She opened her mouth to object again, but Bryce broke out in a long, bullshit toast about happiness and marriage, and everyone at the table raised their glasses, clinking them together in celebration. Annabelle had never seen her parents look happier, and she could have sworn she saw a flicker of satisfaction in her father's eyes, as if he had known this was coming. Bryce's parents got up and hugged her, expressing their joy that the two "children" were still getting married.

Bryce smiled warmly, then whispered close to her ear. "You forgive me for all those things I said, right, sweetheart? You know I didn't mean them."

Her lips tightened. Trying to control her anger, she whispered back, "I don't know what the hell you're up to, Bryce, but I am not going to—"

The words died in her throat when she heard Ryan's chair scrape against the parquet floor. Without a word or a look in her direction, he walked out of the dining room.

Panic filled her body. "Ryan—" she called, but Bryce tightened his grip on her hand.

"Let him go. This is obviously very awkward for him, us getting back together," Bryce said smoothly.

"We are *not* getting back together," she hissed out. Then she shrugged his hand off her arm and ran out of the dining room after Ryan.

She caught up to him just as he reached the front door. "Wait," she said breathlessly. "Please, Ryan, don't go."

Very slowly, he turned to face her, his blue eyes utterly expressionless. "Do you seriously think I'm going to stay?"

"Bryce and I are not back together," she blurted out. "I don't know what the hell he's up to, but I promise you, Ryan, I am not marrying Bryce."

He didn't answer.

Annabelle stepped toward him, cupping his chin with her hands. "Please don't go. Or at least wait for me to change and I'll go with you, okay?"

Weariness etched into his features. Sighing, he covered her hands with his and very gently removed them from his face. "You can't go with me," he finally said, his voice rough.

She wrinkled her nose. "Why the hell not? Trust me, the last place I want to be right now is here. I just want to throttle Bryce for what he did back there. He knows damn well we're not back together."

"Look, it doesn't matter." There was a chord of frustration in his voice.

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?"

He paused for a few long beats, then let out a heavy breath. "You should probably go back to Bryce anyway."

Ice hardened her veins. "Pardon me?"

"This isn't really my scene, babe." He shrugged, then reached up to loosen his tie. "It's a little too much for me, actually."

"What exactly are you saying?"

"I'm saying I don't belong here." He tore off his tie and shoved it in the pocket of his black trousers. His voice was suddenly cool, careless. "We were just having some fun, Annabelle. I didn't sign up for family weekends and drama and all that crap."

Her hands trembled. "You offered to come home with me."

"Yeah, and it was a big fucking mistake, okay?" He raked one hand through his dark hair. "Let's just make this easy, babe. We spent a couple of weeks together, had a good time, but now it's time to end it."

"End it," she repeated dully.

"Yes. Because honestly? The fun's over for me."

The cruelty of that comment hit her hard. Her chest felt like someone had sliced it open with a knife, and at that moment, she realized just how much she cared about this man. Damn it, she'd fallen in love with him. Her heart squeezed in pain and humiliation. God, she was so stupid.

"Can I ask you something?" she asked quietly, forcing herself to meet his eyes. "Do you even feel *anything* for me?"

He hesitated, and her heart ached again.

"Do you?" she demanded.

Ryan's gaze didn't waver as he gave a slight shake of the head. "No," he finally admitted.

Tears pricked her eyelids. She quickly blinked them back. Anger joined the sorrow swimming in her gut, and she narrowed her eyes at him, unable to accept what he'd just said. "You're lying. You do have feelings for me."

"You turn me on, sure," he said callously. "But I don't love you, if that's what you're getting at." He grimaced. "Fuck, we both know I'm in love with someone else."

The knife in her heart twisted several more times, leaving her chest raw and empty. "Jane," she said softly.

"Yes." He averted his eyes. "It's always been her, all right?"

"Were you using me to try and get over her?"

He nodded.

The tears returned, this time doing more than stinging her eyes. They streamed down her cheeks and she viciously swiped at them with the back of her hand. She took a deep breath. "Go then. You obviously don't want to be here, and frankly, I don't want you here either, so just go, Ryan."

His blue eyes flickered with regret. "I'm sorry, Annabelle."

"Yeah, me too," she said bitterly.

He started to reach for her, then seemed to change his mind. "It was fun at least, no?"

Anger ignited in her body. "Yeah, loads of fun," she answered darkly. "Now do me a favor, Ryan, and get the hell out of my house."

It was past midnight when Ryan let himself into his apartment, his suit rumpled from the flight and his heart battered from everything he had put it through tonight. *You did the right thing*, the voice in his head said, but he didn't feel reassured. Had he done the right thing? He couldn't get the image of Annabelle's tears out of his mind, and it killed him knowing that he'd hurt her.

But she would be better off in the long run, right? He didn't belong in her world, and he would never fit in to that wealthy lifestyle of hers. Her father had made that pretty damn clear. Annabelle would be fine. She'd probably get back together with that asshole Bryce, move into a big mansion, and have a luxurious life. He was sparing her the embarrassment of being with some military bum who made in a year what her father probably earned in a week.

You are not good enough for my daughter.

Gregory Holmes's harsh words continued to buzz in his brain. He groaned softly, then pulled his tie from his pocket and hurled it across the room. He stalked into his bedroom, where he tore off his suit and slid into bed, naked and pissed off. The moment his head hit the pillow, the scent of orange blossoms filled his nostrils, which only made him angrier. Damn Annabelle and her snobby parents and her sexy orange blossom smell and all that sexy sarcasm. He groaned again, the sound muffled by the pillow, and then in an uncharacteristic burst of fury, he threw the pillow across the room. The damn thing hit the stack of DVDs atop his dresser, sending the pile crashing to the floor.

With the instincts of a well-trained Navy SEAL, Matt suddenly appeared in the doorway, looking alert and urgent. "What happened?" he demanded.

Ryan let out a hysterical laugh. "Nothing. DVDs fell, that's all. Sorry if I woke you."

Matt studied him, a worried expression filling his face. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Nothing," he said again.

"You have crazy eyes, man. The same look you had on your face during that last gig in Afghanistan." Matt furrowed his brows. "Weren't you supposed to come back from San Francisco tomorrow night?"

"I left early." Then he thought, to hell with it, and added, "I broke up with Annabelle."

Matt's eyes widened. "What? Why the hell did you do that? We both know you're crazy about her."

He smothered a sigh. "I'm crazy about Jane," he corrected.

His friend went silent for a moment, confusion practically radiating from his body. "No, you're not." A shrewd glint entered Matt's eyes. "You don't have that lovelorn little boy look on your face anymore when you say her name."

"Fuck. Just mind your own business, O'Connor. Annabelle and I are over, and that's that." Sarcasm dripped from his tone. "If you want her around that badly, you date her."

Matt raised both eyebrows. "Wow."

"Wow what?" he grumbled.

"You're in love with her."

Ryan gritted his teeth. "Would you go back to your room already? I'm trying to sleep here."

"No, you're not. You're trying to sulk."

"Fuck off, Matt. Just leave this alone."

Matt shook his head, but rather than pressing the subject, he simply walked away. A moment later, Ryan heard Matt's bedroom door shut with a soft click.

Damn it. Matt was wrong. He wasn't in love with Annabelle. He couldn't be. Two weeks, that's all they'd spent together. Had some sex, shared some laughs—that wasn't love.

Was it?

He settled back in his bed, staring up at the ceiling in dismay. No, he couldn't love her. And he just prayed that Matt really would leave it alone. He didn't need his friend harassing him about this break-up, if you could even call it that, and he certainly didn't want to think about Annabelle anymore. It was over. Done. Better off forgotten.

But apparently the words *leave it alone* weren't in his best friend's vocabulary, because when Ryan walked into the kitchen the next morning after a sleepless night of tossing and turning, he found none other than Jane sitting on one of the stools in front of the narrow counter. She wore a turquoise sundress, her red hair hung in a loose braid down her back, and for the first time in a long time, he didn't feel a burst of longing when he saw her.

"So how'd you fuck it up?" she asked when she saw him, cutting right to the chase.

He ignored the question, heading for the fridge. He pulled out a jug of orange juice, poured himself a cup, then leaned against the sink as he took a deep swig of juice. "Don't you have better things to do than bug me at—" he glanced at the clock on the microwave, "—seven o'clock in the morning?"

"Nope," she replied breezily.

He drained his glass and dropped it in the sink with a clink. "Did O'Connor call you?"

“Yep.” Her blue eyes searched his face. “He said you dumped Annabelle and asked me to come over to slap some sense into you.”

“Trust me, ending it made perfect sense,” he muttered under his breath.

“I don’t believe you.” Her chin jutted out in its usual stubborn pose. “Annabelle is awesome. She’s funny and smart and it was obvious you two really hit it off. So how on earth does it make sense to just dump her like a piece of—”

“Her father tried to bribe me to get out of her life,” he cut in, his voice hard.

Jane’s jaw fell open. For once in her life, she was actually speechless, and Ryan could see her brain working overtime, trying to figure that one out.

“No way,” she finally said, sounding horrified.

“Yes way.”

Hopping off the stool, Jane marched over to him, took his hand and dragged him into the living room, where she made him sit on the couch. She flopped down beside him and said, “Tell me everything.”

So he did. He told her about the trip to San Francisco, about the goddamn palace Annabelle’s parents lived in. The way her mother had looked down her nose at him, the fun chat with Annabelle’s dad. He even threw in Bryce’s surprise the-wedding-is-back-on announcement, just for kicks. When he finished, Jane looked utterly amazed.

“That sounds...terrible.”

“It was,” he confirmed. “Really awkwardly terrible. Now do you see why I ended it?”

She looked at him in disbelief. “No, I don’t, actually. When the hell did you become a coward?”

His skin prickled with offense. “I’m not a coward.”

“Yes, you are. You felt out of your league, got all insecure, and took off like a scared little bunny rabbit.” She softened her tone. “Look, I know you didn’t have the most luxurious of upbringings, and I’m sure being around all those rich people was overwhelming, but come on, Ryan, you’re better than that. You’re better than *them*, and you should have fought for her instead of letting her father scare you off.”

Ryan suddenly regretted ever telling Jane about his childhood. He should have known she wouldn’t understand. She came from a great family, and even if she hadn’t, she seemed to fit in wherever she went. He could see Jane getting along splendidly with Annabelle’s snotty parents, that was just the kind of person she was. But him? He would never fit in with those snobs.

“I just don’t get how Annabelle didn’t see through your bullshit break-up speech.” Jane shook her head in bewilderment. “She seemed pretty sharp when I met her at the hospital.”

Guilt swarmed his gut as he remembered what he’d said to Annabelle. *It’s always been her*. He quickly avoided Jane’s eyes, scared she might read his mind, which of course she did.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” she said with a sigh.

“No,” he lied.

“What the hell did you tell her to get her to believe your crap, Ryan?”

He stared at some random point behind her head, determined not to meet those keen blue eyes. “Nothing.”

“Ryan.”

“Jane.”

He nearly jumped when he felt her hands on his chin. She forced him to look at her, her hands warm against his jaw. “What did you say to her?” she asked sternly.

Swallowing, Ryan met her gaze head-on. “I told her I was in love with you.”

She let out a startled expletive. “For God’s sake, Ryan, why the *hell* would you—” She stopped abruptly, searching his expression. “Oh fuck, you actually believe you meant it.”

Irritation climbed up his body, hardening his chest. “Maybe I did mean it.”

Jane shook her head, the sympathy in her eyes making him wince. Great, she felt sorry for him. How fucking wonderful. “I know we had a little flirtation going when Beck and I broke up all those months ago, but come on, Ry, you’re not in love with me.”

“Maybe I am,” he said roughly.

“No,” she disagreed. “Maybe you think you are, because I’m the first woman you’ve ever opened up to, but we’re best friends and nothing more. Deep down, you have to know that—”

He kissed her. He hadn’t planned on doing it, didn’t think about the consequences either. One second he was looking into her gorgeous blue eyes and the next he was covering her mouth with his. He’d fantasized about this moment for months, wondered how it would feel, how she would taste, but the moment his lips met hers, reality crashed into him like a tidal wave.

“Fuck,” he said hoarsely, quickly breaking the lip contact. He averted his eyes again, ashamed of what he’d just done. He wanted to slap himself, not just for forcing a lip-lock on his best friend, but because he knew now, with total certainty, that he’d just kissed a woman who was the equivalent of a sister he didn’t have.

A woman who rewarded the unwanted contact with an angry scowl. “What. The. Fuck,” she snapped.

“I’m sorry.” He sucked in a ragged breath, cringing when she scooted to the other end of the couch. “I thought—shit, Jane. That was a crappy thing to do.”

“Beyond crappy,” she grumbled. Then, to his extreme surprise, she started to laugh. “Felt rather incestuous, no?”

A laugh slipped out of his own throat. “Uh, to say the least. I’m sorry,” he said again.

Jane’s laughter died, replaced by a long sigh. “I forgive you.” She paused. “Now that you’ve gotten that out of your system, can you please get on a plane back to San Francisco and win back the woman you *actually* love?”

He hesitated, the idea so tempting he nearly launched himself at the phone to call the airline. But he reined in the futile urge. “No,” he finally said.

“Why not?” She sounded frazzled.

“Because this doesn’t change anything. Maybe I misunderstood my feelings for you, but I know exactly where I stand with Annabelle’s family. Her dad tried to pay me off, for fuck’s sake.”

“Well, screw him,” Jane retorted. “You love Annabelle, not her dad.”

“I don’t belong in her life, Jane,” he said softly.

She sighed again, slowly sliding back toward him. This time when she touched his cheek, her fingers were gentle. “Then you know what that makes you, Ry?”

“What?” he asked hoarsely.

She dropped her hand, the disappointment on her face unmistakable. “It makes you a goddamn fool.”

Chapter Eight

Annabelle spent the morning in her childhood bedroom, trying to figure out what the heck to do. Her heart felt like someone had smashed it with a hammer, and she still couldn't believe what a fool she'd been, actually believing that she and Ryan had more than a fling going. Somehow, during their two weeks together, she'd fallen for him.

But he hadn't fallen for her.

She sat down at the edge of the four-poster bed, looking around the bedroom in dismay. Decorated in shades of cream and yellow, the room boasted an antique dresser, a huge desk built into the wall, and a walk-in closet that was bigger than Christina's bedroom back in San Diego. Everything was neat and pristine—her mother didn't allow clutter—and, growing up, Annabelle had hated this perfect, impersonal room.

She was probably going to have to move back in here, until she found a place of her own, and she was not looking forward to being under the same roof as her parents again. But what choice did she have? No matter what Bryce said, she was not going to marry him. No matter how things had ended with Ryan, her time with him had shown her that she didn't want to be with Bryce. She wanted a man who gave a damn about her, who made her feel beautiful and special, who made her laugh and appreciated her, and Bryce Worthington was not that man.

She still didn't know why he'd dropped that bomb at the dinner table last night, without even speaking to her about it. After Ryan left, she'd gone up to her room and locked the door, refusing to talk to anyone, and she'd heard Bryce and his parents leaving, while he assured everyone that his fiancée was just a little "overwhelmed". Overwhelmed, her ass. Who did he think he was, telling everyone they were back together out of the blue like that?

A sharp knock rapped on her door, and she lifted her head in irritation. "Yes?" she called.

"Miss Holmes," came Magdalena's polite voice, "Mr. Worthington is here to see you."

She stifled a groan. Great. Bryce was back, no doubt to try and talk her into marrying him. For a moment she wanted to tell the housekeeper to kick him out, but then she realized this was the perfect opportunity to set things straight.

"Have him wait in the den," she replied. "I'll be down in a minute."

As Magdalena's footsteps retreated down the hall, Annabelle walked into her private bath and checked her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes looked a little red, probably from all the crying she'd done

after Ryan left. She turned on the faucet and bent down to splash some water on her face, then pinched her cheeks to give them some color. When she saw Bryce, she didn't want to look like a gaunt, pathetic girl who'd been dumped—twice, actually.

He was standing at the bay window when she strode into the spacious den. She crossed the parquet floor and joined him, frowning when he tried to draw her into an embrace. "No, Bryce," she said stiffly, shrugging his hands off her.

His pale-blue eyes flickered with annoyance. "I can't hug you now?"

"No, you can't." She crossed her arms over her chest. "What the hell was last night about? We're not back together and you know it."

He looked sheepish. "I know, it might have been a little presumptuous of me, but I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy?" she echoed in disbelief. "You broke up with me because you wanted to *take a walk on the wild side*, and all of a sudden you want to marry me again?"

He shifted, great discomfort lining his face. "I made a mistake," he said in a vague tone. "I realized right after I ended it just how much I missed you."

She snorted. "Is that why you were making out with some girl at the Sheppard party?"

His eyes flashed. "Who told you that?" Before she could reply, the anger in his eyes faded, replaced with regret. "I messed up, okay? But I'm willing to make it up to you, sweetheart. I really want to marry you."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I don't want to marry you."

Bryce faltered. "You don't?"

Was he seriously surprised? Shaking her head, Annabelle let out a harsh laugh. "Of course not. Why would I want to marry a guy who dumped me like a piece of trash?"

Bryce's jaw tensed. He turned his head, his blue eyes focused on the sparkling water of the bay that sat a hundred yards away. When he finally turned back to her, suspicion hardened his face. "Is this about that guy you brought home last night?" His voice went cold. "I'm willing to forgive you for that, so why can't you forgive me?"

"This isn't some forgiveness contest," she retorted. "And me not wanting to marry you has nothing to do with Ryan. Not that it's any of your business, but we're not seeing each other anymore."

Relief filled his eyes. "Then there's no reason for us not to get back together."

She released a frustrated sigh. "Why are you so eager to marry me? Is someone holding a gun to your head, for Pete's sake?"

Something about his expression gave her pause. It wasn't so much guilt as it was...fear? She uncrossed her arms, letting them dangle to her sides, suddenly feeling weary. "What the hell is going on, Bryce?"

He mumbled something.

"I can't hear you," she snapped.

"Your father," he said, raising his voice.

She pursed her lips. "What about my father?"

"He threatened to fire me, okay?" Bryce spat out, sounding livid. "He said if I didn't stop screwing around and do right by you, I'd lose my job."

Horror swarmed her body like a cluster of hornets. He couldn't possibly be serious. Her dad was controlling, sure, but not cruel. Right?

"If you're lying to me, I swear to God, Bryce, I'll kick your ass," she said in a deadly voice.

"I'm not lying, Annabelle. He pulled me into his study before dinner last night and laid it all out."

She stared at Bryce, a vine of disgust twining around her spine. "So you were willing to marry me to keep your job? That's pathetic."

His face turned red. He opened his mouth to say something, but she was through listening. She held up her hand to silence him, continuing in a quiet voice. "We are not getting married, Bryce. I don't care what threats my dad made against you, but if it makes you feel better, I'm going to talk to him right now and tell him to stop interfering in our lives." She sighed. "I'll make sure you keep your job, okay?"

Surprise filled his gaze. "You will?"

"Yes, so long as you understand that we are *not* getting back together. I don't want to." She paused. "And I don't think you do either. So please, Bryce, just leave."

With a nod, he stepped away from the window, then hesitated. "I am sorry, you know." He met her eyes, shamefaced. "I know I was an ass to you, but I think we can both agree our relationship wasn't working."

She couldn't help laugh. "Yeah, I think you're right about that."

Her chest felt surprisingly light as she walked Bryce to the front parlor. They didn't hug or kiss goodbye; he just slid out the door, and the past five years they'd spent together simply floated away in the warm morning breeze.

Annabelle closed the door after him, then leaned against it, collecting her thoughts. A minute later, she straightened her shoulders in determination and made her way to her father's study.

Time to confront dear old dad.

Ryan raised his beer to his lips, staring at the TV screen glumly. Thank fuck Matt was out. It spared Ryan the humiliation of being horribly belittled for his current viewing choice. But this was the last movie he'd watched with Annabelle, and he'd always been a sucker for self-torture. He drained the rest of his beer, the cold alcohol sliding down his throat but doing nothing to soothe the ache in his gut.

He missed Annabelle. He'd only known her for two weeks, and yet it felt like so much longer. And now that she was no longer in his life, it was like there was a big gaping hole in his chest. It was stupid, really. Things between them would have ended anyway—she had a job, a life, in San Francisco. Wasn't like she would've moved to San Diego to be with him.

Quit thinking about her, he ordered himself. *She's gone, it's over. Go out and get laid or something.*

But the idea of having sex with some random chick at a club or bar held no appeal for him. He didn't want random. He wanted Annabelle, damn it. It was funny, how for months he'd thought he was in love with Jane, and in the end, he'd been totally blindsided by his love for Annabelle.

The click of the door opening jolted him from his thoughts. Shit. Matt was back. Ryan set down his empty bottle and looked around for the remote control so he could turn off the movie before he got caught watching it. Damn, where the hell was the—

He froze as Annabelle strode into his living room.

She wore a pair of baggy tan Capris, a snug sky-blue tank top and red flip-flops on her feet. His pulse immediately sped up, getting faster when she crossed her arms over her chest, emphasizing her full cleavage.

"Hi," she said, sounding very casual.

He swallowed. "Hi."

Her brown eyes softened. "So, why didn't you tell me my father tried to pay you off?"

A wave of surprise crashed into him, along with a flash of regret. Damn, he hadn't wanted her to find out about that. Her father might be an ass, but he was still her father, and Ryan hated the pain he saw swimming in her eyes.

"I didn't want to ruin your relationship with the guy," Ryan admitted in a hoarse voice.

She uncrossed her arms, perching one hand on her hip. "Out of curiosity, how much did he offer?"

He made a wry face. "We never got that far, to tell you the truth. I told him to screw off long before we made it there."

Something that resembled satisfaction flickered on her face. "Good." Her eyes darkened. "But then you told *me* to screw off, too." Regret rose in his chest. He wanted to apologize, but she lifted her hand to silence him. "I get why," she said quietly. "You told me about the way you grew up, how awful it was. And then my dad goes and tells you that you don't belong. I can see why it freaked you out."

He slowly met her gaze. "You do?"

"Everyone gets insecure sometimes, Ryan. I just wish you'd talked to me about it instead of—O-M-G, are you watching *P.S. I Love You*?" she suddenly demanded, noticing for the first time what was on the TV screen.

He felt his cheeks heat up. Fuck. This was goddamn mortifying. "Uh, it's on TV," he lied.

“No, it’s not. I can see the DVD player counting the minutes going by.” Annabelle let out a delighted laugh. “You miss me!”

He tried to tamp down his amusement, but it came out in the form of a sheepish smile. “Yeah, maybe a little.”

Before he could react, she bounded toward him and launched herself into his arms. He held her close, breathing in the sweet scent of orange blossoms, rubbing his chin against the silky-smooth flesh of her neck. God, it felt good holding her again.

“I miss you too,” Annabelle said, pulling back. “I know it’s only been a day since you left, but it feels like forever.”

“I know,” he confessed with a sigh.

She searched his face, her eyes flickering with hesitation. “I just...what you said at the house...you didn’t mean any of it, did you?”

“None of it,” he said gruffly.

Relief flooded her beautiful face. “I thought so. Not at the time, but after I confronted my dad and found out what he tried to do, I figured you said all that stuff because you were...I don’t know, scared?”

As a rule, he hated to admit fear, but at the moment, he knew he had no choice. If he wanted this woman back—and God, how he did—then he had to be completely honest with her. “I felt like a loser,” he admitted. “I thought I wasn’t good enough for you, so I said whatever I could to convince you I didn’t want you.”

“And the thing about...um...Jane?”

He reached out and touched her cheek. “I don’t love her. I thought I did, a while ago, but I was wrong.” He swallowed hard. “But you...I’m in love with you, Annabelle, and I know I’m not wrong about that.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “You’re in love with me?”

He nodded earnestly.

The smile widened. “Good. Because I’m in love with you too.”

Pleasure burst in his chest. “You are?”

It was her turn to nod. “And I already decided I won’t do the long-distance thing. Those relationships never work out.”

He moistened his dry lips. “I can’t move to San Francisco, baby. I need to stay close to the base so—”

She interrupted him with a laugh. “Duh. I’m going to talk to my boss about transferring me to our San Diego office. She’s always talking about how that location is understaffed, so I think she might really go for it.”

Emotion clogged his throat. “You want to move here?”

She nodded.

“What about your family?”

Pain fluttered across her face. “I think it might be a good idea to be away from them for a while. God, Ryan, I’m so furious at my dad. I can’t believe he did that to you, and then he tried to do the same thing to Bryce.”

Ryan frowned. “What?”

“He threatened to fire him if he didn’t get back together with me,” Annabelle said darkly. “But I convinced him to let Bryce keep his job.”

“I hate that I might have done something to ruin your relationship with your father,” Ryan said roughly.

She sighed. “I’ll forgive him eventually. I hate staying mad at people. But like I said, I think some space from him and my mom will be for the best.”

Smiling, he drew her into his arms, then dipped his head to kiss her softly on the lips. “So do you want to move in here?”

Annabelle looked startled. “Here?”

“Duh,” he mimicked. “Eventually we’ll get a place alone, if you want, but I can’t abandon Matt just yet. We signed a one-year lease.”

She laughed. “Way to get ahead of yourself, Roger. I was thinking more along the lines of staying at Christina’s. She and Joe might end up finding a place together anyway, which means I could stay upstairs for good.”

Ryan couldn’t help but smile. For good. He liked the sound of that. “Well, my door’s always open, if you change your mind.”

Annabelle leaned in to kiss him again. “Okay, now that we’ve settled that...can we have make-up sex?”

He laughed too, his heart so full of joy he was scared it would explode. “Definitely.”

“We still have two more items on the list to check off,” she reminded him, arching one brow.

He struggled to remember the elusive two items, then grinned when he did. “Number ten,” he said with a decisive nod. “Let’s start with that one.”

Annabelle shook her head. “No way. I just took a shower before I boarded the flight. I’ll get all sticky if we do number ten.”

But he was already on his feet, heading for the kitchen to get a bottle of maple syrup. Glancing at her over his shoulder, he flashed a brilliant smile and said, “Trust me, it’ll be fun.”

About the Author

A RITA-award nominated author, Elle Kennedy grew up in the suburbs of Toronto, Ontario, and holds a B.A. in English from York University. From an early age, she knew she wanted to be a writer, and actively began pursuing that dream when she was a teenager. When she's not writing, she's reading. And when she's not reading, she's making music with her drummer boyfriend, oil painting or indulging her love for board games.

Elle loves to hear from her readers. Visit her Web site www.ellekennedy.com or send her a note at elle@ellekennedy.com.

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Heat of Passion
Heat of the Storm
Heat It Up

Coming Soon:

The Heat Is On

Letting her into his life is not an option. Letting her go...impossible.

Heat It Up

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Out of Uniform, Book 4

One look at Thomas Becker's seriously ripped body, and Jane Harrison is having trouble remembering why she tracked down the Navy SEAL. Oh, yes, that hot scoop for her magazine. Instead they get trapped in an elevator together—and she gets sizzling hot sex.

After the delicious encounter is over, Becker's out of there, she's left off balance, and even more determined not to take no for an answer. Either for that interview, or another chance to find out if he always goes commando.

One minute Becker is making it plain his answer is no. The next, he's using the only weapon at hand to calm her confined-space panic attack—a kiss. And caving in to a fierce, unexpected need that wasn't even on his radar. Long term? Hell no—not after the divorce that just spit him out. But a fling with the redheaded reporter with a brutally honest mouth and a body made for sin? Abso-effing-lutely.

Trouble is, when the week is over, she isn't even close to being out of his system...

Warning: Contents under pressure. Hot elevator sex, a redhead who knows exactly what she wants, and a Navy SEAL who can't help but give it to her. May cause spontaneous combustion. Be sure to fan yourself frequently.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Heat It Up:

Becker resisted a sigh. Shit, he really needed to quit thinking about the divorce. It had been finalized months ago, and yet here he was, constantly thinking about his ex-wife. Maybe he needed to take a page out of his teammates' books and indulge in some random, no-strings sex.

And double shit, because sex was definitely something he shouldn't be thinking about either. Not now, anyway.

The woman in his lap shifted, letting out a wobbly breath that broke through the silence. "Okay, this isn't working," she choked out. "Maybe you can try to distract me? Talk to me about something."

Becker fought a wave of discomfort. Wonderful. If there was one thing he sucked at, it was talking. Especially to women.

"Please," she added, obviously seeing the reluctance in his eyes.

"Talk about what?" he finally asked, caving in.

"Anything. Tell me about the bullet wound in your arm, your favorite movie, your pet peeves. I don't care." Another shaky breath.

"Um, okay." He paused. "Well, bullet wounds hurt."

Her lips quirked, and Becker was startled by the little spark of pleasure he got from knowing he'd made her smile. "What does it feel like? Is it like a knife wound? Because I know what *that* feels like."

"When the hell did you get a knife wound?"

"College. I was a reporter for the school paper and I went to interview this meth addict for a piece I was doing. Only he was super high and thought I was a narc." She offered a small shrug, as if to say *no biggie*.

Despite himself, Becker grinned. "Remember earlier how I said you were persistent? Well, correction—you're nuts."

"It was an important story. Getting knifed added some color to the piece." Her blue eyes twinkled. "So, the bullet...?"

"Right. Well, to be honest, I didn't even feel it at first. Adrenaline running too high, you know. I was too focused on getting your sister into the chop—" He narrowed his eyes. "All this is off the record, right?"

Jane made a face. "Unfortunately. But I still think you should let me interview you."

"Not interested."

"Fine." She gave a little pout, which brought another smile to his lips. "At least finish the story."

"Yes, ma'am. So, like I said, didn't feel a thing at first, not until I climbed into the chopper. Then the pain hit me, like a streak of lightning. Arm started throbbing, head spinning from the loss of blood. Felt like someone stuck a live wire straight into my bone."

"Is that the first time you've been shot?"

"First time I've had a bullet in me, yeah. I've been grazed a few times, knifed, slashed by a machete once..." His voice drifted, and he smiled at the horror in her eyes. "Part of the job."

"I could never do it," Jane said frankly. "A job where I'm constantly getting injured? No thank you. I'd way rather interview people in the comfort of their homes."

He shot her a curious glance. "What kind of stories do you write?"

"Whatever I get assigned. Last issue I had a piece about insider trading, the one before that was a story about human trafficking."

"And now you're working on a story about your sister?"

She nodded then released a long breath. To his relief, this one didn't sound shaky. She was evidently calming down. "I was so worried about her, Becker. When her office called and told us she'd gone off the radar, I thought she was dead." Jane swallowed. "I always tell her not to take such risky assignments, but she never listens."

He arched a brow. "Would you ever turn down a story because someone told you there might be some risk?"

The corner of her mouth curved. "No. I guess it runs in the family, huh? Pigheadedness is probably the only thing I have in common with them."

“You don’t get along with your family?”

“No, I do. I love them to death. But sometimes I feel like the odd man out, you know? My mom, Dad, Liz, my brother Ken—they’re all so similar. Look alike, think alike. Hell, they all chose the same career. Photographers, all of them!” She shook her head, looking baffled. “Journalism is a related field, I guess, but I know squat about photography. We have dinner together every Wednesday night, and the four of them drone on and on about new techniques they’re using or what not, and I just sit there, twiddling my thumbs.” She halted suddenly, her cheeks reddening. “Sorry, I don’t mean to complain. You’re probably bored by my rambling, huh?”

Actually, he was the farthest thing from bored. Becker couldn’t remember the last time he’d enjoyed listening to a woman talk. And he knew exactly what Jane was saying. How many times had he sat at the dinner table listening to Alice go on and on about her headshots and runway walk and the latest fashion trends, then watching her get all huffy when he had nothing to contribute to the conversation? Too many times.

“I don’t mind the rambling,” he admitted. “I find you interesting.”

She smiled again. “Thank you.”

He liked that. Thank you. Alice had never been able to take compliments, always feigning humbleness while in reality she loved hearing how wonderful she was.

He swept his gaze over Jane’s beautiful face, and then, before he could stop himself, lightly ran his hand over her hip. Her lips parted slightly, a flicker of arousal in her eyes, and Becker’s hand instantly stilled. Shit, what was he doing? The air between them sizzled, while the heat from her curvy little body seared into him and made his pulse race. He realized she was the first woman he’d been attracted to since the divorce, and the notion unnerved him.

Clearing his throat, he struggled to snuff out the flame of desire burning in his body. “So, did you always want to be a journalist?” he blurted out.

She blinked, as if snapping herself out of her own sexual haze. “Uh, yeah. Ever since I was a kid. I used to write articles about everyone in the neighborhood.” She grinned. “I was convinced Mr. Jervais from across the street was up to no good, so I would spy on him and then write about what I saw.”

“What *did* you see?”

“Well, he took out the garbage a lot, so I decided he was getting rid of dismembered body parts. And he spent a lot of time in his garage, which was obviously where he killed his victims.”

Becker laughed. “Poor man. I hope you didn’t show him any of the stories.”

“No, my parents made me shred them. They said even ten year olds could be arrested for slander and harassment.”

“And ten years later, you’re still at it, huh?”

“That would make me twenty. I’m twenty-eight, thank you very much. But I appreciate the compliment. And yes, I’m still at it. I’m going to win a Pulitzer someday, you know.”

The flash of ambition he saw in her eyes brought a wave of uneasiness. He’d seen that look far too many times in his ex-wife’s eyes.

“And what about a husband and kids? Do you see that in your future too, or just the Pulitzer?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Sure, I want those things too, but there’s no rush. I want to focus on my career right now, make a name for myself. There’ll be time for all the rest.”

Becker stifled a snort. How many times had he heard that one? There’s no rush. *There’s time*. Alice had spouted that bull for fourteen years of marriage, before finally dropping the bomb that she *never* planned on starting a family.

A spark of bitterness ignited in his gut, but he forced himself not to reveal his thoughts on the subject to Jane. He seriously needed to stop comparing her to his ex. He didn’t even know this woman. He had no right judging her choices and goals. So what if they weren’t aligned with his? Wasn’t like he was going to marry the girl.

“I do make plenty of time for sex, though,” she added with a small grin.

His hard-on returned with full-force, straining against his zipper. No doubt Jane felt it straining against *her* too, because her eyes widened slightly. “Oh my,” she murmured.

Becker rolled his eyes. “That’s what happens when you say the word *sex* while you’re sitting in a man’s lap, sweetheart.”

“Do you want me to say it again?” she asked with an impish look.

“Seeing as we’re trapped here in this elevator, I can’t really stop you from saying anything, can I?”

He instantly knew he’d said the wrong thing because Jane’s blue eyes flickered with terror. She glanced around the small space, as if remembering where they were and why there were there. Her throat worked as she swallowed repeatedly, and Beck could practically hear her pulse began to race. Shit. Why on earth had he reminded her they were *trapped* in an elevator?

“Jane—” he started.

“How long has it been?” she cut him off. “Didn’t he say a half an hour? It feels like ages since—”

“Jane—”

She shifted in his lap, hand fumbling toward her purse. “My phone has the time on it. I need to see—”

“Jane—”

“—how long we’ve been here. Do you feel hot too or is it just me? And it is getting hard to breathe, because I really can’t—”

Becker pressed his lips to hers. He hadn’t planned on kissing her, but it was the only way to shut her up, to distract her before she hurled herself headfirst off another panic cliff.

Only, the second his mouth touched hers, he forgot all about why he'd kissed her in the first place. Instead, all he could think about was...well, kissing her. Kissing the holy hell out of her.

So he did.

One man wants her heart. The other wants her dead...

Going Down

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Holding Out for a Hero, Book 1

Eleanor Owen needs to get out of Chicago and quick. It's not that she doesn't want to obey the subpoena to testify against her drug-trafficking ex-boyfriend. It's making it to the witness stand alive, should a dirty cop make good on his threats.

Tiny, remote Wyattville, Oregon, looks like the perfect place to disappear, but it's hard to blend into the woodwork when one of the town's infamous namesakes sends her heart racing. Worse, Mr. Tall, Hot and Packing is the town sheriff, which means she should stay as far away from him as possible.

Tyson Wyatt is positive the sexy new girl in town is hiding something. Question is, what? He vows to feel out her secrets—including what she feels like beneath him. Preferably naked. Until then, he's not buying the story she's selling.

Their chemistry is sheet-melting hot, and Ellie realizes much too late that the man with the badge is as dangerous to her heart as her ex is to her life...

Warning: A city girl on the run, and a small-town sheriff set to seduce. Explicit sex. Dirty talk. A hint of danger. Oral sex with a cupcake.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Going Down:

"Okay, you need to stop cornering me like this," she said breathlessly.

He slid his gaze over her, took in the hardened points of her breasts beneath the tank top, and her uneven breathing.

"I think you like it when I do, Ellie."

Instead of replying, her tongue darted out to trace over the mouth that was tempting the hell out of him.

His blood pounded harder and he knew he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

"You do like it. Don't you?" his voice dropped an octave as he curled his fingers around the swell of her hips.

"Tyson." His name on her lips was a breathy combination of plea and protest.

But when he lowered his head, there was no protest in her wide eyes. And before his lips could touch hers, her lashes fluttered down in submission as she leaned into him.

A wave of need washed through him, primal and potent. With a low groan, he closed that last distance, taking her mouth.

Her lips, pillowy soft and pliant, moved against his. The warmth of her breath teased him, ripped at his self-control.

He nipped her bottom lip with his teeth, using her gasp of surprise to thrust his tongue inside the hot cavern of her mouth.

He moved his hands around her hips and grabbed the firm roundness of her ass, squeezing, and then lifting her onto the counter.

Jesus. He was going to lose it. So much for being professional. But screw it, just like he'd told her earlier, he was off duty. And right now, his only duty was to see how far she'd let him take this.

And if he played his cards right, maybe all the way to the bedroom.

You need to stop him.

Ellie ruthlessly silenced the voice of reason in her head and moaned as Tyson pushed her legs wide to step between them. The only thing that mattered now was pleasure, and following the thread of temptation that Tyson had so carefully laid out for her.

The edge of the counter bit into her bottom, the angle and pressure adding to the intensity and spontaneity of the moment.

His tongue danced with hers, rubbing and sucking. Their mouths separated for just a second, giving them both enough time to gasp in air, before once again he claimed her lips.

His hands, confident and knowing, moved to her waist, gathering the tank top she wore and pushing it upward.

Cool air brushed her belly and her pulse quickened. *If you're going to stop him, now would be the time.*

Then it was too late, and she really didn't give a damn as the fabric lifted over her breasts and her nipples tightened.

His head lifted from hers again, and she refused to open her eyes, because she knew he was looking at her body.

"Oh, yeah, sweetheart," he muttered thickly. "You like it."

Wet friction rasped over her bare nipple and she groaned, pleasure rocking through her as she finally let her lashes flutter up.

The vision of Tyson's head bent over her breast sent heat exploding in her belly and a rush of moisture between her legs.

His tongue moved against the tip, teasing and exploring her, making her nipple lengthen and tighten for his touch.

With a soft laugh, he parted his lips and drew her into his mouth, suckling lightly.

So good. It felt so damn good. How could she possibly stop him when this moment was so exquisite? She was only going to be in Wyattville for a couple months...why not indulge in a little harmless sex?

Ellie squirmed on the counter, her breath quickening as she tunneled her fingers into his short, blond hair, holding him against her. Wanting him to suck harder, to use his teeth.

His free hand came up to cover the other breast, squeezing and massaging the flesh. Then he caught the nipple between two fingers and pinched lightly.

She jerked against him, crying out. More, she wanted so much more. Wanted his fingers buried deep inside her, and then his tongue, before finally, his cock.

The image of it skittered through her head, robbing her ability to breathe, making her wetter.

Tyson switched his mouth to the other nipple, sucking fiercely as he eased his hand down her belly. His teeth grazed over the tip over her breast, before he lifted his head.

"I want to touch you here," he muttered thickly, just before he cupped between her thighs. "Feel how hot your pussy is right now."

"Tyson," she moaned, her sex clenching at his erotic words. Jesus, it was like he'd known her thoughts.

"I bet you're nice and slick, sweetheart." He licked her nipple, moving his hand back up to her stomach. "Aren't you?"

Yes. Her heart pounded and her body wept for release. This man, almost a stranger, had aroused her more than any man she'd ever dated before. And more than anything, she wanted him to follow up and touch her like he'd just said.

She issued a husky, "Why don't you check for yourself?"

He lifted his head, possessiveness and desire flaring in his eyes. "No games. I like that."

Without breaking eye contact, he maneuvered his hand beneath the waist of her pants and thong. The brush of his strong fingers at the top of her mound had her biting her lip to hold back a groan.

"No games," she repeated and caught his wrist, pushing his hand lower. "No teasing either."

"Ah, but teasing is so much fun, Ellie," he muttered, before his palm cupped her sex completely. A second later, he curled one finger deep inside her sheath and Ellie's world went spinning.

Last call? She'll take a double. Straight up, please...

Happy Hour

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For six years, widow Grace Wright's days have been filled as a single working mother. Now, with her daughter graduating, her nest is yawning before her, wide and empty. And so is the upcoming weekend. Invited out by her coworkers, she decides it's time to turn that corner and get on with her life.

Jamie's had his eye on Grace for years, but it never seemed the right time to approach her. Tonight, something's different. The sexual signals she's giving off are unmistakable—and he's not the only man in the bar who's noticed. His best friend, Trey, is breaking a sweat just looking at the delectable English teacher.

The two men make her the offer of a lifetime, and Grace doesn't hesitate. For one night, Jamie and Trey indulge her every desire, every fantasy, every naughty craving. In the morning Trey is gone with the wind, but Jamie is holding on to every moment as if he never wants to let go. Leaving her wondering if another chance at forever is too much to ask...

Warning: Contains a red-hot ménage, anal sex, graphic language, bondage and toys. Serve with a tall, cool one with plenty of ice. How 'bout another round?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Happy Hour:

Jamie refused to have his night with Grace ruined by Carmen and he reacted before he thought. He leaned over and kissed Grace, a hard, full-on, open-mouthed kiss. He half expected her to pull away and slap him, so he was pleasantly surprised when she wrapped her arms around his neck and returned the kiss.

He wasn't sure how long he inhaled the sweet scent of her breath and tasted the tang of beer on her tongue. He gripped her waist and held on, reveling in the moment. Their first kiss and it was better than he'd ever imagined. Her lips were soft against his, but her response proved she wouldn't be a passive or timid lover. She touched his tongue with hers, exploring his mouth while her fingers tugged his hair, pulled him closer.

The kiss betrayed her true feelings and had his mouth been free, he'd have shouted his happiness to the entire bar. She was as hungry for him as he was for her. For a moment, the rest of the world faded away, leaving just the two of them, lost in their own private Eden.

And then reality intruded.

"Jamie?" Finally, the female voice penetrated his lust-clouded mind and he regretfully pulled away. "Jamie?"

He turned to find Carmen standing beside the table, looking confused—and shit—upset. He hated hurting her, but she didn't understand when he said he wasn't interested in dating her. When faced with the

idea of listening to her nonstop boring conversation another night, he'd acted on instinct. "Hey, Carmen," he said, forcing a nonchalant tone to his voice.

"Hi," she said. "I thought I spotted you over here." An awkward silence fell, and Jamie decided it was time to carry the subterfuge to the next level.

"Have you met my girlfriend, Grace?"

"Girlfriend?" Carmen asked.

He nodded and was grateful when Grace smiled kindly. "I think we may have met a few months ago. At another happy hour, maybe?"

Carmen shrugged and Jamie saw Trey roll his eyes. No doubt Carmen didn't remember the fact she'd met Grace at least three times in the past. She wasn't exactly bright and she certainly never paid a bit of attention to the other women at the table, usually saving all of that mind-numbing banter for him or Trey.

"Isn't she a little old for you?" Carmen asked.

Jamie fought back the urge to tell the woman off for her cruelty. "No. She isn't." His words were clipped and halting and any fool could see he was furious. Unfortunately, Carmen was the queen of fools.

She looked Grace up and down and then dismissed her as a serious threat. "What are you guys doing tonight?" she purred, thrusting her breasts forward as if the mere sight of her big tits bursting out of her too-tight top would make him come to his senses and fall madly in love with her.

"We're having a few drinks together."

"That's cool," she said, looking around for an extra chair. Mercifully, they'd given their extra seats to a large group at the next table.

"Well, it was good to see you again, Carmen. Maybe I'll see you around sometime." Jamie's dismissal was curt and he silently prayed it would be enough because if she persisted on hanging around, they'd have to leave. After the kiss he'd just shared with Grace, he'd rather cut off his left nut than cut this evening short.

Carmen hovered by the table for a moment until Trey and Grace both added their goodbyes, then she left.

"Damn, man," Trey said. "Quick thinking on that kiss. Well done."

He nodded, though he was still fuming over Carmen's insult. He glanced at Grace. "I'm sorry she was so rude to you."

Grace reached over and grasped his hand. "That's not your apology to make. Besides, I think we've already discussed her lack of intelligence."

Trey laughed, but Jamie continued speaking. "With any luck, that will be the last time I have to deal with her."

Grace squeezed his hand. "Oh, I think you made your point. You've tried to break things off with her gently at least a dozen times, Jamie. Sometimes, you just have to be less subtle, more direct."

“That kiss was pretty fucking direct,” Trey said.

Grace looked at him and smiled. “Have to admit I didn’t mind pretending to be your girlfriend for a few minutes. Wow.”

“Few minutes? Felt like you were swallowing each other’s tonsils for hours.”

“Shut up, Trey,” Jamie said with a grin, pleased by Grace’s compliment.

“You know, Grace, I think I see an old stalker girlfriend of mine over there. Mind giving me one of those kisses?” Trey asked.

Grace shook her head. “Don’t you guys have anything better to do tonight than harass this old woman?”

“Carmen’s a fucking idiot. I don’t see any old women at this table,” Jamie said, hating for her to feel the sting of the insensitive woman’s words.

“Maybe not, but I still don’t get why you two are here. Despite my fears of pumping up your already overinflated egos, you’re both totally hot. Why are you sitting here with me tonight rather than going out on dates? Getting laid?”

Jamie shrugged. “Spending the night with you is a hell of a lot more fun than spending all our money, buying drinks and trying to get into the pants of some stranger.”

“We’d rather buy drinks and try to get into *your* pants,” Trey teased. The image of the three of them in bed together floated through Jamie’s mind and he silently cursed the denim cutting into his rock-hard cock as he was reminded of Trey’s proposition.

“Ha ha. God. I can’t tell you how glad I am I’m not still out there, trying to maneuver my way around the dating scene.” Grace picked up the pitcher and freshened up all their drinks, clearly dismissing their come-ons as harmless teasing. When Jamie considered how often they’d made sexual jokes in the past, he could understand.

“Why aren’t you out there, Grace?” Trey asked. “You’re single, hot, young.”

Grace looked as if she wanted to refute his friend’s words and Jamie felt something inside snap. “And before you call Trey a liar, you might want to consider the consequences.”

Grace and Trey both turned to him, astonished by his sharp tone.

“Consequences?” Grace asked.

“Everything Trey said is true. I’m sick of hearing you put yourself down, angel.”

“I don’t put myself down,” she argued.

“Tell me you weren’t about to tell Trey he needed to get glasses, that you’re old, past your prime or some other stupid shit like that.”

She closed her mouth and he could see he’d hit the nail on the head. His eyes narrowed. “Say anything else like that again tonight—or any night for that matter—and I’ll be forced to punish you.”

His words provoked a nervous laugh from her and he could see Trey's scowl from the corner of his eyes.

"And just how would *you* punish *me*?"

She stressed the wrong words and Jamie felt his hibernating grizzly bear begin to wake. "I'd pull down those skin-tight jeans of yours, lay you out and bring you to orgasm with just my hand. Over and over."

Grace flushed and he could see in her eyes she was struggling like mad to read in his face whether he was joking or not. He made sure she saw the veracity of his words. This was no joke.

"I'm pretty sure that's physically impossible." Leave it to Grace to find her footing quickly. She took the middle ground, not giving away anything and once more, he was left to try to decide if she was interested or horrified by his comments. Damn woman never made anything easy.

Fuck it. He was going to lay it all out for her tonight. He was tired of holding back because of their age difference, because of Maddie, out of respect for her dead husband, because he was afraid of rejection or losing her friendship. All his excuses faded away as he looked at her lovely face.

"Clearly you've never been finger-fucked. I'd have you begging for my cock in minutes," he replied, leaning closer to her.

She flushed as he added the last statement, but her suddenly shallow breathing and the turgid nipples poking through her blouse answered the most pressing question in his mind. He didn't have to wonder about her sexual interest in him anymore. Her body was screaming *Yes!* loud and clear. Now he needed to clear the hurdle of her mind.

Trey's voice broke the silence surrounding them. "You two do realize I'm sitting here and can hear everything you're saying, right?"

Grace laughed, but it had a breathless quality that sent a fresh surge of blood to Jamie's cock as he imagined that sound in his bed as he came into her body. "I hope you're driving tonight, Trey. I think maybe Jamie is a little drunk."

Jamie reached down and pulled her chair roughly toward his until she was sitting between his outstretched legs. "You had to go there, didn't you? You couldn't help yourself. It's easier to make a joke than admit to yourself that there's a guy sitting at this table who wants to fuck himself to death inside you."

Jamie saw Trey move his chair closer to Grace and as he looked away from her astonished face, he saw his friend's hands resting on Grace's waist.

"Two guys," Trey added. "There are two guys who want you, Gracie."

Grace looked from him to Trey and he could see her mind fighting to process what they were saying. "This is a joke." The words were weak, almost a question. Hell, he thought they sounded like a plea.

He shook his head. "I've wanted you for years, Grace."

Trey bent forward and as Jamie watched, his friend pressed a soft kiss to the side of her neck. Grace's eyes drifted shut and he grasped her hands when they began to shake. "Open your eyes and look at me," Jamie said.

She opened them, looked at him, her gaze full of questions and if he wasn't mistaken, lust. "How long has it been?" Jamie whispered.

"Too long," she replied breathlessly.

He suspected—hell, he knew—she hadn't been with anyone since her husband's death. They were good enough friends she would have told him if there'd been another man since then.

"Come home with us," Jamie said, his heart pounding as he spoke the words, the realization of what he was asking dawning hard. He was inviting Grace and Trey to his bed.

Trey's lips still lingered by her ear and he heard his friend whisper, "Please, Grace. Just tonight. One night."

She shuddered and Jamie tightened his grip on her hands. For Trey, it would be one night, but Jamie was hoping for much, much longer.

Grace took a deep breath and Jamie sensed her struggle to recover her wits. "I feel like we should talk about this. There needs to be some conversation, some discussion."

Jamie cut her off. "Do you want to sleep with us?"

"God, yes."

"Discussion over. Let's pay the tab and get out of here."



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