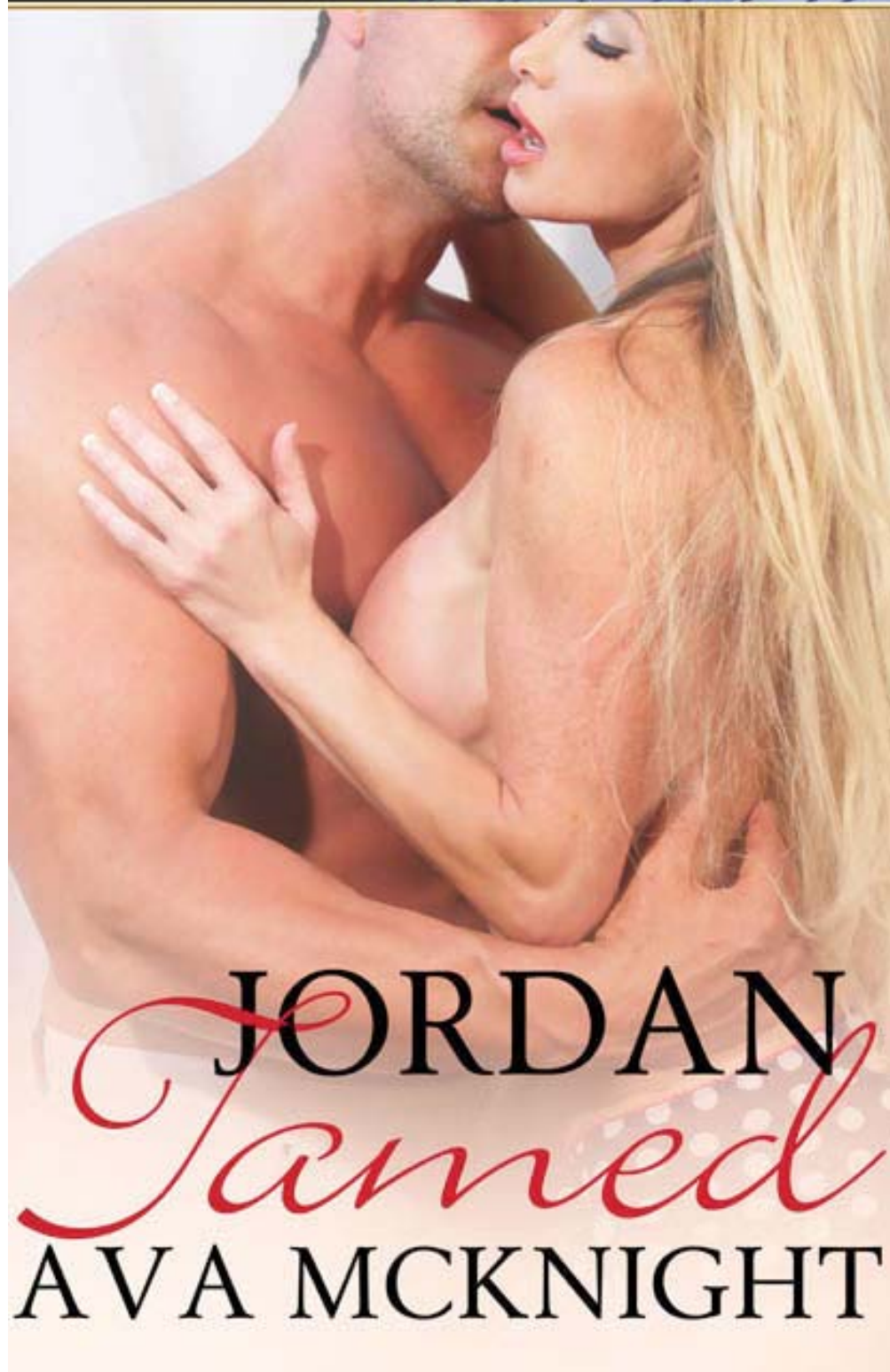


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



JORDAN
Tamed
AVA MCKNIGHT

Jordan Tamed

Ava McKnight

Charming and charismatic Jordan has watched his two best friends, Sam and Sophie, fall in love. When sexy Bridget declares eternal sexual and romantic bliss is a delusion, Jordan pulls out all the stops to prove her wrong. He's wanted her for a long time, and now it's time to prove it.

Since being played by a married man when she was just eighteen, Bridget has denounced all things romantic and no longer believes in happily ever afters—until Jordan. But can a woman whose heart has been cold for so long warm to the ultimate gift of devotion and eternal love?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Jordan Tamed

ISBN 9781419931376

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Edited by Briana St. James

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication November 2010

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JORDAN TAMED

Ava McKnight

Acknowledgements

I was absolutely blown away by the amount of 5-star, Top Pick and Recommend Read reviews my June 2010 release, *Satisfying Sophie*, received! In addition to hearing from reviewers that a sequel for the “other hero” in the book was in order, readers also emailed me to say Jordan was too wonderful to be left as a loose end—he needed his own story! I couldn’t have agreed more, but finding just the right woman for a playboy with a *ginormous* heart is no easy feat. Surprisingly, though, the answer was staring me in the face the whole time I was writing *Satisfying Sophie*. Bridget is a woman determined to never be played again, making her a tough nut for Jordan to crack. She’s got some issues, to be sure, but when the heart wants what the heart wants, it’s damn difficult to deny it!

Like its sister story, *Jordan Tamed* pulled a few of my heartstrings. I hope it touches you as well, as these two vulnerable-on-the-inside people chip away at each other’s tough exteriors.

More thanks to my wonderful editor, Bree. I am eternally grateful we were paired together and look forward to working on many, many more projects with you!

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Chapter One

"Sophie Jensen, you'll be late for your own wedding," Jordan Cooper said as he rapped on the door to her bathroom before turning away to pace in front of Sophie's bed. "Get dressed and get out here!"

"She *is* dressed," Bridget Carlton said as she swept into the room, looking so damn glamorous and sexy it made his cock stand up and take notice.

"Jesus, Bridget." He took her in from the tips of her manicured toes to the top of her sleekly coiffed head. "You'll give the Justice of Peace and every man at this wedding an instant hard-on."

"Oh Jordan, you say the most romantic things."

He grinned, though it was a tight one, because *he* had an instant hard-on. "Just calling it like I see it."

"Well, you're wrong," she said with a half-roll of her amber-colored eyes. "Sam barely even glanced at me when I went to check on him. He just kept asking me how Sophie was doing. It's not that I want to make a man hard on his wedding day, but come on. A girl goes to all this trouble, she likes to know it evokes a response."

Jordan laughed. "Believe me, it evokes!" He was feeling a bit snug in the crotch to prove it. His designer tux wasn't exactly conducive to the mammoth erection a woman like Bridget Carlton inspired. So easily, no less.

Given that she always looked ready, willing and able to sin, he figured the only "trouble" she'd gone to today was to tone down her gregarious personality as she'd mingled with the guests arriving for the beach ceremony.

She'd pinned her long hair away from her striking face, using sparkly clips that glittered in the soft light that filled the bedroom. The rest of her hair flowed down her back like a curtain of blonde silk, tempting him to run his fingers through the glossy

strands. He had a primo view of her backside because of the standing mirror positioned behind her. The lavender, strapless mini-dress she wore hugged her tight ass and reminded him of the night he'd fucked her from behind on Sam's boat—before Sam had fallen for Sophie. It had been an unexpected threesome that had left him with some smoking-hot memories.

But now was hardly the time to think about how much he'd enjoyed being inside Bridget. This was his best friends' big day. Sophie and Sam were tying the knot and Jordan was the best man. Honorary maid of honor as well. A title he proudly acknowledged.

Which reminded him... He tore his gaze from Bridget—no easy feat—and pounded on the door to Sophie's bathroom once more. "Come on, sweetheart. Time to get the show on the road. You stay in there any longer, and Sam's going to think you've changed your mind about marrying him."

"As if!" she snorted from behind the closed door. Then there was nothing but silence. She still didn't come out.

Jordan cast a quick glance over his shoulder at Bridget, who was Sophie's bridesmaid.

Bridget shrugged a slender, bare shoulder and said, "She's been in there for twenty minutes. I couldn't get her to come out, which is why I sent someone for you while I went to check on our groom. You're the only one who's going to get her out of there. Well, aside from Sam, of course."

She reached for a crystal flute on the silver tray sitting on Sophie's dressing table and poured herself a glass of champagne from the open bottle. After taking a sip, she said, "You know how nervous she is, so you'd better coax her out before Sam comes in looking for her. If he sees her in her dress before the wedding, she'll have to change into something else for fear of bringing on bad luck." Bridget sighed before taking another sip. "That'll add another hour to this ordeal, I'm sure."

Jordan let out a low chuckle. Bridget was not a fan of weddings. Or anything romantic, he suspected. It was a wonder she'd agreed to stand by Sophie. It proved Bridget could rise above her own convictions to do a friend a favor. Not something he'd expected from this woman, but then, maybe he didn't know her as well as he thought he did.

Shaking his head, he focused on the issue at hand. Turning back to the closed door, he said, "Soph, sweetie. The JoP is here. People are gathered on the beach. The sun's about to set and Sam is waiting. You take any longer in there and it'll be a *sunrise* wedding, not a sunset one."

"I just...want to be perfect, Jordan."

He sighed. "Soph, you *are* perfect. In every way imaginable. Now get your ass out here and let me have a look at you."

Jordan knew her insecurities. She wasn't a vain woman. Rather, she was an emotionally and physically scarred one. It'd taken her ten years to admit her father had beaten her so severely when she was sixteen that he'd left a horrifying mess of raised scars on her lower back. The pain she'd suffered had haunted her the whole of her life...until she'd finally opened up to Sam.

Eventually, she'd shared her trauma with Jordan. They were best friends, after all. And though Jordan had wanted to heave a chair across the room when he'd seen the evidence of the beating, he'd refrained. Had fought harder than ever before to keep his emotions in check so that he didn't upset Sophie further.

To this day, he still wanted to strangle the man who'd done this to her — as did Sam. But Sophie's father was long dead and buried, so the only retribution to be had was this day, when Sophie and Sam declared their love for each other in front of God and fifty of their closest friends and family. That, in Jordan's mind, was precisely the type of restitution Sophie deserved.

When the lock on the door snapped, his thoughts returned to his mission. To get her on the beach before the sun really did set.

She opened the door a hair, but he couldn't see around it to where she stood. She said, "I need you to be honest with me, Jordan."

"Have I ever been anything *but* honest with you?"

They were business partners as well as best friends. Co-owners of a graphic design and marketing company. They told each other everything.

Hell, when Sophie had wanted to know about the ménage he, Sam and Bridget had engaged in long ago, he'd been perfectly forthcoming, describing it in full detail. Admittedly, he'd gotten a rise out of recapping that wild night on the boat. Sophie's arousal, as he'd told the story, had turned him on. But remembering how incredible it had felt to be buried to the hilt in Bridget's tight, wet cunt, fucking her while she moaned and begged for more, had really got him going.

Stop thinking like that, man. His cock would burst through the fly of his pants if he didn't get his mind off Bridget. But damn, it was difficult. She looked amazing in her short dress. Her mile-long, tanned and toned legs made him think of little else but having them wrapped around his waist as he hammered into her, making her scream in ecstasy the way she had that night on the boat.

"Soph," he said, the adrenaline from his wicked thoughts shooting through him and putting him on edge. "Give me a break, sweetheart. Sam will have my head if you don't get the hell out of there and go marry him."

She came around the door, a tentative look on her beautiful face. She stared up at Jordan, her eyes searching his as he stared back at her. The breath literally rushed from his lungs, creating a sharp stab of pain in his chest.

"My God," he whispered. "Sophie Jensen..." He shook his head. There were no words to describe how stunning she was.

His gaze slid over her and she seemed to hold her breath as she awaited his response. Her appearance was a direct contrast to Bridget's provocative, "fuck me now" one. Sophie was alluring in a soft, sensual, breathtaking way that made Jordan's heart

swell with his love for her. The friendly sort of love. The protective, “I’ll kick anyone’s ass who tries to mess with her” type of love.

She was so mesmerizing, it was all he could do not to pull her into his arms and hug her tight. Reassure her that she truly was perfect in every way. But he didn’t want to mess up her hair or her dress.

She asked, “What will Sam say?”

Jordan smiled at her, his emotions building into a lump in his throat, making it difficult to speak. He managed to tell her, “Sam won’t know what hit him, sweetheart. You’ll knock the wind right out of him. He won’t be able to say a damn thing, Soph.”

Tears pooled in her eyes. “He’ll like the dress?”

“I don’t think he’ll even notice the dress, Soph. He won’t be able to take his eyes off your face.” She was, in Jordan’s mind, an angel. “When you smile for him and he doesn’t have a breath left in his body to speak, know that his heart is about to burst from his chest because he loves you so much. You’ll leave him absolutely speechless and hopelessly indebted to you for agreeing to be his wife.”

“Jordan.” She smiled at him, her mouth quivering. Fat drops crested the rims of her softly accented eyes and rolled down her flushed cheeks.

He shook his head, not wanting her to say anything else. He didn’t want her to cry. Even tears of joy. “You’re going to smudge your makeup.”

Luckily, Bridget swooped in with a tissue and a few cosmetics. She dabbed at Sophie’s cheeks, then touched up her eyeliner and lip gloss. “You really are spectacular,” she said to Sophie, who also wore a strapless mini-dress.

The crisp white complemented Sophie’s tanned skin and the satin material hugged her curves the way a dress that had been made specifically for her should—and it had been. Jordan had suffered through more fittings than any man ought to be subjected to, but she’d wanted his opinion every step of the way. Her light brown hair was neatly arranged on top of her head, with long, soft curls brushing her temples and bare shoulders. Sparkly pins similar to Bridget’s were strategically placed in the thick mass

and she wore the same strappy sandals as Bridget, though hers were white and Bridget's were lavender.

"Okay, ladies," Jordan said when he finally had his wits about him again. "People – and one very anxious-to-be-married groom – are waiting for us."

Sophie took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. She said, "Thank you both. Sam and I couldn't ask for two better people to stand by our side today."

"Come on," Jordan said as he held his arm out for her. He was not only best man and honorary maid of honor, but he'd also be walking Sophie down the aisle and handing her off to Sam, a man more than deserving of his best friend.

They headed toward the door, but Jordan stopped before they passed through it. Glancing over his shoulder, his gaze met Bridget's. She hadn't moved from just outside the bathroom where she'd fixed Sophie's makeup.

"What?" he asked in response to her stunned expression.

"That was beautiful," she simply said. Then she shook her head and returned to the dressing table.

Jordan offered her his other arm. "Aren't you coming with us?"

She lifted her glass of champagne and said, "I'm going to finish this first. I'll see you on the beach."

He nodded. "One glass. Don't make me have to come get you too."

"Oh I'll be there," she assured them.

Jordan smiled at her. Then he returned his attention to Sophie and escorted her downstairs and out onto the deck, which was her designated holding spot until they were ready for her.

She said, "This is the perfect day."

Indeed, the weather had cooperated. There was a light breeze blowing off the ocean and the scent of roses mixed with the salty sea air. Below them, rows of chairs sat facing the water as gentle waves rolled onto the shoreline. A wooden arch decorated with

green vines and accented with white and yellow roses sat at the front of the line of chairs, which were divided by an aisle they'd walk down as Sophie's flower girl dropped multicolored rose petals before them. It would be a simple, elegant affair, reflective of Sophie's style.

"Yeah," he said as he pulled her a little closer to him. "It is the perfect day. And you are the perfect bride."

She laughed. "You really should only say that once, Jordan. You might want to save the sentiment for your own fiancée, when you find her."

He grinned at her. "Seriously, Soph. Who would have me?"

She shrugged. "Oh you might be surprised. I know I swore I'd never tell a soul what a sweetheart you really are, so I don't spoil your bad-boy image. But the truth is," she said as she stared up at him with admiration and love in her eyes, "I think you let the cat out of the bag today."

Chapter Two

Bridget had never been one for downing fine champagne. She typically sipped it slowly, savoring the crisp texture and sweet flavor. But today was not a typical day.

Granted, it wasn't the first time she'd been asked to be a bridesmaid. Not her favorite role to play by any stretch of the imagination, because Bridget thought weddings were a crock. Every wedding she'd ever been to—or been in—had ended in misery. Affairs, bankruptcies, estrangement, divorce, death. You name it, her friends had experienced it.

Not that she expected Sam and Sophie to fall into that category. No, if ever two people were made for each other and had the chance to stand the test of time—and all of life's bumps and bruises—it was Sam and Sophie. Bridget was genuinely happy for them. Even a bit in awe of their love. It was almost...tangible. An odd sentiment, but she could swear she felt the romantic aura that surrounded them. As though she could reach out and touch it. Wrap her fingers around it. A temptation she resisted because, of course, it was a figment of her imagination, not a reality. But still, there was something about the sizzling and popping between the two of them that made Bridget want to steal some of the magical chemistry and bottle it for herself.

A shocking revelation, even if it was only an internal admission. Another reason to be unsettled and suck down a little more champagne. She had a feeling the next several hours would be full of interesting little discoveries. Like the fact that she actually envied what today's bride and groom shared.

Bridget didn't believe in true love and a happily ever after for herself, but she was pleased it was happening for her two friends. Sam and Sophie had fallen in love when they'd opened their eyes and *looked* at each other. Really saw each other for exactly who they were. Flaws and all.

Hell, it was as though their flaws were what bonded them together. Or maybe not so much the flaws themselves, but the admission and acceptance of them. Sophie had confided in only three people about her dark past and, surprisingly, Bridget was one. She had never considered her and Sophie the best of friends, mostly because Bridget wasn't the gal-pal type. But clearly Sophie had decided they were meant to be close friends, and when Sophie wanted something, she went after it with the sort of gusto that had to be admired.

Bridget appreciated Sophie's forthright personality. Wished she could extend the same courtesy to some of the people in her own life, but Bridget had learned long ago that trusting people resulted in detrimental consequences. Something she simply couldn't afford to experience again, from an emotional standpoint.

Shaking her head to dislodge her dismal thoughts, she splashed a little more bubbly into her glass. Her mind was a jumbled mess today and she couldn't quite make heads or tails of the wayward direction in which her thoughts continued to go.

She consulted the clock on the dressing table. She had ten minutes left to shake whatever it was that plagued her. Out of the blue, she'd gone from being disgruntled over having to deal with all this wedding bullshit to finding it...endearing.

It was Sophie's fault, she deduced. The girl had a way of lighting up every dark crack and crevice, be it in a room or in someone's heart. And now here was Bridget, thinking she'd never seen anyone so breathtaking and emotionally stirring as Sophie Jensen on her wedding day. And she was suddenly grateful to be a part of Sophie's matrimony experience.

Well, it wasn't just Sophie's fault. Jordan was to blame too. Whoever would have expected him to say what he'd said to Sophie when she'd come out of the bathroom? True, he was always forthcoming with his thoughts, but the emotion he'd put behind those words... The sincerity and awe that had been wrapped around each and every utterance... Good God, just thinking about those few minutes she'd witnessed between

him and Sophie made Bridget want to plop down on the bench seat next to the vanity and cry her eyes out at the beauty of it all.

So ridiculous. She never cried. And most definitely *not* at weddings.

Draining the remainder of the champagne, she touched up her own makeup and headed downstairs, shaking her head the entire time and wondering what the curious flutter in her stomach was all about.

Let it go. Getting wrapped around the axle over Jordan's words was insane. Instead, she focused on something that was easier to manage in her mind—how amazingly hot he looked in a tuxedo.

As she stepped out onto the deck and accepted the tidy bouquet of soft yellow roses the florist handed her, Bridget's gaze swept over Jordan. His tux consisted of pants, a vest and a jacket, all in black and looking tailor made. He wore a crisp white shirt and a slim black tie. A Rob Pattinson-Brad Pitt red carpet mash-up that was damn sexy.

He had sandy-brown hair that was too long. The wind tousled it in evocative disarray. Her fingers itched to sweep through the luxurious-looking strands, though not to straighten them. Rather to make them even messier, because it was such a sexy style on him. He looked like a rock star, and every woman at this wedding, with the exception of Sophie, would fall head-over-heels in love with Jordan Cooper tonight. Even if it was just a temporary affliction.

Bridget had witnessed his effect on women on numerous occasions. Would be subjected to the inevitable too if she allowed herself to be. But Bridget's world was a well-constructed one that she managed with great care and caution. She had a wonderful career as a real estate agent to the rich and famous and was invited to the most prestigious events in town. She was successful and at the top of Malibu's VIP list, even though she kept people at arm's length, for the most part.

She could easily afford her affluent lifestyle, yet Bridget had been given the majority of her most valued possessions. Her Mercedes convertible, almost all of her

diamond jewelry, her timeshare in Barbados, her beachfront condo. All were gifts from her long line of wealthy suitors.

Though not one of them had ever stirred her emotions the way Jordan had today.

Stop!

She really had to get off this sappy merry-go-round. It was making her dizzy.

"Sounds like it's time." Jordan's sexy, intimate voice broke into her errant thoughts. The music had changed, indicating the ceremony had begun, and she hadn't even noticed.

She glanced over at Jordan and her breath caught. He was staring at her with a warm expression on his boyishly handsome face. His dark brown eyes looked like melted chocolate. They made her think of warm fudge dripping onto her naked skin and oozing down her chest, between the valley of her breasts where he would lick it off slowly. So, so slowly...

She stifled a moan. Jordan's tongue on her breasts. Now there was a wicked thought that would make her trip on her way down the aisle. She could vividly imagine his mouth closing over one of her tight nipples and sucking gently on it as his cock thrust deep into her wet cunt, making her cry out from the pleasure he brought her...

She turned away. Fought for a steady breath. Her stomach took a strange tumble and her clit tingled as though wanting to make its need for stimulation known.

Jordan asked, "Are you two ready?"

Sophie said, "I can barely wait another minute!"

Bridget smiled at her enthusiasm. She shared the same opinion, but for an entirely different reason. Sophie couldn't wait to be pronounced Mrs. Sam Houston. Bridget couldn't wait to get home. The sooner this day was over, the better. She needed a serious reprieve from the roller coaster ride she'd been on since she'd arrived at the house. So much of it Jordan's doing.

She headed to the steps and, on cue, made her way carefully down to the sandy beach. Her flat-soled sandals helped to make it an easy walk down the aisle. She was also glad the lack of high heels kept her from looking like the Jolly Green Giant next to Sophie, who she'd be standing alongside during the ceremony. At five-foot-ten, Bridget was as tall as Sam and Jordan when she wore her three- or four-inch heels. The height and her long legs tended to make her stand out in crowds. Though she didn't mind that any other time, today was different. Today was Sophie's day, and Bridget was woman enough to want her friend to garner all the attention she deserved.

Despite Bridget's earlier lamenting over the trouble she'd gone to in order to look good for the wedding, she knew all eyes would be on Sophie—as they should be. In fact, she realized now there was only one man she'd gone to so much trouble to impress, and the thought was a disconcerting one. *Jordan*.

As she reached the decorated arch and stepped off to the side, Sam gave her a friendly smile. They went back. Way back. Had dated casually for a couple of years, though their "relationship" had basically been a mutual business transaction rather than a romance. He was a real estate attorney and they made a good "couple" at social events where there were networking opportunities to help each of them advance their careers.

Sam was a good fuck, no doubt about it. But one night on his boat, their association with each other had changed dramatically. Jordan had been along for the day at sea, and Bridget had successfully seduced them both, enjoying a ménage that had fulfilled the fantasy she'd harbored, starring the two men.

Yet after that night...her desire for Sam had vanished—and vice versa. In its place, her mad crush on Jordan had erupted.

She smiled at him now as he walked Sophie down the aisle. He winked back and her cunt clenched tight. She wanted him, there was no denying it. Though it was just an infatuation that would go away once she had him again. Just *him*, all alone so that they could concentrate solely on pleasuring each other. Then he'd be out of her system and

she could move on. Let go of all these feelings swirling in her belly like a mini-cyclone trying to gain strength and speed. She wouldn't allow it to. In fact, tonight was the perfect night to get it on with Jordan so *she* could get on with her life.

The ceremony was not a lengthy one, but it was certainly chock-full of heartstring-pulling moments. Bridget was relieved when it was finally over and the party started. The reception was set up on the beach and the deck of the house that overlooked the ocean. A steel-drum band played upbeat music, tiki torches lit the beach and the champagne flowed freely.

The touching toasts at dinner were a bit to muscle through, but all in all, the evening progressed quite well. Though Bridget was on bridesmaid duty, there wasn't much Sophie required of her. In fact, the bride was attached to her groom all night long, only leaving his side once or twice for trips to the bathroom. Now that the dancing had commenced, she and Sam were glued to each other as they swayed to the music and stared into each other's eyes, slow-dancing even during the fast songs.

"Disgusting, isn't it?" Jordan asked in a playful voice as he sidled up to Bridget while she stood along the edge of the parquet dance floor, arranged in the sand for the occasion. "They can't keep their eyes or their hands off each other. Thank God they're staying at the Four Seasons tonight and then heading to Hawaii in the morning or I'd have to move out for the next couple weeks."

She laughed. "What's wrong, Jordan? Knowing your friends are fucking like bunnies night and day would make you too horny to stay in the house?"

"Yes," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, knowing Sam, he booked a secluded suite so the neighbors won't have to be subjected to copious amounts of honeymoon sex."

"Ah, good for them for going at it nonstop," he said as he unexpectedly wrapped his strong arms around her waist and lifted her just enough off the ground that he could tow her onto the dance floor before she could even protest. Setting her gently on her

feet, he said, "Guess that's one good thing about marriage. You've always got a sure thing waiting for you."

Bridget shook her head. "Not necessarily. Most people I know have *less* sex after they get married."

"That will not be the case with Sam and Sophie," he said. "I've never seen two people so hot for each other."

His arms tightened around her and his body pressed to hers. He began to move to the slow, sexy music, and she had no choice but to follow suit. Not that she minded, really.

"Unfortunately," she said, "passion fades."

"Doesn't have to," he murmured in her ear.

His intimate tone and warm breath on her neck made that tingling sensation dance along her clit again. Her nipples felt tight behind the built-in bra of her dress. The way Jordan moved with her caused their legs to tangle together. His thick thigh was wedged between her parted legs, creating pressure against her mound, which made her pussy throb with the need to be filled.

She sighed. *Oh Jordan. How you tempt me...*

"You don't believe two people can keep the fire burning if they work at it?" he asked, apparently in response to the puff of air she'd just let out, which had sounded a bit despondent, she had to admit.

"I think it's a nice notion."

"But not a realistic one."

She gave in to the inevitable—that he wasn't going to let her go until they'd danced together—and slid her arms around his neck. It felt good to be in his tight embrace, with her chest pressed against his. His head was bent so that he could speak quietly into her ear and she found that she liked how feminine she felt when she wasn't eye-to-eye

with him. Snuggled close to him with her head on his shoulder was by no means a hardship.

"I didn't say it's not realistic," she told him. "I just think anyone who believes in eternal sexual—or romantic—bliss is headed for serious disappointment."

He chuckled. "So cynical. Was there ever a time when you believed you'd meet Prince Charming and live happily ever after—with lots of hot and sweaty sex?"

"No." The word practically flew out of her mouth, with absolutely no hesitation on her part. She rolled her eyes at what he'd already pointed out as cynicism, grateful Jordan couldn't see the gesture because her cheek was resting on his shoulder. But clearly he felt the tension that instantly gripped her body, because he pulled away slightly and stared down at her.

"You were never the princess starring in your own fairytale?"

"Jesus, Jordan," she said as she thrust her hips forward and tightened her arms around his neck, forcing him to cozy up to her again. "Why is that such a surprise or a big deal? Not all women believe in that crap." Though even as she said the words, she knew she was doing something she'd never done before. She was lying to Jordan.

"Well, you're the first woman I've met who feels that way."

She closed her eyes, wishing like hell this topic had never come up. Of course she'd fantasized about a happily ever after with her own Prince Charming. Once upon a time. But she'd learned at an early age that he didn't exist. And no, she wasn't thinking in literal terms about what princes in fairytales translated to—perfection. No one was perfect. Nor did she require that in a man. But she did require fidelity when exclusivity was agreed upon. Unfortunately, she'd yet to meet a man who valued the concept the way she once had.

She'd learned it was much easier—much kinder to her heart, actually—to accept the fact that men were prone to cheating and it was better to face the inevitable than to bury her head in the sand and get torn to shreds again.

Bridget had been played before. No, that wasn't quite accurate. She'd been wrecked, damaged, nearly destroyed. Like a stalled car sitting on the tracks when the flashing lights weren't on and the crossing guards weren't down—indicating it was safe to be there—she'd been slammed into by the undetected train. And it had almost killed her.

At first, she'd wished it had. But time heals most wounds...or at the very least, one learns to bury the pain in order to survive.

For Bridget, the "once bitten, twice shy" adage had become an immediate and unwavering motto. So if people thought she was promiscuous or cold-hearted because she didn't date exclusively and didn't believe in romantic relationships, that was their prerogative and she didn't bother correcting them. She owed no one an apology, because she never pretended to be more than she was.

The plain and simple truth was, she'd tasted heaven and swallowed hell.

Being emotionally devastated was not an easy thing to bounce back from and she was fairly certain the only way she'd made it through was by vowing to never open her heart to anyone again.

Not exactly a nice sentiment, but Bridget couldn't imagine surviving another demoralizing and shattering heartbreak, so she stayed away from romance and words meant to deceptively seduce the heart for one's own, temporary purposes.

Perhaps that was why she'd been so annoyed with her innate response to Jordan's tender comments when he'd spoken to Sophie earlier. Bridget hadn't wanted to believe he meant such lyrical, beautiful words. But she knew, deep in her soul, that he had. And those words had moved her in a way she'd never been moved before.

Which was so very dangerous.

Needing to regain some of the ground she'd lost tonight, she said, "I think two people can appreciate what the other has to offer without getting mired down in half-truths or personal agendas. Life isn't all roses and sunshine, so why pretend that it is? A

little honesty and realism between men and women would be refreshing, don't you think?"

"Hmm," Jordan muttered in her ear. "Prince Charming was a lying, cheating bastard not worthy of your little-girl fantasies?"

"Yes." She hoped he'd leave it at that. If Jordan knew the truth—that she'd once believed in fairytales with happy endings—he'd be like a dog with a bone and never let it go.

His arms tightened around her, and he said in a lower voice, whispering softly in her ear, "You've met the wrong princes."

Her eyes squeezed shut and her stomach fluttered for the tenth or so time since she'd arrived for the wedding. What was Jordan doing to her tonight? Was she so enthralled with Sophie and Sam's beautiful union that she was succumbing to romantic notions she'd denounced long ago?

She had no idea why she was falling down the rabbit hole with Jordan, but damn if she didn't want to believe that perhaps he was right. Maybe she really had met all the wrong princes.

Mentally shaking her head, she said, "It's not that simple."

"Nothing ever is."

This time it was Bridget who pulled away. "I don't subscribe to any of this," she said, mustering a matter-of-fact tone.

She searched for that confident, above-reproach veneer she'd kept in place for so long. It had dissolved in Sophie's room, when Jordan had been so kind to a woman desperately wanting to be everything she could possibly be for the man she loved. Somehow, Jordan had made Bridget drop her protective shield, and she needed to find some way to slip it back into place. Before she did something really crazy, like fall for bad-boy Jordan Cooper.

He gave her a curious look, to which she responded, “You have to admit, Jordan, that life is so much easier when you live it with your eyes wide open, don’t expect any romantic miracles and stand steadily on your own two feet so the rug doesn’t get ripped out from underneath you.”

She stepped around him and walked off the dance floor, hating with every breath she took that the cynicism had finally spewed forth, getting the best of her. She’d worked so hard for so long to keep herself emotionally detached. To focus solely on her career and not get sidetracked—or derailed again—by romantic delusions. She’d been left emotionally bankrupt once before and she wasn’t inclined to put stock in that market again.

Jordan had turned the tables on her today and it seemed the only way to regain her footing was to walk away and regroup. Unfortunately for Bridget, there was no escaping the bliss weddings inspired. Try as she might...

Chapter Three

Jordan whistled under his breath as he watched Bridget make a beeline for a tuxedo-clad waiter and lift a glass of champagne off his tray. She climbed the stairs to the deck, then disappeared inside the house.

Interesting. He'd rattled her cage. He wasn't quite sure how, but there was no denying he'd pushed some buttons that had left her off-kilter.

As he accepted an offer to dance from a wide-eyed beauty in a red cocktail dress, he wondered what had the ice queen so unsettled. Really, it wasn't like Bridget to be flustered or so...huffy. What nerve had he struck, he wondered as he held Sophie's cousin, Mia, in a loose embrace while twirling her around the dance floor. He didn't miss a step, but his mind was not on the steady calypso beat or the woman in his arms. Rather, he continued to look for Bridget to return to the party. It wasn't like her to hide out, yet that's exactly what she seemed to be doing.

Two dances with Mia led to two dances with her sister Carol, which led to a slow dance with one of his and Sophie's friends from college, and so on. By the time he made it off the dance floor, the party was winding down. Sophie tossed her bouquet—an event for which Bridget was a definite no-show—and Sam tactfully removed her garter and shot it into a crowd of men who all reached enthusiastically for it. Oddly, it dropped at Jordan's feet as he sipped his champagne. Sam grinned at him and Sophie beamed brightly.

With a scowl on his face, Jordan bent down to retrieve the garter. "I'll frame it for you," he said to Sam.

"Oh no. It's yours to keep, buddy." Sam clasped his shoulder and added, "Some people would consider that a sign, my friend."

"Please, don't curse me," Jordan retorted. To Sophie, he said, "Aren't you glad you finally came out of the bathroom?"

She swatted playfully at him. "Yes, indeed. And now I'm ready to leave all you crazy people behind and spend a quiet night with my new husband."

Jordan was happy to see her so in love. "You two take off. The caterer and cleaning crew have everything under control."

"And what about you?" Sophie asked, an expectant look on her face. "What do you intend to do for the rest of the evening? And you'd better not say one of my cousins!"

He chuckled. "Nah. They're pretty and all, but...not my type." In fact, Jordan already had someone in mind. If only he could track her down and persuade her to spend the night...

Sam and Sophie made the rounds, saying goodbye to everyone, then headed off to the Four Seasons and what would surely be an erotic wedding night. Jordan entertained the rest of the guests until there was no one left but the wait staff and Bridget. She'd helped the florist pack up the decorations that Sophie wanted to donate to a hospice facility to cheer up patients.

When Bridget returned to the kitchen, she reached for an open bottle of champagne in a crystal chiller. "I really shouldn't, but what the hell? I'm not driving. There's a limo on call for me."

Jordan thrust his glass toward her and said, "Fill 'er up. We may as well relax and put our feet up now that the mayhem is over."

She sighed. "It was a beautiful wedding, I'll admit."

"Sophie knows how to throw one hell of a party."

"I'll say." They retired to the deck and stood at the railing, staring out at the ocean lit by the moon. The tiki torches on the beach still burned, but with less intensity so that the immediate area was cast in flickering shadows.

Jordan said, "You had a good time, then?"

She nodded. "For the most part. I'm not one for weddings, but this one was more of a celebration than a sappy lovefest. I kind of liked it."

He grinned. "And who can complain when Dom Perignon and Maine lobster are on the menu?"

"Indeed." She lifted her glass in a toast. Jordan touched the rim of his flute to hers. "For once, being a bridesmaid didn't totally suck."

"Soph was really pleased when you accepted."

Bridget took a sip of bubbly, then said, "I was really surprised when she asked."

Jordan was quiet a moment. He had his suspicions as to why Sophie had warmed up to Bridget when Bridget really hadn't been considered a close friend of the "family" before Sophie and Sam had hooked up. The primary reason, he deduced, was that Bridget had always been a fan of Sophie's, which had been demonstrated in ways others—like Sam, Sophie and Jordan—had picked up on, but which he was certain Bridget herself hadn't even realized.

Being so protective of Sophie, Jordan hadn't missed much. And the fact that Bridget always had something encouraging and heartwarming to say to Sophie each time one of her boyfriends dumped her because of her inability to engage in physical intimacy—as a result of her scars—proved there was more depth to Bridget than she'd let on.

Jordan, for one, had not missed how good a friend Bridget had been to Sophie over the years, even if neither woman had seen it themselves until recently.

In addition, Jordan had witnessed the change in Bridget and Sam's relationship following that notorious night on the boat when the three of them had gotten it on at Bridget's request. Her interest had shifted, he was sure. The months following that night had led to Bridget and Sam becoming friends, no longer lovers, and Sam and Sophie becoming lovers instead of just friends.

And Jordan? He'd looked at Bridget with different eyes, no doubt about it. He suspected she'd experienced the same thing, since she'd begun requesting Sam send his driver for her first, then stop off at the beach house to pick up Sam, whenever they

attended functions together. Bridget would come in and have a drink with Sophie. Jordan would join them. And then Sam would eventually wander along and whisk Bridget off to the event du jour. When it would have been more convenient for him to simply pick Bridget up on the way to whatever party they were attending together.

Hmm. It was interesting how he knew all of this, but had not fully processed it in his mind until now.

His gaze slid to Bridget as she sipped her champagne and stared out at the ocean. "What happened while we were dancing?" he asked.

She shot him a hard look. "What?"

"You heard me." He shifted his body so that his hip pressed to the side of the railing and his elbow rested on top of it. This way, he faced her head-on. He hoped she wouldn't move away or divert her gaze. He wanted an honest answer from her.

She looked uncomfortable as she took another sip of champagne, then shrugged a shoulder. "You were talking about things I don't believe in, Jordan. And trying to make me see it all in a different light."

"What's wrong with that? Sometimes we need to see things in a different light."

For instance, he'd needed to see Bridget casting aside her own cynical convictions about love and weddings in order to accept a friend's request to stand by her, when Bridget clearly didn't like participating in such things. It was only a small piece of the Bridget Carlton pie, but every little bite added up, didn't it?

She said, "You want me to be something I'm not, Jordan. I can see it in your eyes."

He shook his head. "No. I just want you to be you."

"That's all I've ever been," she said, a hint of exasperation in her tone.

Jordan set his glass on the railing and reached for her, one of his hands gripping her waist and pulling her to him. "I can feel the chemistry between us and I like it. But you seem to fight it."

She sighed. "If it were just physical chemistry, I wouldn't be so opposed to it. But your probing is... I don't know." She set her glass on the railing next to his. Staring up at him, she said, "Tonight isn't like that night on the boat. Or any night I've had with Sam—or anyone else for that matter. I'm used to being in control of the situation, and it's always just about sex, Jordan."

His jaw clenched for a moment before he said, "I can relate."

She smiled softly at him. "No, I don't think you can. You see, with me, it's just a physical act. Sexual—not emotional—fulfillment. With you, I could tell it was different—that you were different—that night we were on the boat. I saw it in the way you watched me, the way you touched me, the way you fucked me. It was like you wanted more than just to be inside my body. You wanted to be inside my head."

He regarded her for a moment, then said, "You are a tough nut to crack."

"It's not worth the effort, Jordan. What you think is there...isn't."

"I don't believe that," he was quick to say. "Not for a second." His eyes searched hers and he could swear there was a hint of hope in them. He chose to believe that she wanted him to dig deeper, even while she warned him off.

It would be easier, of course, to just let her be cold-hearted Bridget. Admittedly, that wasn't what he wanted. He didn't want either one of them to take the easy way out. Because he was convinced there was more to the connection they shared than just one night of down-and-dirty sex. And even though it would be a smoother road to travel if he just let his little head overrule his big head and simply fuck her right here on the deck, he found himself not minding the inevitable bumps he might encounter along the way.

He leaned toward her as his hand still gripped her waist, holding her in place. His head dipped and his lips brushed over hers. He kissed her softly, slowly. Tasting her lips, coaxing her to stay where she was and not retreat.

He felt her body tense and heard her breath catch.

"Jordan," she whispered. Another warning he wouldn't heed.

"Maybe there's something to be said for complicated and messy," he told her in a low voice.

Her head moved from side to side as she said, "You and I aren't the complicated, messy type. We like neat and orderly. Controlled environments. Controlled emotions."

Any other night, he probably would have concurred with her and let it lie. He wouldn't engage in a verbal debate just to take advantage of what she had to offer. But something was different tonight. *She* was different tonight. Hell, he was too.

Maybe it was all this wedding stuff he'd been in the thick of for the past several months, and seeing Sam and Sophie so in love. Maybe it was the fact that he'd taken one look at Bridget before the wedding and hadn't been able to think of anything but getting naked with her the rest of the night. Maybe it was because she'd walked away from him when they were on the dance floor, as though needing to get away from the pick chipping at the ice, getting too close to something she wanted to keep frozen in time, in the past. Which intrigued him.

Likely it was a combination of all these things and more. Whatever it was, Jordan had to admit that while his cock couldn't care less whether he fucked Bridget hard and fast or made love to her slow and easy, his heart actually *did* care.

"You know," he said as he took a moment to process what all this meant—and verbally acknowledge it. "I have just as much to lose as you do."

"No," she said in a sad voice. "I don't bounce back so well."

This was an interesting tidbit he added to the puzzle. He said, "Maybe there won't be anything to bounce back from. What if there aren't any stone walls to hit?"

She laughed softly. "Oh, Jordan. I do like your optimism."

He grinned at her. "You like my cock too."

"You're so arrogant."

He nodded. His lips brushed hers again and he murmured, "So are you. Maybe that's one of the things that makes us sizzle together. Neither one of us has an inhibited bone in our bodies."

"So true." Her body, toned and luscious, melded to his. The slender, manicured fingers of one hand toyed with his tie, as though she were contemplating loosening it. She said, "I was thinking earlier this might be a perfect opportunity to get you alone."

"Notice I wasn't interested in spending the evening with anyone else."

"Oh I saw you out on the dance floor. You had them lined up one after the other."

He grinned again. "They asked me, not the other way around. You were the only one I dragged out there."

"It was a nice dance," she told him. "While it lasted."

"I'm not used to be snubbed, you know."

"You're a big boy. I'm sure you handled it just fine."

He shook his head. "I think you owe me one."

Her fingers curled around his tie and she pulled him closer to her. Her mouth touched his, tentatively at first. He heard her suck in a sharp breath, then she pressed her lips to his and kissed him passionately. Jordan responded instantly. Their lips parted and his tongue slid past her teeth to tangle with hers. His arms wrapped around her waist, crushing her body to his, just as her arms wound around his neck.

Fire roared through his body and his cock throbbed with the need for release. From his pants, from the tension that gripped him. He wanted to thrust into her slick cunt and make them both come.

A groan lodged in his throat. Bridget may have been right with her veiled warnings—this could actually be dangerous for them both. But Jordan didn't care at this point. He wanted her more than he had that night on the boat. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any woman. Perhaps that was why it'd taken so long for them to reach this juncture. He knew there was something stronger between them than just lust.

He doubted Bridget acknowledged the same, even if just to herself. That was okay. Jordan was a patient man. As long as she walked the path with him, he wasn't too concerned with how slow the pace might be.

Not sensing any resistance on her part—likely because he was kissing her, not picking her brain—he loosened his embrace and reached for the zipper on her dress. It slid smoothly down the track and he eased the material from her body, finally breaking their kiss in order to work the tight dress over her hips and down her legs. She stepped out of the shimmery fabric and he laid it along the cushion of the chaise lounge so it wouldn't wrinkle.

When he turned back to her, Jordan's cock jerked behind the fly of his pants. "Jesus," he said, followed by a low whistle of appreciation. "You'd win Centerfold of the Century if there were such a thing."

She grinned at him. "Such charm."

He hadn't forgotten how amazing her body was, yet the vision before him still stole his breath. She stood with one mile-long leg crossed over the other and her hands clasped behind her back, which made her full breasts thrust forward and upward as though begging for his attention. Her small areolas and tight nipples were a dusty-rose color that complemented her tanned skin. Clearly, she sunbathed in the nude, because there were no unsightly lines. Just inches and inches of smooth bronze skin he was dying to touch.

She wore nothing now but her sandals and a tiny, lacy, lavender G-string. It was a million-dollar view. *Playboy* wouldn't lose money if they paid her that much to be a centerfold.

Jordan worked his tie loose and undid the first few buttons of his shirt. He wanted to unfasten his pants as well, since his cock could also use some breathing room. Instead, he returned to where she stood, his eyes glued on her amazingly luscious body.

She reached for one end of his tie, which hung around his neck. Pulling the material slowly from him, she dangled it in the air and said, "Wanna tie me up?"

His heart hammered in his chest and his cock pulsed with a strong beat that was almost painful. To her question, he said, "No. I want your hands on my body."

She dropped the tie and crooked a finger at him. He closed the gap between them with one step and she deftly slid each button on his vest through its hole. She removed the garment from him and then went to work on his shirt. Both items ended up tossed in the general direction of the chaise lounge, where he'd left her dress.

Her hands splayed across his bare chest and he let out a low grunt. Her skin on his felt good, but it was the way she touched him that really revved Jordan's engine. She was confident, sure of how he would respond to her. As her fingers swept over his pectorals and then her nails scraped his nipples, he fought the urge to grip her elbows and force her backward to another chaise, where he could ease her down onto her back and fuck her hard.

He had something different in mind tonight. An experiment of sorts. Something that would be foreign for them both, but he really wanted to give it a shot. Figured this was his one and only chance.

She kissed him again and he let her command their passion, making her think she was in control. She wasn't. Nor was he. Not tonight.

When she pulled away, he scooped her up in his arms, surprising her.

"What are you doing?" she asked as they left the deck. Clearly she'd expected him to bend her over the railing and fuck her from behind, or set her on the chaise lounge and spread her legs wide, as he'd considered doing.

"Taking you someplace comfortable. A big bed where we can spread out," he said with a wink.

She seemed hesitant to wrap her arms around his neck, but really had no choice. He carried her upstairs to his bedroom. Placing her gently in the middle of the king-size bed, he took a step back and admired the way her tanned skin and blonde hair looked against the royal blue of his duvet. He bent down and slipped the sandals from her feet, then reached for the strings at her waist, dragging her skimpy panties down her legs.

"Damn, you've got one hell of a body." His gaze lingered on her breasts. He wanted to cup them in his hands and squeeze them roughly before licking her nipples, making them even tighter than they already were. But he resisted the temptation. Instead, he said, "Don't move."

"Jordan," she said on a frustrated sigh. "Are you planning on fucking me or not?"

He grinned at her, though it was a strained one because his entire body was wound tight like a spool of thread. "Oh yeah. But just...wait a minute."

Her head flopped back against the plump pillows on the bed.

Jordan chuckled. Good to know she wanted him. *Now*. But they could both wait just a few more minutes. He was sure it'd be worth it. He stalked out of the bedroom and went into Sophie's room to collect a few candles he'd spotted earlier. He brought them back, set them on his nightstand and lit them. Bridget sat up and opened her mouth—to protest, he was sure—but he cut her off with a look.

Then he went downstairs and found a few items he thought would come in handy. Returning to his bedroom, he set the bottle of champagne on the opposite nightstand from the candles, along with two glasses. In his other hand, he had two small boxes stacked on top of each other.

"What are you up to?" Bridget asked.

"I believe they call this 'mood enhancement'," he said.

"You need *atmosphere* to fuck me?" She sounded incredulous.

Jordan laughed. "Come on, Bridge. A little romance never hurt anyone."

"Oh no," she said as she sat up again. "I don't want romance. Jesus, Jordan. What is going on with you? The last time we were together, you couldn't get your dick into me fast enough. You fucked my cunt, you fucked my ass. You gave me more orgasms than any other man ever has. Why on earth would you muck up sexual chemistry with *romance*?"

He grinned at her as he shrugged. "I don't know. Just seems like the thing to do tonight."

"Oh God." She groaned.

Jordan rushed on, "Just shut up and let me do this. You might actually like it."

"Yeah, that's the problem," she muttered.

Jordan bit back another grin. He popped the cork on a new bottle of champagne and poured her a glass. Handing it over, he said, "Try to enjoy the moment, babe."

She rolled her eyes, but accepted the glass nonetheless. "I will never figure you out."

"Kind of fun, isn't it?" He winked at her.

Crossing the room, he hit the switch on the gas fireplace and a low flicker of flames danced beneath the ceramic log. Returning to the bed, he reached for one of the boxes and flipped the lid open. Inside were enormous strawberries arranged around a big blob of whipped cream. He set the container next to Bridget's shapely thigh, then opened the other box.

She gasped in surprise as he grabbed a handful of Sophie's multicolored rose petals and tossed them in the air, letting them fall where they may.

As the petals rained down on Bridget, a huge smile lit her striking face just as her amber eyes misted over. "They're so beautiful."

Jordan tossed aside the empty box and climbed onto the bed. He picked up a fragrant pink petal and ran the velvety side along Bridget's calf. She sighed as she settled back against the pillows.

"Okay, totally hokey, but..." She shrugged a shoulder. "I guess it's not so bad."

"I promise not to tell if you end up enjoying this."

She laughed. "I wouldn't let anyone else get away with this, you know. You're completely out of line, Jordan."

"Why, because I want us both to see what we might be missing?"

"It's not that simple," she was quick to say.

"No, it's not." Because turning this into a romantic interlude might evoke feelings they'd both suppressed or fought or denied. "This could be dangerous," he admitted. "Then again...it could be damn hot. For instance..." He scooped up a finger full of whipped cream and plopped the dollop on one of her tight nipples. Liking his train of thought, he did the same by coating the other nipple.

Bridget grinned. "I will never get you."

"Maybe that's the key to keeping things exciting. If I never do what you expect me to do, I'll never be predictable or boring."

"Jordan." She pinned him with a serious look. "No one, and I mean *no one*, would ever call you predictable or boring."

"So let me have my fun," he said quite simply.

She shook her head and let out a low breath. "Fine. Do whatever pops into that creative brain of yours. I'll lie here and reap the benefits."

"Now that's more like it. See how much more enjoyable this is when you don't fight me?"

She smirked. He chuckled. Then he bent his head to her breasts and licked and sucked off the whipped cream on first one, then the other, nipple. Next, he dipped the tip of a plump strawberry into the fluffy, white blob and held it to her glossy lips. "Bite."

She did. As she chewed the fruit, he ate the remainder of it. Loading up another strawberry, he moved between her legs and dabbed a bit of the white frothiness on her clit.

Bridget said, "Oh yeah. Very creative."

His head dipped and he licked off the whipped cream with his tongue. Bridget sighed. He handed her the strawberry and she sucked on it as he sucked on her clit, making her squirm on the bed. His tongue flicked over the swollen bud before he drew

it into his mouth again. She gasped and moaned. Jordan's cock strained against his suit pants, but he concentrated solely on pleasuring Bridget.

His hands splayed over her inner thighs as he spread her legs wider. His tongue slid over her pussy lips, making her hips jerk in response to his touch.

"Jordan."

She set aside her champagne and her fingers threaded through his hair as he targeted her clit again, flicking it quickly with his tongue until she was panting and moaning and writhing. Her excitement spurred him on. He pushed a finger into her wet cunt and her grip on the strands of his hair tightened.

"Oh God, that's so good," she told him.

He worked a second finger into her tight pussy and finger-fucked her with quick strokes.

"Yes," she murmured. "Make me come."

He withdrew his fingers from her cunt and used them to feverishly work her clit. She squirmed on the bed and gasped for air.

"You like that, don't you?" he asked as her eyelids closed and sexy sounds fell from her parted lips.

"I'm so close," she told him. Her hands cupped her breasts and she squeezed them as he worked her a little faster. "Oh yes. That's it. Right there."

He stroked her confidently and her hips lifted, creating more pressure against her clit. Jordan wanted to lick her pussy again, but he could sense how close she was to coming and he wasn't about to shift any gears before the orgasm hit her. He wanted her to come. God, how he wanted her to come! He wanted to hear her scream his name and watch as her body quivered and quaked.

With his free hand, he spread her lips, his finger and thumb positioned so that she was completely open to him. He massaged her clit with a little more speed, a little more

force. Within seconds, she was whimpering and moaning. And then she gave him exactly what he wanted.

“Jordan!” She called out his name as she came. “Oh God!” Her body jerked and spasmed as he continued to pleasure her. His mouth returned to her clit as two fingers slid into her cunt. Her hips rocked and she moaned again. “That feels incredible. You are so good at going down on me.”

Jordan liked how she tasted and how she responded to him. She didn’t hold back, even when he was doing something so intimate to her. As her fingers wove through his hair again, he stroked her inner walls while licking her clit, keeping her moaning and writhing and begging for more.

“Oh yes,” she whispered as her hips lifted again. “Make me come, Jordan. I love how hard you make me come.”

He glanced up to find her squeezing her breasts and then tugging on the tight nipples. Watching her made his cock throb. It was a wonder he kept from coming himself.

His head dipped again. He felt her body tremble and knew she was close to letting go once more.

“That’s it,” he whispered against her bare flesh as her hips rocked to the rhythm he set with his finger-fucking. “Take what you want, Bridget. I’ll give you whatever you need.”

Her breathy sighs turned throaty as she seemed to lose herself in the moment.

He knew she was exceptional at reciprocating, but that wasn’t really on his mind right now. He enjoyed arousing her and making her feel good as he pushed her closer to the edge.

When her second orgasm hit, she cried out his name again and Jordan’s heart hammered a little harder in his chest. His cock throbbed a bit more painfully as well. Withdrawing his fingers from her, he climbed off the bed and reached for the button on his pants, unfastening it. The zipper slid down the track and he shoved the garment,

and his briefs, over his hips. He toed off his shoes and quickly divested himself of all clothing. His gaze returned to the bed and his cock jerked at the sight of Bridget running her hands over her body as she spread her legs wide.

With a contented smile on her face, she said, "How do you want me?"

"Every way imaginable," he admitted. "We may be at this well into tomorrow afternoon."

She laughed. "If anyone has the stamina for that sort of marathon fucking, I'm sure it's you."

He retrieved a box of condoms from his nightstand and then joined her on the bed, settling between her parted legs. "You have a body that was made for sin," he told her.

"Likewise." Her hands roamed his shoulders, his chest, his back. She reached down and gripped his ass, giving the cheeks a hard squeeze. "Fuck me, Jordan," she said as her pelvis ground against his. "Give it to me good."

He groaned. The desire to simply thrust into her tight cunt and fuck her hard until they both came was an overwhelming one. But he was on a fact-finding mission tonight, wasn't he? He had something altogether different in mind and he stayed the course. He bent his head to hers and kissed her slowly, sensually. Until her body seemed to melt into the mattress and her arms wound around his neck. She moaned into his mouth and lifted one long leg, draping it over his ass, holding him to her.

Jordan took his time, kissing her thoroughly. When they were both breathless, his lips moved over her jaw and down the long column of her neck. His tongue tasted her slightly salty flesh and his teeth nipped gently, making her squirm beneath him. He made his way down to her breasts and took one puckered nipple into his mouth, sucking on it before swirling his tongue around the tight peak, tasting the remnants of the whipped cream he'd licked off earlier.

Bridget sighed. "You make my nipples so hard and tingly."

He pinched one between his finger and thumb while his teeth grazed the other. She bucked beneath him as she let out a sharp breath.

"You're making me wetter," she told him.

Jordan groaned. "I'm so hard for you."

"Then grab a condom and have your way with me."

He palmed her breasts and squeezed them roughly. He wanted to bury his cock between the plump mounds and fuck her breasts. He wanted to flip her onto her stomach and fuck her from behind. He wanted her beneath him, on top of him, alongside him. It was nearly impossible to decide where to start. But when his gaze lifted from her breasts and met her own lusty stare, he knew exactly what he wanted.

Rolling onto his back, bringing her with him so she straddled his lap, he reached for a condom on the nightstand, tore the packet open with his teeth and handed the rubber to her. She rolled it slowly down his erect shaft, making his hips jerk upward at the intimate touch.

Christ, he was so close to coming. She had him totally worked up, in desperate need of being buried in her warm depths as he fucked her hard. But he kept a firm grip on his emotions, kept himself in control.

When she was done, he held her hips in his hands and guided her down on his cock. She drew him into her body. Every inch sliding along her inner walls made him yearn to thrust up into her. But he held back, agonizing as it was.

When she'd completely sheathed him with her hot, slick cunt, he coaxed her into a slow rhythm as he continued to grip her hips. He purposely kept the pace easy and sensual, despite his primal urge to hammer into her. She let him lead the way, which surprised him. When he was convinced she wasn't going to turn the tables on him, he let go of her hips and instead cupped her breasts again, squeezing them and teasing her nipples. She rocked in time with him, their bodies moving together as one.

Her head fell back on her shoulders, her long blonde hair cascading down her back. The flickering candles and flames in the hearth created shadows and light that danced across her naked body. She was more beautiful than any woman he'd ever laid eyes on, but tonight, in this light, she also looked softer and more sensuous than ever before.

As she rode him slowly, her cunt milked his cock and her soft pants carried on the quiet air. He'd never made love to a woman like this before—so slow and controlled. He could feel every inch of her surrounding his cock. Could feel the tightening and releasing of her inner muscles. She ground her ass against his pelvis and he lifted his hips slightly, pushing deeper into her and making her gasp.

"Bridget." He whispered her name.

She moaned. "You feel so good inside me. So big and thick."

His hands shifted from her breasts to her shoulders. He guided her down on top of him, so her chest pressed to his. His hands moved down to her ass and he cupped her cheeks, leading her into a slightly faster—though still easy and sensual—pace as he pushed up into her with just a little more force.

"Oh yes," she murmured. "That feels so good. The way you fill me and move inside me..." She dropped featherlike kisses on his neck and jaw. "We fit together perfectly."

He suspected she'd caught herself by surprise with that honest admission, because she missed a beat. But his hands on her ass helped her to resume the rhythm they had going.

"I like feeling your breasts against my chest," he told her, thinking it was only fair to be forthcoming as well. "And your lips on my skin."

Her mouth brushed over his cheekbone to his ear. She nibbled on the lobe and it drove him wild. Whispering in his ear, she said, "I have no idea what you're up to tonight, Jordan, but it feels damn good."

A soft grunt fell from his parted lips. "It's not easy holding back. You make me crazy, Bridget. I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone."

"You've had me before," she reminded him.

"No. Last time, I had to share you with Sam. And it wasn't like this. It's never been like this." His cock had never been this hard, he was sure. Never this sensitive or this close to bursting when he'd barely just gotten started. But everything he'd experienced

with Bridget tonight was a first, and maybe that was why being inside her, moving so slowly instead of fucking her hard and fast, felt so incredible. She was tight and wet and warm and he could think of no better sensation than this.

“Jordan,” she said, that hint of warning entering her voice again.

“Shut up, Bridget. Remember?” He thrust up into her to pacify her. She let out a sharp breath of air and he added, “If you don’t come with me inside you, then obviously I took the wrong approach tonight.”

She laughed softly in his ear. “That’s hardly a fair way to judge anything, Jordan. It’s impossible not to come with you inside me. It’s impossible not to come no matter what you do to me. It all feels so damn good.”

His hands moved from her ass, gliding slowly up her back to her shoulders. She shifted her own hands, sliding them around to his back, so he could twine his fingers through her silky hair. He guided her mouth to his and kissed her, long and deep. Her body rocked against his, and her soft curves and smooth skin felt great. So much so, he couldn’t help but lift his hips and push deeper into her wet cunt.

When they came up for air, she said, “You’ve never kissed me like that before.”

“Doesn’t mean I never wanted to.”

She stared at him a moment. There was something in her eyes that he couldn’t read. The flickering candlelight made her amber irises shimmer brightly, but he quickly realized it wasn’t an optical illusion he was witnessing. The look in her eyes backed up her response to him and his kisses. He could sense she had something to say. Something profound and touching. It was there in her eyes, he just didn’t know how to coax it from her.

It occurred to him that what he saw was acceptance of something significant between them, something that had been building for some time, which neither had chosen to acknowledge until now. And even though he was likely forcing her to accept the inevitable against her will, at least she wasn’t running and hiding from it.

Wrapping his arms around her slim waist and rolling her onto her back while he was still inside her, he stared down at her. And asked a very loaded question. "What if we're two people who thought we could only have a wild and wicked time and find satisfaction by playing the field, when in fact, all we really needed was to find the one person whose passion and sex drive matched our own?"

Her eyes narrowed on him. "What are you getting at, exactly?"

"What if..." he began as he ran a hand down her side to her thigh. He lifted her leg and draped it over his ass, where he liked it. She had the hottest gams he'd ever seen on a woman. "We were meant for each other all along?"

She groaned. "Jesus, Jordan. You are *so* not being fair. You're inside me, making me deliriously happy while posing an impossible-to-answer question!"

"Why is it so impossible to answer?" he asked as he moved a little faster inside her, giving her a little more of what she wanted, if her gyrating hips and tight grip on his cock were any indication.

"I just want you to fuck me," she told him. "You feel so amazing in my cunt. I'm close to coming again and I don't want to think about anything but how good this feels."

He could understand that sentiment. Admittedly, it was a bit difficult to keep coherent thoughts in his head when he was inside Bridget. His libido warred with his heart. The former merely wanted to drive in deep and fast, until both he and Bridget were sated. The latter had issues to resolve.

"Jordan," she muttered his name as her pussy squeezed him tight. "I like how you feel inside me. Isn't that enough?"

He sighed. He wasn't going to get anywhere with this conversation when they were both hot and horny for each other. Fine. *He'd* be the one to shut the hell up. But he wasn't veering from his experiment. He continued to move inside her with a strong, steady rhythm. She wrapped her other leg around his waist and arched her back, so her

breasts pressed firmly against his chest. His hands moved around to her backside and he cupped her ass cheeks as he made love to her.

"Now we're talking," she said.

Jordan groaned. "You'd better be close, Goddamn it."

She laughed. "Oh I am. Now that you've stepped off your crazy soapbox. *This* is all I can concentrate on, Jordan. It deserves my full attention."

His ego didn't mind the boost, even if he hadn't gotten an answer to his question. He kissed her again as he thrust into her. They moved together and he felt all the erotic sensations swell inside him. Her body trembled beneath his and he dragged his mouth away from hers so he could stare down at her and watch her as she came. He pushed her closer and closer until he heard the hitch in her breath. Her back arched further and her eyelids fluttered closed.

"Jordan," she whispered his name. "Oh God. I'm going to come again."

"Let go," he whispered back. "I want to feel you squeeze me tight and call out my name when you come."

Her eyes opened and their gazes locked. She opened her mouth as though to say something, but all that escaped her parted lips was a sharp moan.

"That's it," he said as he felt her inner walls contract around his cock. "That's the spot, isn't it, babe?"

Her teeth sank into her lower lip. She didn't close her eyes or look away, for which he was grateful. She was giving him what *he* wanted. Raw honesty. The passion of the moment from *her* perspective. He could see the emotions swirling in her amber irises, could hear the desire in her breathy moans. He could feel the pleasure she felt as she moved beneath him and clutched him tightly. The connection was there between them. It was strong and palpable. He could feel it.

He knew he'd made the right choice tonight. It was a turning point for them both, whether she acknowledged it or not come morning.

"Jordan," she muttered his name as her legs tightened around his hips. She squirmed beneath him as though she were restless and desperately in need of him. "I want more." He plunged into her and she cried out. "Yes, yes! That's the spot. Oh God you feel so good!"

Their eyes remained locked as he continued to give her what she asked for. Seconds later, she gasped for air, then cried out his name, making his gut pull tight and his cock surge inside her as he came too.

"Jesus, Bridget!" His orgasm was a powerful one, stealing his breath and making his body convulse. Neither of them looked away as the sensations consumed them both, as evidenced by the quaking of her body that matched his own.

She held him tight, her arms and legs around him, her cunt squeezing him, giving and receiving every ounce of pleasure possible. Jordan's hips continued to rock and move with hers. They both rode the wave until his head finally dipped and rested in the crook of her neck. Breathing heavily, he needed a few moments to regroup. Bridget held him to her, her fingers weaving through his hair.

"Okay," she said in his ear. "I'll give you this one. That was fucking incredible."

Chapter Four

For Bridget, the downside of “fucking incredible” was knowing what *could* be with Jordan, if she allowed it. A conundrum she’d never expected to find herself in and one that did not sit well with her.

So she ignored it, for the time being. Stepping from her Mercedes, she greeted her long-time client, Kevin Donnell, with a smile. At the same time, she gave herself a mental pep talk.

Focus on business. This is what you can control. This is what’s sane and normal in your life.

What *wasn’t* sane and normal in her life were the feelings Jordan had evoked the other night.

Good God, the man did the craziest things to her insides! And it was damn near impossible not to admit it, much to her dismay.

She should be royally pissed at him for stripping away all the barriers she’d so carefully constructed. Letting him make love to her, when they should have just had a quickie on the deck and been done with it, was a big mistake on her part. For reasons she still couldn’t fathom, she’d gone along with his little “experiment” —and lo and behold, she’d experienced several of the most powerful orgasms of her life. Not only had they been backed by intense physical desire, but she’d been swimming in a sea of unexpected and very raw emotions.

And Jordan... She shook her head as she thought of how open and real he’d been. No game playing, no seducing her to get what he wanted from her. He’d told her what was on his mind every step of the way and had backed up his words with his actions. At the end, when they’d come together, she’d felt his pleasure and his desire as strongly as she’d felt her own.

Hell, she'd felt more than that. Something had clicked into place with them, which scared the shit out of Bridget. She was supposed to have worked him out her system, not let him weasel further in!

So much for the mental pep talk.

Apparently, it was impossible *not* to think about Jordan.

"I'm going to make your job easy today," Kevin said as she joined him under the fancy port-cochere alongside the seven-million-dollar house she was showing him.

"Oh?" She lifted her sunglasses from her face, pushing them into her hair. This was definitely the diversion she needed from thoughts of Jordan—and the constant remembrance of how amazing he'd made her feel.

"All that information you sent me yesterday confirmed my decision. I'm buying this house."

She smiled at him. At least something in her life was sane and normal. "Congratulations. You won't regret it. The renovations alone make it worth two million more than the asking price, which is already four million below market value. That makes it a steal."

"Agreed." He held his hand out to her. "I appreciate the portfolio you sent over. It was comprehensive and concise. I was only halfway through it when I decided I wanted to buy."

"Just doing my job."

Kevin had been one of her first clients when she'd started selling real estate. Working with him had taught her the value of research and going the extra mile. At one point, that extra mile had included fucking him. But then he'd fallen in love with and married an L.A. socialite. He'd continued his professional relationship with Bridget, though, for which she was grateful.

"So I should expect a call from your lawyers in the morning?" she asked.

He nodded. "First thing. I want to jump on this before someone else does."

They walked back to their cars and he opened her door for her. Ironically, the sporty red Mercedes had been a gift from Kevin Donnell.

"Say hello to Kristie for me," she told him as she slid into the tan leather seat.

"Will do. She wanted me to remind you of the Piper-Whitfield event to celebrate the merger. She'd love for you to be there, since you were the one who convinced the Whitfields to buy here in Malibu, rather than San Francisco. The merger between the two companies might not have taken place if they hadn't come to town."

Definitely not one of her easiest sales, but a satisfactory one in the long run. "I'll be there."

"Feel free to bring a date," Kevin said.

She smiled at him. "I'm not seeing anyone." Those words didn't sit right with her for the first time in her adult life.

Kevin said, "Then just bring a friend. It'll be a fun night."

"Thanks. I'll see you there."

He closed her door and she turned her car around and headed back to her condo, all the while wondering why it felt like a betrayal to say she wasn't seeing anyone. She wasn't. Sure, what had happened between her and Jordan the night of the wedding had been something infinitely more significant and moving than she'd ever experienced before. But that did not, by any means, make them a couple. There had been no agreement of dating exclusivity. No mention of love and hopeless devotion. Yet what had transpired between them had been weighty, she couldn't deny it.

Unfortunately, Bridget was still struggling with what it all meant. *Why* she'd given in to Jordan and let him direct their tryst was still beyond her. *Why* she'd allowed him to bring on the romance and make love to her was still a mystery to her.

The worst part about it all was that she honestly wanted to embrace what they'd shared. But that would be foolish. This was Jordan they were talking about, after all. A renowned womanizer. A free-spirited playboy. Even if Bridget took what had

happened between them seriously, Jordan most likely wouldn't. In fact, he'd probably had his fun and had already moved on.

This thought weighed heavily on her mind as she stepped off the elevator and crossed the hall to the front door of her condo. Her gaze latched onto a navy-colored envelope wedged into the doorjamb. She tucked her olive-green snakeskin clutch under her arm and reached for the envelope, which had her first name only scrawled across it in elegant, gold script. After letting herself into her condo, she dropped all of her belongings on the entryway table and retrieved the silver-plated letter opener from the center drawer, sliding it under the sealed flap. She pulled out a thick, quarter-sheet of cardstock that matched the envelope in color. There was a very brief message written on the card, in the same gold script that had been used on the front of the packet.

The note was a simple one:

Come see me tonight...

J.

Simple, yet impactful.

Her heart seemed to flip in her chest. She shook her head in dismay as she sank into the chair next to the table in the foyer and stared at the invitation.

What was Jordan up to?

She tapped the cardstock against the palm of her hand as her mind whirled. Getting in any deeper with Jordan was dangerous. She'd loved every minute of their rendezvous the other night. The way he'd touched her...the way he'd felt inside her... It had all been so amazingly perfect. Which made it all horrifically wrong. She knew better than to let her emotions get the best of her. She was experienced in this area, knew how detrimental it could be to her heart to travel this path, especially with a man like Jordan Cooper, who was known for his sexual exploits as much as she was for hers!

What if we're two people who thought we could only have a wild and wicked time and find satisfaction by playing the field, when in fact, all we really needed was to find the one person whose passion and sex drive matched our own?

His words echoed in her head. He'd actually asked if perhaps they were meant for each other. And for a few brief seconds, she'd wondered the same. But then reality had invaded her wayward thoughts and she'd known better. Two players did not a relationship make. Oh no. She was woman enough to call a spade a spade. She and Jordan were not the commitment, happily-ever-after type. They were the fly-by-night, enjoy what comes their way type. No strings attached.

What if...?

No. She shook her head again. There was no "what if"? She wouldn't subscribe to it. There was way too much gray area and way too much opportunity for her to suffer yet another broken heart to play that game.

She simply couldn't allow it. The pain had been too great last time. It had been physical as well as psychological. She'd never shared her secret with another soul and didn't intend to. The past was just that and she wouldn't screw up her present or her future by getting mired down with baggage she'd just as soon not carry around.

Or inflicting new wounds upon herself.

As much as she adored Jordan—and wanted him—Bridget knew she had to close the lid on the can of worms they'd opened the other night. There was only one way to stymie the flow of emotions and the hope of what could be, if they both were to allow it.

Admittedly, she hated to play this card, but didn't feel she had any other choice. There was nothing worse, in her mind, than having her heart ripped from her chest again. Bridget wouldn't let it happen. It was up to her to protect herself. She'd be doing Jordan a favor too, in the long run. Whatever it was he was feeling, or thought he was feeling, or wanted to feel, would never last between them because neither one of them was wired for emotional intimacy.

Yes, she'd be doing them both a favor.

That's what she kept telling herself...

* * * * *

Bridget didn't accept his invitation, but she did phone Jordan that night to invite him to her condo the following evening. He'd been disappointed, of course, though not wholly surprised. He wasn't kidding when he'd said she was a tough nut to crack. And even though she insisted it wasn't worth the effort, Jordan begged to differ. In fact, he suspected that what lay beneath the untouchable veneer was something warm and vulnerable. He'd gotten a glimpse of her soft side at the wedding—and later that evening when he'd made love to her—and was infinitely curious to dig a bit deeper and see what he might discover.

He smiled to himself as he stepped out of the elevator on her floor and crossed to her door. He could recognize the invitation she'd issued for what it was. She wanted to be on her own turf. Wanted to be in control of the situation and manage it within her own comfort zone.

So be it. He could let her take the lead. As he'd realized the other night, he wasn't in a hurry and didn't need to push her uphill. He had a very good feeling about the two of them, and if it took her a while to get on board with him, he'd be patient. He wasn't a hypocrite and knew that shifting gears the way he had was likely startling to her and she probably needed an adjustment period.

That didn't mean he'd back off, but again, there was no rush. He'd let her discover for herself exactly what he'd discovered the night of Sophie and Sam's wedding. What he shared the other night with Bridget was much more meaningful than that wild ride they'd taken on Sam's boat. It was much more meaningful than any sexual encounter he'd ever had.

He rang the bell and whistled quietly to himself as he waited for her to open the door. When she did, his jaw nearly dropped to the floor. Snapping his mouth shut, he took her in from head to toe, his cock springing to life at her outfit. She wore a sheer, floral-patterned short robe in muted green, yellow and lavender. Beneath that robe, he could see her corset. Her peek-a-boo corset. No, it wasn't even that. It was more like a lavender-colored, satin waist cincher that squeezed her tight and plumped up her

exposed breasts. Her hard nipples pressed against the thin, see-through material of the robe, tempting him. The garment was tied at the waist. She'd skipped the panties completely, but the cincher had satin garters that held up lavender fishnet stockings with lacy tops.

Her signature color complemented her bronze skin, amber eyes and blonde hair, which she wore loose about her shoulders. She was positively breathtaking and damn sexy. He was hard in an instant.

"That's one hell of a way to greet a man," he told her. It was a wonder he could speak. His mouth was as dry as the Sahara.

She grinned at him. Then she crooked a manicured finger, silently inviting him into her condo. Stepping aside, she held the door open while he entered the foyer. Then she closed the door and reached for the sash around her waist, pulling it loose. She let the sheer material of the robe slide over her shoulders and down her arms. It dropped to the floor at her high-heeled feet as she planted her hands on her slim hips.

"I thought you might enjoy the visual," she said of her risqué outfit. "In fact, I'll bet you'll like everything you see tonight."

The wicked glint in her eyes was promising. "You are one hell of a temptress." Indeed, he was *this close* to tearing his clothes off and taking her right then and there in the entryway! But he kept himself in control.

Remembering he'd brought her gifts, he handed over a long-stemmed, sterling silver rose that went quite well with her outfit. He tapped the velvety bud against the tip of her nose, then offered her the flower.

She looked taken aback by the gesture. "It's beautiful, Jordan. My favorite."

"I assumed as much, given the lavender color."

In his other hand, he held a small box. He gave it to her, though she looked hesitant to accept his gift.

"What is it?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Wouldn't be much of a surprise if I told you, now would it?"

Bridget shifted from one high-heeled foot to the other. "Jordan..." She frowned. "Presents aren't necessary."

He knew a lot of her more costly possessions had been gifts from men she'd dated. Fucked, actually, because Bridget didn't really date. Hell, Sam had given her a Bose music system that had cost nearly three grand. Jordan had been with him when he'd picked it out.

But one long-stemmed rose and what was in the box were not meant as "thanks for being such a great fuck" gifts. They were meant to demonstrate that he knew who she was on a more personal level and to express how he felt about her without him beating her over the head with his emotions.

Laying the rose on the foyer table, she pulled the white satin ribbon from the small, pale blue box and lifted the lid. Sophie had once assured him that Tiffany & Co. was the way to go when he wanted to impress a woman of Bridget's social and economic stature.

She pulled out the small, blue suede pouch and set the box aside. Then she unsnapped the pouch and extracted an old-fashioned silver key that dangled from a long chain. By no means the most expensive item in the Tiffany catalog, but the dollar amount associated with the gift wasn't the point. The meaning *behind* it was.

She glanced up at him, her mouth gaping slightly, her amber irises misting over. "Jordan..." She closed her eyes and let out a long breath. Then she said, "I don't even want to know what this is for."

He grinned at her. "Maybe not today, but someday." He took the necklace and the bag from her and set them on the table. Then he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Maybe she wasn't ready to accept the symbolism, but he was ready to put it out there. When the heart made its choice...there wasn't much one could do to deny it.

She eventually tore her mouth from his and said, "I have a gift for you too." She looked a little out of sorts, but quickly recovered. "Come in and have a glass of Scotch."

He shook his head. "The only thing I want to taste right now is you."

His head bent and his tongue curled around one small, tight nipple, teasing it as she tangled her fingers in his hair.

"You're making me wet," she murmured.

His hand slid down the front of her, his fingers gliding over the satin until he felt her bare flesh. He rubbed her pussy lips before pushing a finger into her slick cunt. He let out a low groan. "It's a good start. But I want you wetter."

"Make her come," said a breathy female voice that was not Bridget's. "I want to watch."

Jordan's head snapped up. He stared at the attractive brunette who was dressed similarly to Bridget, only her reveal-all corset and fishnet stockings were cream-colored.

She dipped a finger into her glass of Scotch, then held it to her glossy lips, closing them around the tip and sucking hard.

Bridget said, "My gift. Meet Stacey. She's an old friend of mine."

Jordan straightened. Didn't take a rocket scientist to know what Bridget was up to. He said, "Nice to meet you, Stacey." Then his gaze returned to Bridget, who gave him a lascivious look.

"She's in town for a couple of days. I thought you'd like to play with us."

The word "play" had more connotations than simply messing around with these two women. Bridget was instigating a game. A battle of wills. He could see right through her, though he doubted she knew it. A threesome was meant to put the walls back up between them. To help her regain whatever emotional footing she might have lost when he'd made love to her, and make the statement that she wasn't giving in to the romantic intimacy he'd sparked and continued to try to coax from her.

But she *had* given into him the other night. And that told Jordan, plain and simple, he had a chance with her. An opportunity to make her accept how right they were together. To do so, he'd have to be as crafty as she was being. Admittedly, her little cat-

and-mouse game was a stimulating challenge for him. Sure, it was a little sadistic to say he enjoyed the fact that she wasn't easy to wrangle. There was something about having to expend some energy and get creative in order to win her over that spurred him on.

He could see things a bit more clearly than she did, he suspected, because he'd reached the crossroads the night of Sophie and Sam's wedding, and had chosen his path. Whereas Bridget was still wandering a bit aimlessly, lagging a bit behind.

Though he had no desire—and no use—for Stacey, if he let Bridget have her fun and feel as though she were in charge and this was merely another sexfest, not a romantic interlude, he'd be giving her the rope she thought she needed. He wouldn't tie her up with it—he liked Bridget's free-spirit and strong will. But he could work a little of his own magic until she was tangled up and forced to see the big picture for what it was.

His confidence was inspired by the one mistake she'd made tonight. Orchestrating a ménage with another woman, not another man. A telltale sign that the evening was designed to take the romance out of what they'd shared, but clearly Bridget couldn't go as far as to fuck another man in front of Jordan. Though what she was proposing was a threesome, it would hardly raise his hackles or spark his jealousy the way another man would. She had to know this, right? Had to have put consideration into how she was going to restore order to her relationship with Jordan without sending him over the edge.

He believed this assumption for two reasons. One, she had to know at this point that he'd never again consent to sharing her with another man. He wouldn't engage in a threesome with her when there was another cock there to fuck her. Two, she was trying to tempt him with another woman. Stacey was a knockout, no denying it. And a week or so ago, he likely would have been turned-on by the idea of pleasuring both women. But tonight he had no desire to share his attention or his affection, particularly when he had ready and willing Bridget to focus on. He didn't want to subject her to watching

him fuck another woman, just as he had no desire to watch another man pleasure Bridget in front of him.

An interesting net to be caught in, for sure. Yet seeing the predicament for what it was helped him to maintain his perspective and plot his course of action. If Bridget wanted to make a statement about them not being a couple, so be it. He'd play along. But she was way out in left field if she actually thought he'd give up so easily. Roll over and play dead.

She knew him better than that, he was certain. A clear sign that perhaps this was all a test—and she didn't even know it.

He grinned at her as he considered *that* implication. Bridget had a flair for the dramatic and this was definitely one way to test the waters with Jordan—determine his level of sincerity and ability to keep his dick in his pants when another woman tried to seduce him. Whether she was conscious of what she was doing was seriously doubtful. Which made it all the more poignant in his mind. Not only would he prove his intentions, but if he played his cards right tonight, he just might leave Bridget with no choice than to accept the truth he offered.

"You played my game the other night," he said. "So now it's your turn. But I have my own ground rules, just so you know."

She eyed him curiously. "And they are?"

They stood eye-to-eye since she wore tall heels, so he merely leaned toward her and whispered in her ear, "I'm not fucking your friend."

Her fingertips ran along his bare forearm as she gave him a sexy look. "No man has been able to resist us before."

So she'd gone for the big guns on purpose. He grinned at her again. "I'm not like your other men, Bridget. Not anymore."

She stared at him a moment, the doubt swirling in her eyes, as though she was thinking, "I guess we'll see about that."

Indeed, they would.

Turning to Stacey, she said, "Jordan's trying his hand at romance."

"How sweet," Stacey said with what appeared to be a genuine smile. Must be, since it caused Bridget to let out a strange little sigh of dismay over Stacey defecting to his camp.

Squaring her shoulders, Bridget said to her friend, "I'm thirsty."

Stacey's expression changed instantly. She bit her plump, glossy lower lip for a moment, then said, "I think I can help you with that."

She dunked a finger into her glass again and then ran the wet tip over her hard nipple, coating it with the liquor. Bridget leaned toward her, bending her head and swiping her tongue over the tight peak.

Stacey moaned. She dabbed Scotch onto the other puckered bud and then cupped the underside of her breast with her hand, offering it to Bridget. "Lick this nipple too. Suck on it."

Naturally, watching two beautiful, half-naked women touch each other was a huge turn-on, even for a man determined not to cross the lines of fidelity he'd drawn for himself. He wasn't a monk, for God's sake. Nor would he spoil Bridget's good time. He'd let her put on her little production and let her get this out of her system. In the end, she'd see that he was still there, offering her the key to his heart.

Bridget flicked her tongue over Stacey's nipple and then sucked it into her mouth, making Stacey gasp.

"Mm, that feels so good," she muttered.

Bridget lifted her head and took Stacey by the hand, leading her into the living room. She relieved her friend of her glass of Scotch and set the drink on the glass-top coffee table. The two women kissed, open-mouthed so that he could see their tongues tangling. Their bodies melded to each other, their breasts pressing together. Stacey's hands moved down to Bridget's bare ass and she squeezed the cheeks, then pulled

them apart. Breaking the kiss, she looked around Bridget's shoulder and pinned Jordan with a look.

"She wants you to fuck her. It was all she talked about before you arrived. How good you feel inside her. How hard you make her come."

Jordan's jaw clenched for a moment. He wanted to be inside Bridget as much as she apparently wanted him to be. And though this wasn't exactly the way he wanted to get it on with her, it was impossible to pass up the opportunity. His cock was rock-hard behind the button fly of his jeans. He wanted Bridget any way he could get her, that was the bottom line.

* * * * *

Jordan stripped his shirt off as he crossed to the living room, tossing it on a chair. Bridget admired his muscular chest and rigid abdomen. He was a beautiful man, so perfectly sculpted, and exuding a raw intensity that made her cunt clench tight. He was wildly charismatic and genuinely kind. Honestly, just looking at him—looking at what she could never really have—made her heart hurt. She didn't deserve him. That was the point she intended to make tonight. But at least she could have him one more time before the rose was off the bloom and he saw her for what she really was. Damaged goods that couldn't possibly be fixed.

He toed off his boots and then unbuttoned his jeans. Stacey's head dipped and her mouth closed over one of Bridget's nipples as she continued to knead Bridget's buttocks. Jordan stepped behind Bridget and ran his fingers along the cleft of her ass, massaging the small opening of her anus before pushing a finger into her wet cunt. She moaned as her head fell back. He kissed her neck, his warm lips grazing her skin as he fingered her.

One of Stacey's hands rounded the front of Bridget and went to work on her clit. This was what made sense to Bridget. Carnal lust. Not emotional intimacy.

She reached behind her and slid her hand over Jordan's erection. He'd undone his pants and she slipped her hand inside the open fly, easing her palm along the length of him. He was so hard, it made her wetter.

"I want to feel you inside me," she told him as he continued to kiss her neck and slowly finger-fuck her, making her hot and restless. Stacey's mouth on her nipple and her finger on her clit heightened her arousal. "You want to fuck me, don't you?" she asked Jordan.

He whispered in her ear, "I want to make you happy."

Her heart constricted in her chest. She ignored the sharp pain. "You inside me makes me happy."

He withdrew his finger from her cunt and stripped off the rest of his clothes. There were several condom packets already laid out on the coffee table and he reached for one. Once sheathed, he gripped Bridget around the waist. Stacey eased down to her knees and flicked her tongue over Bridget's sensitive clit, making her moan. As Jordan thrust into her from behind, Stacey licked and sucked her clit. Jordan's hands shifted to her breasts. He palmed them, massaging them and teasing the nipples tighter as he pushed deeper into her pussy, picking up the pace until he was thrusting hard and fast. Her breath came in heavy pants.

"That's it," she said on a sharp breath as his quick strokes hit just the right spot. "That feels so good." The erotic sensations built rapidly, swelling inside her until they exploded. "Jordan!" She cried out his name, because even though Stacey's mouth on her clit felt heavenly, it was Jordan who filled her and pushed her over the edge.

He didn't stop fucking her. Stacey moved away to sprawl across the black leather sofa. Bridget bent down, her head between Stacey's parted thighs. Jordan moved with her, his cock still thrusting into her as she licked Stacey's pussy, making her moan and writhe. Stacey's hands cupped her own breasts and she squeezed them before tugging on the nipples. Bridget slid a finger into her friend's wet cunt as she suckled her swollen nub.

"Oh yes," Stacey said. "Fuck her harder, Jordan, so she'll fuck *me* harder."

He hammered into Bridget at the request, making all the crazy sensations build again in record time. Bridget lifted her head and stared at Jordan over her shoulder as her body jolted at the sexual onslaught. "You're so big. The way you fill my cunt feels so incredible."

His jaw was set as his gaze locked with hers. His hips jerked sharply as he fucked her harder, making her moan and whimper.

"Oh God, yes." She loved how he felt inside her. "Fuck me, Jordan. Fuck me until I come."

Her head dropped to Stacey's clit again and she licked and sucked with the same vigor Jordan used to push her to the edge again.

"That feels so good," Stacey said. "You tonguing my clit and fingering my pussy. Jesus, Bridget, you're going to make me come."

When one of Jordan's hands reached around to rub Bridget's swollen clit, she knew she'd come soon too.

Her and Stacey's moans of pleasure mingled with Jordan's occasional grunts, filling the quiet living room. His cock slid along her slick inner walls and she squeezed him tight, making him jerk behind her and thrust a little more forcefully into her body.

He said, "It's impossible not to want to be inside you. Even with this ridiculous power play. After you come again, with me inside you, it's my turn to make a statement."

His words reverberated deep inside her, stirring emotions she didn't want to feel. Emotions that made it difficult to keep herself detached and convinced this was just an animalistic, physical act.

As he fucked her, giving her everything she wanted, she found herself fighting off the orgasm for fear of what she'd have to face after she came. But it was impossible to hold it off when Jordan felt so fantastic inside her. There would never be a more

physically satisfying sensation than his cock in her pussy. He fit perfectly. Wide enough to stretch her and make her feel every single inch of him stroking her inner depths. The pads of two of his fingers on her clit doubled her pleasure. He was all she needed, but that was such a dangerous thought to acknowledge.

She didn't trust anyone with her feelings, her heart. Including Jordan. Yet as he evoked all the beautiful sensations that would flood her body when she climaxed, he also stirred something inside her that had been buried long ago.

Bridget was suddenly very, very ashamed that she had made him play along with her. The intent had been to make him see there could be nothing between them but hot sex—not romance. He'd consented, proving he was willing to do whatever she asked of him. And that in itself was enough to make her hate herself for using this ploy to get him to back off.

She had more feelings for Jordan than she could possibly process at once, but they could no longer be ignored.

"Make her come again, Jordan," Stacey said. "She wants it. I can hear it in her moans. I can feel the way her body is trembling. And her skin is so hot. She's so hot for *you*."

Bridget stared at her friend, who was betraying her right in front of her! Stacey grinned, and it wasn't a contrite one. "Sorry," she said. "But he's a powder keg and you're a lit fuse. The two of you are making *me* hot!"

Jordan said, "Tell me what you want."

Bridget dragged her gaze from her traitorous friend and glanced over her shoulder. Jordan looked as though he were in pain. Holding back when what he really wanted to do was ram his hard cock into her body until they both screamed in ecstasy. How could she possibly deny him? Or herself?

"Do it," she told him. "Make me come."

He hammered into her, causing her pulse to race and her breathing to turn sharp and raspy again. The sensations expanded inside her, growing and singeing her insides

with their heat and intensity. There was no way she could ever fight this. She'd been foolish to think she could.

As she continued to stare at Jordan, their gazes locked, she said, "Come with me. Now."

He nodded. His warm, chocolate-colored eyes were as mesmerizing as his too-handsome-for-words face. She really didn't deserve him. But her body craved him and she wanted to give him the sort of satisfaction he always gave her. She squeezed his cock with her cunt, milking him and making him grunt as he thrust a bit harder into her, seeking his own release as he pushed her toward hers.

"Oh yes," she whispered. "Give it to me, Jordan. Fuck my pussy."

He did, with a fervor that made everything inside her tighten and quake and then burst into flames.

"Jordan!" she screamed. "Oh God!"

She felt him convulse inside her as he came too, which intensified her own release.

"Jesus, Bridget," he groaned. His cock surged inside her, throbbing and pushing deep.

She gripped him fiercely, not wanting to lose a single second of the erotic bliss that consumed her.

"Oh fuck, yes."

Her gaze dropped to Stacey's parted legs. Her friend had picked up where a distracted Bridget had left off, rubbing her own clit until she climaxed along with Bridget and Jordan.

"Sorry." Bridget mouthed the word.

Stacey smiled as she shook her head. "No worries. Believe me, it was good for me too. Watching the two of you. Holy shit. I'll be fantasizing about that for months. What a huge turn-on!"

Bridget had no idea how she'd lost control of the game so quickly, so easily, without even really realizing it. As Jordan withdrew from her, she stood. He scooped up his briefs and jeans and wandered off to the bathroom. Stacey headed into the kitchen, cleaned herself up and then pulled her full-length overcoat around her body, tying the sash at her waist.

"You have one hell of a man there," she said to Bridget. "Anytime you want an audience, feel free to invite me over. I'll be a happy spectator, because I'm pretty sure this is the last time he's going to let you get away with a stunt like that."

Bridget said, "I don't understand how it completely backfired on me."

Stacey smiled again. "Oh I think you do." She gave Bridget a quick peck on the cheek, then headed out the door.

Bridget gathered up her robe and wrapped it around her just as Jordan returned from the bathroom. She turned, albeit reluctantly, to face him.

"She left in a hurry," he said of Stacey's quick exit.

"Yeah, I don't think she's too happy with me."

Jordan crossed his arms over his bare chest and said, quite frankly, "She's not the only one."

"Oh Jesus, Jordan." She lifted her hands in the air and said, "We all got something out of it and it was damn hot. What more do you want?"

His jaw clenched for a moment before he said, "An answer to one question."

She stared at him, knowing innately what he was going to ask her and fearing there was no way to be honest with him this time.

Shaking her head, she said, "I don't have any answers for you, Jordan. And I don't want to lie to you, so don't make me."

"Just tell me what happened, Bridget. What happened to you that made you so jaded and so convinced that what I'm offering you can't possibly be real?"

She stared at him, her mouth gaping. Of course he knew there was an explanation for why she kept him at arm's length. He wasn't daft. Still, hearing the words from him caught her off guard, even though she'd been prepared for them.

He dropped his defensive stance and instead reached for her, his large hands gently gripping her biceps. "Give me something, Bridge. Anything to help me understand. Throw me a bone, for fuck's sake."

Tears instantly pooled in her eyes, making her grind her teeth together. Here she was, a woman who didn't cry, about to do it again for the second time in a week. But the look in Jordan's beautiful eyes, the intense expression on his face and the raw honesty that flowed from him...all of these things made her want to assure him that she was the way she was because of *her*, not because of anything he did or didn't do. He was wonderful and she was...not worthy of him.

The thought made the fat drops crest the rims of her eyes and roll down her cheeks. She looked away from him and asked, "Why couldn't we just enjoy each other tonight without turning it into something heavy?"

"Because there *is* something heavy between us," he was quick to say. "Not just carefree and dismissive."

She sucked in a breath and shook her head again. Her gaze locked with his and she asked, "What do you want from me, Jordan?"

He stared deep into her eyes and said, "Everything."

Bridget didn't know how to respond to that. Her heart felt as though a large fist was squeezing it tight, trying to crush it, because she knew she couldn't give Jordan what he wanted. That tore her apart. Made her feel as insignificant as she had years ago....

Pulling away from him, she headed down the hallway to her bathroom. He stopped her dead in her tracks, though, with his next words.

"I'm ready to give *you* everything."

That fist holding her heart seemed to rip it from her chest. She recognized the feeling, had experienced it before. It stole her breath and made her want to drop to the floor and cry her eyes out. Her bottom lip quivered as she said, "I'm not worth giving everything to, Jordan. I learned that a long time ago. Girls like me..." She swallowed down a lump of emotion as she fought the tears unsuccessfully.

Jordan stepped into the hallway and propped a jean-clad hip against the wall, stuffing his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "What do you mean, 'girls like you'?"

She let out a short, hollow laugh. "That's what my mother used to say to me whenever something good or bad happened to me. Either 'Girls like you are fortunate, not because you're smart or work hard, but because you're beautiful. Everything comes easy to you'. I assure you, it doesn't. Or 'Girls like you don't deserve to be happy all the time, so don't expect me to be sad for you when you cry'."

Jordan's brows knitted together. "Christ, Bridget. Who the hell says that to their own daughter?"

"My mother. She was a very bitter woman. Until one day, when she got her revenge at my expense."

Bridget wrapped her arms around her waist, as though that might hold in all the emotions brimming to the surface. She didn't want to say anymore, but the look on Jordan's face—that "I'll protect you at all costs" look—had her gaze locked on his and made her completely incapable of walking away.

She said, "My father always doted on me. Called me the most beautiful creature God ever graced the earth with. My mother hated me for it. She was rather plain and very stern. She wasn't exactly warm and fuzzy, so most people, including my father, were very standoffish with her. Why they married, I still don't know. Nor does it matter, because he left her when I was a teenager. The same year—"

She shook her head and turned away. Jordan rushed forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. "The same year...what?" he asked. "What happened that year?"

Bridget hadn't thought about when she'd turned eighteen in so long. But as it came back to her now, she suddenly realized why she and Sophie had a bond that had grown once Sophie had confided in her about the scars on her back.

Bridget didn't have physical wounds, but she'd suffered psychologically as Sophie had. In different ways, but it occurred to her that she had buried a past long ago that had, like Sophie's, cut her off from emotional intimacy. Had killed the hope of ever finding happiness again.

"Tell me," Jordan urged in a soft voice. His warm breath on her neck reminded her of how comforting he could be. How right she felt when she was with him, in his arms, his sole attention on her.

She said, "I almost died. Emotionally. I literally almost shriveled up and wasted away because of the emotional pain. The kind that cuts so deep, you're actually shocked there's no blood. There should have been. Gallons of it."

His other hand rested on her shoulder and he held her steady. She couldn't face him. She didn't *want* to face him.

"Bridget." That one word made a soft sob fall from her lips. He said her name quietly, yet his own agony was wrapped around it. As though he hurt for her and didn't even know why. Just that she had been devastated and it devastated him in return.

This caused her to finally turn and face him. To summon whatever tiny bit of courage she might possess and actually face a man she wanted to trust and believe in. A man who had let her get away with so much these past several days. These past several months, really. Since that night on the boat when all of their relationships had changed dramatically.

"I don't want this to be painful for you," he said as he looked deep into her eyes. "But I know it will be. You've kept something inside you for so long that it's held control over who you are." His head dipped and his lips lightly brushed her cheek where the tears fell. "You're hurt. I want you to heal."

Like Sophie. She nodded, but still couldn't speak.

Jordan said, "I remember how I felt when Soph told me about her scars and how her father had beaten her so badly that she couldn't scream for help, because she could barely breathe. I wanted to tear things apart when she told me. I can't even begin to imagine how Sam felt. I can't imagine how I'd feel if you told me someone hurt you like that." His eyes locked with hers again. "But I won't walk away. I won't tell you it's too much for me to deal with or that I can't understand or accept it. Whatever happened to you, Bridget, is a part of your past. It doesn't necessarily have to be a part of your future."

Her head dropped and she pressed her cheek to his shoulder. Jordan's arms slid around her.

"You don't deserve to suffer for someone else's cruel actions," she told him. "Not just because of the way it affects me even today, but because you deserve someone simple and fun-loving." She pulled away from him and stared up at him. "That's why I wanted to push you away tonight. Because you deserve someone who's not...damaged. Someone who can give you everything you want and need and deserve."

"You do that already, Bridget." His hands gripped her shoulders again. "When I'm with you, I've got everything I've ever wanted."

More tears flowed down her cheeks. "Jordan." She could barely breathe. "You say the sweetest things. I don't deserve—"

"Stop, Bridget! Seriously!"

He pulled her back to him, his strong arms wrapping around her as his body melded to hers. He held her tightly and it made Bridget cry. Because he was so amazingly wonderful and such a beautiful human being.

She understood now why Sophie had hidden in the bathroom for twenty minutes on her wedding day. Bridget inched away from Jordan, sniffled, then said, "Sophie wanted to be perfect for Sam. She knows she never will be. Not physically. And maybe not emotionally, because she'll always carry her past around with her."

"Sam doesn't see the scars. Not in the way you'd think. They're not hideous. They're a part of her, and nothing about Sophie is hideous in his eyes – or in mine."

"You're the absolute best friend a person could ever have."

He shook his head. "I just try to see people for who they are."

This made her tremble in his loose embrace. "Jordan..." She drew in a deep breath, let it out slowly. "You do see people. Even when they're trying to hide from you. What you talked about when we were dancing at the wedding hit way too close to home for me. Because I was in love once. And I did feel like a princess and I did believe in fairytales and Prince Charming and happily ever afters."

"What happened?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Her stomach coiled tight, another palpable sensation that made her ill at ease. She said, "I met David my senior year of high school. He was twenty-three and new to L.A. He was just starting a career as an architect, but he also had a lot of family money. From the moment I met him, he swept me off my feet."

She remembered Jordan doing the same to her the night of Sophie and Sam's wedding, both literally and figuratively. It occurred to Bridget that Jordan's simplest gestures rang more true than all of David's extravagant ones, but she'd been young and impressionable back then and couldn't see the forest for the trees.

"We had a perfect courtship," she said, easily recalling how romantic and attentive David had been. "He always picked me up with some sort of gift in hand and he took me on the most extraordinary dates. He'd book private dining rooms or set up a candlelight dinner in a fragrant garden or a catered lunch on a secluded beach. He fascinated me with tales of world travels and amazing people he'd met. And he treated me so wonderfully."

Every morning, when she'd stood in front of the mirror, styling her hair and applying her makeup, she'd considered herself the luckiest girl in the world.

"We fell in love quickly, and I know that being in love at eighteen isn't the same as being in love at twenty-eight or thirty-eight. But even though it may not have been as mature, it was that first-time, fantasy-laced kind of love that's devastating to lose."

"What he'd do?" Jordan asked.

Bridget stared down at her hands. This was the humiliating part. The cold, hard reality that had slapped her in the face and left her stunned and psychologically abused.

She said, "We talked about getting married in a couple of years, after he'd established himself at the firm where he worked. He brought me sketches of the house he wanted to build for us and talked about the beautiful family we'd have and the perfect life he'd give me. I believed every word. He'd never given me a single reason to doubt him."

She'd never given much thought to the fact that she hadn't met his family, because they were all living back east. And with his office and apartment an hour away in Beverly Hills, and given her class schedule, since she was concurrently enrolled in college classes, and the amount of time he devoted to work, spontaneous dates were out of the question. They'd planned everything so that they could make the most of their time together. With the exception of one dark and drizzly day...

"One of our beach outings got rained out. It was a Wednesday, late afternoon. He'd left the office early to come to Malibu and, on impulse, we decided to go to the movies. I was so excited to snuggle up next to him in the theater. And to be out with him in public. It had never really occurred to me that we always did things privately. I just assumed he liked being alone with me, I guess."

She shook her head and muttered, "Stupid me."

"You said yourself he'd never given you a reason to doubt him. How could you put together a puzzle if there were never any pieces to it?"

She nodded and said, "I tried that logic with myself. It's still a tough pill to swallow. The best excuse I can give is that I was hopelessly, utterly, sensationally in love and I couldn't see anything but him."

“What happened at the movies?”

Bridget sighed. The pain in her stomach increased and her heart felt raw and exposed. It was embarrassing to admit all of this to Jordan. To show him her wounds. To let him know how she’d been treated by someone she’d foolishly trusted.

In fact, that was probably the most difficult part of all. Letting Jordan see what a complete fool she’d been. A silly child with silly dreams.

She bit back a sob that thought evoked. Tears built in her eyes, but she fought them back as well, because she didn’t want to cry in front of Jordan. Telling him this tragic love story was humiliating enough. How would he ever look at her the same way when he realized what an idiot she’d once been?

Yet she’d started down the path and had to continue, much as she wished she could simply turn away from him and go into her bedroom and close the door between them.

Mustering a little strength, she said, “We’d just gotten popcorn to share when someone called out his name. A woman. He turned instinctively and, really, the expression on his face told me all I needed to know about who she was. In hindsight, I wondered why I didn’t walk away right then. What point was there in staying when I could see, quite clearly – as could everyone else – what was about to transpire?”

“Maybe you would have always wondered if you were right.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have had my heart ripped out,” she countered. “If I’d simply walked away, I could have done it with my head held high. I could have been furious and let my anger push me through the pain. By staying...”

She let out a sharp laugh. Jordan’s jaw tightened. “You ended up getting slapped in the face.”

“Yes,” she was quick to say. “That’s exactly it. Only...so much worse.”

Her bottom lip quivered as she recalled the exchange between David and the other woman – his wife. She’d been a small brunette with a huge stomach. Bridget guessed she was close to giving birth any day.

"She was out with her friends, one of whom lived in Malibu, I later learned because I kept running into her. As if the shock and pain and humiliation of that one night wasn't enough. It was as though I had to be punished every two or three months with the friend as a reminder staring me in the face."

Bridget felt the mortification and degradation as though the horrific incident had happened only yesterday. "The woman who'd called out David's name pointed to me and demanded to know who the 'slut' was. To which David—my knight in shining armor—replied... 'No one'." She sucked in a breath as the familiar feeling of utter worthlessness consumed her. "He'd said, 'She's nobody. She means nothing. She's just a kid who runs errands at the firm and I was treating her to a movie'."

The words still cut her to the quick to this day.

"Can you imagine..." she said as the tears built in her eyes again because she was unable to stop them this time. "How devastating it is to hear someone you loved and trusted—someone who'd just claimed you meant everything to him and that he wanted to marry you and give you everything your heart desired—call you 'no one'. To say you meant nothing to them when minutes earlier, they'd told you their life could never be complete without you in it."

Bridget could picture herself at eighteen, staring at David as though he'd just run her through with a sharp blade. She'd literally *felt* as though he'd stabbed her in the heart, not just in the back. The pain had been immediate and agonizing.

"The son of a bitch," Jordan said.

"Yes," she whispered. "About me, he further said to his wife, 'In fact, I can't even remember her name'." A lump of emotion welled in her throat. She was barely able to add, "People laughed."

"Bridget." Jordan reached a hand out to her, but she took a step backward, giving a slight shake of her head. Although she appreciated his empathy, if he were to touch her, she'd break down and cry. And whatever dignity she had left would float away with her tears.

"They believed him," she said in a quiet voice. "They all believed him. And as I stood there, too shocked and hurt to say anything in my own defense, *I* believed him. I was nobody. Just some kid who meant nothing to him. Absolutely nothing."

She had to turn away this time. With her back to Jordan, she said, "And that's why I became somebody. That's why I work so much and that's why I accept gifts from men. Because they wouldn't bother buying me cars and condos if I was no one who meant nothing to them." She squared her shoulders. She'd done everything Jordan required of her. She'd told him the truth. It had stabbed her in the heart all over again, but she'd done it for him. And now she had one thing to ask of him. To let her go.

Over her shoulder, she said, "Now you know why I don't believe in romance and fairytales. Happy endings just don't exist for me, Jordan." She paused, wishing she could be convinced otherwise, but knowing it was impossible. "Now you know why I will never believe in *us*. Even though I want to, I simply...can't."

She turned her head and walked down the hall to her bedroom, shutting the door behind her as a fresh batch of tears filled her eyes.

Chapter Five

Jordan sat at the kitchen table of the beach house, one hand on the mouse that was connected to his laptop, the other gripping a nearly empty glass of Scotch. He'd been working nonstop all weekend and sucking down the hooch like he possessed the last bottle of Scotch on the planet and intended to drain it before someone else swiped it from underneath his nose.

Like some stupid, moronic fool had done with Bridget's heart. Swiped it right out from underneath Jordan's nose before he'd even gotten a chance to stake his claim.

He snorted at his analogy. Perhaps he'd had a little too much to drink. He didn't care. The alcohol helped to dull all his senses. Helped to not feel Bridget's pain quite so acutely. No, he wasn't focused on his own emotions—how he felt about her pushing him away for the final time. He'd deal with that eventually. For now, he was completely wrapped around the rage he felt that someone had treated the woman he loved so abominably.

And yes, he did love Bridget. He'd suspected it when he'd bought that stupid necklace for her, thinking it was a clever way to give her the key to his heart. Not knowing, really, it was a gesture that meant nothing when he hadn't first listened to the reason why she was so closed off emotionally or responded to it. Before he could give her his heart, he had to know what was in hers. Not that it changed how he felt. It didn't. Rather, it intensified the sensation and made him all the more furious *for her*.

This must be how Sam felt.

The thought materialized in his fuzzy brain, causing Jordan to set aside his glass and stand up. He started to pace the large kitchen as he heard the front door open. Sophie called out for him and Jordan's head snapped in the direction of the foyer. She came from that room into the kitchen and threw her arms around him.

"We're back! Did you miss us?"

He hugged her tightly, then pulled away and said, "Yeah. But you can make it up to me."

She laughed. "Make it up to you? You got the whole house to yourself while we were gone!"

"And clearly, leaving me to my own devices is a huge mistake."

She eyed him curiously. "What on earth are you talking about?" Her gaze narrowed on him. "Jordan Cooper. Are you *drunk*?"

"Yes." He reached into the front pocket of his jeans and extracted his car keys. "That's why you'll have to drive."

"Drive? Where? If it's to the liquor store, you can forget it. You're smashed!"

"Actually," he said, "I'm in love."

"What the hell kind of conversation did I just walk in on?" Sam asked as he dropped their bags at his feet.

"Long story," Jordan said. "But I need you both to go with me somewhere. I can't believe I didn't see this myself," he muttered. "She paused. And she was waiting for me to say something to convince her she was wrong...and I didn't say anything. But I know—I know *exactly*—what I'm supposed to say to her!"

"Her *who*?" Sam asked as his gaze shifted from Jordan to Sophie and back.

"I have no idea," Sophie said with a shrug. "But he's on the move and we'd better drive."

Jordan was already in the entryway, retrieving his iPhone from the foyer table. He punched in a speed dial number and when Bridget picked up on the third ring, he asked, "Are you at home?"

"Yes."

"Stay there," he demanded. "Don't move."

"Jordan," she said, followed by a sigh of exasperation.

"Just stay there, for fuck's sake. It won't kill you." He disconnected the line. They piled into Sam's SUV and Jordan said, "Montecito Lane."

Sophie shifted in her seat and stared at him. "That's where Bridget lives."

"We're going to Bridget's?" Sam asked, incredulous. "You're in love with *Bridget*?"

"Yes. And I think she's in love with me. Though it might take some convincing on my part to get her to admit it."

"What the hell happened while we were gone?" Sam practically shouted.

Sophie merely smiled.

Jordan said, "Isn't it amazing how it just creeps up on you, so it seems like it came out of the blue, when it really didn't?" He shook his head in wonder. "But the thing is, she's got issues."

Sophie's look turned serious. "Has she confided in you?"

"Yes."

"And you can accept whatever it is that's troubling her?"

"Yes." He didn't even think twice about it. "In fact...I want to be the guy that makes sure she never gets hurt again. I want to protect her," he said in a matter-of-fact, albeit slightly slurred, tone. He realized it might be better to be sober for this, but when a man made up his mind that he wasn't going to let the woman he was meant to be with slam the door in his face one more time, he wanted to prove the point immediately.

So he was a prince being driven to the princess's castle—to rescue her from herself—by his two best friends. He never claimed to be gallant. But he would be faithful and honest. And he was pretty damn certain there wouldn't be a day that passed from here on out that Bridget would ever question how much she meant to him and how hot he was for her.

She'd said eternal sexual and romantic bliss didn't exist. He intended to prove her wrong.

Sam had barely pulled into the parking lot of Bridget's complex when Jordan swung the back door of the SUV wide and climbed out. His friends followed him up to Bridget's condo. She greeted them with a confused and wary look on her pretty face.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Jordan cut her off, saying, "You got to speak and now it's my turn."

"Jordan—"

"Uh-huh," he said as he walked past her. Sam and Sophie followed—after Sophie gave Bridget a quick hug. They gathered in the living room. Sophie sank into the leather sofa, Sam stood behind her.

Bridget stared at them all and ignored Jordan's gag order. "What are you all doing here?"

"Consider them Exhibit A," Jordan said as he gestured to Sam and Sophie.

"What?" She glared at him. "Jordan, are you drunk?"

"Yes," Sophie answered. "But I think for a good reason, so don't hold it against him."

Bridget shook her head. "I knew getting involved with the three of you was like upsetting the apple cart."

"There was a *reason* you got involved with all of us," Jordan said. "Sophie said it once. Well, she was talking about herself, not you, but the principle applies to you now."

Bridget's arms flapped in the air. "What reason or principle or whatever? And what does it have to do with...*anything*?"

"Soph said people connect on a subconscious level. Like their psyches bond or something. Without even knowing it, we seek out people who share similar circumstances—like you and Sophie in a way. Or we connect with people who are directly opposite from us, emotionally and psychologically, so that they balance us out. Sam balances Sophie. I balance you." He grinned at her.

Bridget stared at him, clearly stumped and at a loss for words.

Jordan rushed on. "I'm the guy who changes everything for you. Like Sam is for Soph. When she realized he was the one, she told him her secret. He felt her pain as if it were his own and that's how he was able to help her heal. You confided in me," he said, feeling supremely confident of his "findings", no matter that Bridget looked ready to kick him in the balls. "Because you love me. I feel your pain—and I want to smash in David's face. Now here I am, telling you that I accept your flaws and your emotional shortcomings because I understand what they stem from. And I'm going to show you what real love is."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "You're going to show me."

"Yes." He grinned at her again.

Unexpectedly, she laughed. "Exactly *how* much did you drink today, Jordan?"

"That's beside the point."

"No, I don't think it is."

"Okay, let me point something else out to you," he said. He gestured to Sophie as he continued on. "She used to steal his shirts—before they were together. She'd actually go into the laundry room and outright pilfer his clothing."

Sophie looked only moderately contrite. "It's true. The shirts smelled like him and I liked wearing them. I couldn't resist."

"Sam would wander around the house, mumbling about why the mystical force in the dryer didn't steal his socks rather than his shirts. Then Soph would come bounding down the stairs, wearing one of his Yale jerseys, and Sam would be like, 'Oh! There it is'. And not ask for it back."

Bridget groaned. "I didn't steal your shirt."

Jordan turned back to her. "*Au contraire*. Let's consider this Exhibit B, shall we?" he asked as he swept his hand up and down the length of her, pointing out that she was, in

fact, wearing his shirt. The white tuxedo shirt he'd worn at Sam and Sophie's wedding, to be exact.

"I was just about to change when you rang the bell. If you want it back—"

"I don't want it back. I don't give a rip about the shirt, Bridget. All I care about is that you wanted something of mine that reminded you of me." He really had to fight the urge to gloat. Though, admittedly, he wasn't done yet.

He said, "You told me what made you *not* believe in love when you were eighteen. But..." He took a few steps toward her and cupped her beautiful face in his hands. "You did believe. The night of Sam and Sophie's wedding, you *did* believe. I know it, Bridget. I saw it in your eyes and I felt it when I made love to you. You let me orchestrate that entire encounter because, deep down, you wanted to see if something real might actually exist between us. It does. And that scared you. Which was why you pulled that power play the other night with Stacey."

"Jordan."

"I let you, because I can't force you to see what I see. Or at least, that's what I thought. Until Sam and Soph came home today." He dropped his hands and stepped out of the way, so his friends were in Bridget's line of view. "There's your proof that love exists and that it can be everlasting. Can you even, for one second, deny that they belong together, deserve each other—flaws and all—and will live happily ever after?"

Bridget's eyes misted over. She said, "I can't think of two people more in love and more deserving of that love."

Sophie stood up. She crossed the room and took one of Bridget's hands in hers. "I can."

"Oh God," Bridget sobbed as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Why are you all doing this to me?"

Sam was the one to speak. "Because we all love you. In different ways, but we do love you. You're part of our family, Bridget. It's a small, selective family, but we all chose each other. We chose you and you chose us."

Jordan said in a quiet voice, "You're somebody to us. You always will be. For me, you're...the *only* somebody."

"Jordan." She stared up at him because she was barefoot.

He grinned down at her. "That's Prince Jordan, if you don't mind."

She laughed. Not her usual short, hollow laugh. A real laugh. A happy, playful laugh. "God, you're so arrogant!"

He reached for her and pulled her to him. "And you are stubborn. But that's okay. I don't need you to say you love me. I just need you to let *me* love *you*."

"But I do love you," she whispered as another tear crested the rim of her eye. She tugged on the long chain around her neck and pulled out the key he'd given her, that had been hidden behind the buttons of his shirt. "I've been wandering around this condo for two days, wearing nothing but your shirt and the key to your heart."

"I wouldn't give either to just anyone," he said as he bent his head and brushed his lips over hers.

"I believe that," she told him. "I believe in you. I believe in us. I just needed time to accept it, Jordan. Your persistence helped, by the way."

He chuckled. "Never let it be said I don't know how to make a point."

"Oh for the love of God," Sam muttered as he turned away, taking Sophie by the hand and leading her toward the door. "He'll gloat about this for months."

"He's entitled," Bridget said. "I didn't make it easy for him."

"It was worth the fight," Jordan assured her.

Sophie said, "Enjoy the rest of the afternoon. Sam's going to take me home and make love to me."

"It was a long flight from Hawaii," Sam said. "And she wouldn't let me initiate her into the Mile-High Club."

Jordan laughed and Bridget giggled along with him. When the door shut behind Sam and Sophie, he said, "I did lie about one thing."

She stared up at him. "What?"

"The night of Sam and Sophie's wedding, I said I'd never seen two people hotter for each other. I was wrong." He grinned at her. She grinned back.

"There is a certain spark between us," she said.

He hauled her up against his body. "Spark? Baby, this isn't a spark. This is a full-on, five-alarm rager." And he had the hard-on to prove it.

"Jordan Cooper," she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck, "you say the most romantic things."

Epilogue

The wedding was a ridiculously extravagant one. As Bridget stood in front of a three-way mirror in her dressing room, Jordan came through the door and pulled up short.

"Holy cow," he said. "Cinderella's going to shoot the fairy godmother for lending out her dress to someone who wears it better than her."

Bridget laughed. She turned to face her groom. "It is rather...over the top...isn't it?"

"No more so than the rest of this fairytale wedding." He eyed her from head to toe as he whistled under his breath. "Jesus, Bridget. You look absolutely stunning. I'm not going to remember anything about this day except how breathtaking you are."

Her full-length gown was made of silver and white satin, with a strapless empire bodice decorated with intricate beading and trimmed with silver satin along the top and ribbon that tied in the back. The skirt was a draped overlay that created depth and dimension and flowed into a long train. She wore elbow-length gloves and a sparkly tiara settled in her upswept hair. Her chandelier diamond earrings and the heavily beaded bodice were the only glittery adornments she needed, save for the exquisite cushion-cut diamond ring Jordan would slip on her finger later.

"No princess ever looked this gorgeous," he assured her.

Bridget smiled. "I know it's crazy, but I couldn't resist. We opened the floodgates and now all I can think of is romance and happily ever afters!"

"No, no," he said as he came further into the room, looking amazingly handsome in his gray tails. "I love it. I can't take my eyes off of you."

She handed him a glass of champagne. Jordan sank into one of the oversized wingback chairs and pulled her carefully into his lap. "You sure you don't mind me seeing you in your dress before the ceremony?"

"Absolutely not. I want to share this entire day with you. Every single second."

He grinned as she lightly tapped the rim of her glass against his. He said, "I love how you're unconventional and traditional at the same time. This wedding will shock everyone who knows you, and yet...it's absolutely perfect. You are the perfect bride for me."

Her breath caught. "Don't make me cry before the ceremony."

He shook his head. "No more crying. I want you to be happy, Bridget. Ridiculously, over-the-top happy."

She smiled as a tear pooled in her eye. She couldn't help it. "I am ridiculously, over-the-top happy. Because of you."

Jordan placed a soft kiss against her temple and said, quite simply, "Thank you."

She stared at him a moment, then asked, "For what?"

He swallowed down what seemed to be a lump of emotion. He took a deep breath and said, "For being you, Bridget. You stood your ground and did what you had to do to find a peaceful existence after, as you'd once mentioned, the rug was pulled out from underneath you. But you let me in. I love everything about you, now and forever."

"Even the flaws?"

"The flaws are what make you so real." He kissed her temple again, careful not to mess up her makeup.

"You truly are an amazing man, Jordan Cooper. I am so lucky to know you."

"And I'm so lucky to be marrying you."

"Which won't happen," Sophie's voice suddenly filled the large dressing room, "if you two don't stop fawning over each other and get out to the wedding hall! There are over three hundred people in this mansion *ooing* and *awing* over the ginormous floral arrangements and all the fancy tulle and ribbons and candles!"

"Kind of like Cinderella barfed up her night at the ball, huh?" Bridget asked as she climbed off Jordan's lap.

Sophie laughed. "I'd say it's every girl's fantasy wedding come to life. Complete with a devastatingly handsome and attentive Prince Charming."

"If the tails fit," Jordan said, with a good-natured laugh, of his extravagant tuxedo.

"This wedding will be featured in every bridal magazine in the country, along with photos of the two of you," Sophie said.

"Well, when Sam suggested we move into the guest house on the beach, I sold the condo and decided to spend the money frivolously," Bridget said. "It may just be one day of our life together, but it'll be one we – and our friends – will never forget."

"I'll say," Sophie concurred. "Now let's march those Christian Louboutin glass slippers down the aisle!"

Jordan's jaw dropped open. "You're not really wearing...?"

"Oh course not!" Bridget said. Then quickly added, "Well, the heels are. Specially made for the wedding."

He shook his head and chuckled. "You are something else."

"And you're about to become *Mr. Something Else*."

Jordan held his arm out to her. "Gladly."

It was Sam who walked her down the aisle, since Bridget's father had died two years ago. Her mother was not in attendance, though Bridget had chosen to rise above all the insults and the cruel things her mother had always said to her and invite her to the wedding. It was probably best that she wasn't there, Bridget surmised. That left nothing to mar her and Jordan's perfect day.

When she reached the heavily decorated altar, her romantic miracle grinned at her and immediately said, "I do."

Everyone laughed. And this time, so did Bridget.

About the Author

Multi-published and award-winning author Ava McKnight's love of romantic fiction began as a teenager. She holds degrees in General Studies and Communications and has worked on newspapers as an editor and reporter. Most recently, she worked in PR, writing speeches and Congressional testimonies.

Ava is a member of Romance Writers of America and one of its Phoenix chapters, Desert Rose. She has served as a Board member, Newsletter Director, National Contest Chairperson and Arbitration Co-Chair. She is also published in romantic fiction as Calista Fox.

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