

Lucky Mr M

Jasmine Aherne





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PPB

Chapter One

“I’m not so sure... I mean, I don’t even have anyone to try it out with.” Lorna hesitantly ran her finger over the smooth, glossy pages of the adult toys catalog. The sleek shape, length and ridges of the advertised vibrator promised “toe-curling, ceiling-high” pleasure – and who wouldn’t want that?

Lorna and her closest friends, Kate, Susie and Sara, had piled into Lorna’s living room and sprawled lazily across her comfy, but threadbare, couch. Something girly and upbeat flowed from the stereo in the corner.

“You won’t regret it.” Kate, a curvy brunette, purred into her wineglass. “And who says you need a man? The very point of these things is that you get the best part of a man without the other junk that comes with it.”

“I guess so.” Lorna flipped a few pages.

She had invited her three closest friends over to cross off one more thing in their “209 things to do in 2009 list” – to attend a promotional party in which an adult store rep came to show off toys, lingerie and edible sex aids – and then to purchase one of the said toys.

Now, the cheerful rep, with her bouncy hair and sticky pink lip gloss, had left, handing the girls glossy-paged catalogs, and Lorna and her friends, still thinking about what to order, had promised to get in touch.

Kate’s list of things to buy covered two pages of sky-blue notepaper already. “Why the hell not?” she said, as she flicked her pen and added a set of cute PJs to the items. “I mean, in the immortal words of Woody Allen, ‘Don’t knock masturbation, it’s sex with someone you love.’ I mean, if you can’t get properly intimate with yourself down there, why would a man want to?”

“Right,” Susie, a petite blonde, chipped in. “How’re you ever going to show him what you like?”

Lorna eyed the vibrators in the catalog and couldn’t help wondering if any man faced with one of the giant penises wouldn’t feel a bit, well... small in comparison. She checked out the specs for one of the “mammoth” toys and doubted it would even fit inside her.

She’d never been overly liberated when it came to sex. And she’d never shared that with anyone, until one fateful night with her friends. Too many cocktails, added to a large supply of

chocolate and a sexy film on the TV, had led to Lorna confessing that her sexual experience with men up to this moment in time could be described as a little... limited.

Thus, the sex toy exploration had been added to The List.

Lorna couldn't say she felt any better, even after handling some of the vibrators. She supposed she might feel differently on her own in bed, a few mango-scented candles lit, and an image of a shirtless Johnny Depp playing in her mind.

Kate nudged her. "You said you don't have any one to try them out with. Is that true? Or is there someone you like?"

"Ooooh," Susie chimed in.

Lorna rolled her eyes. "We're not in high school anymore, you guys." But her cheeks did flush a bit.

Kate whooped. "There is! I knew it. Who is it?"

Lorna sighed. "My roommate has this friend who stops over sometimes, Jamie." Just thinking about him made her insides melt into the consistency of gooey chocolate. When she closed her eyes she saw his floppy brown hair, ocean-blue eyes, and the dark shadow of stubble that made him look so mysterious. "But I doubt he's interested in me."

Susie held up the catalog and waved it before Lorna's eyes. "He might be interested in what one of these babies can do for him." She pointed at the cock rings, some shaped with stimulating points and ridges. "Apparently they make him stay harder for longer."

"I think I'll worry about getting a man first, rather than keeping him hard," Lorna said, but she laughed along with her friends.

Kate finished her wine. "Okay, it's late, and I have school tomorrow."

That made Lorna laugh again. "It concerns me that you can fondle fake penises by night and teach elementary school by day. I suspect you're corrupting our children from the inside."

"Someone's got to," Kate shot back. She shrugged her jacket on and smoothed down her dark hair. Then she patted the catalog. "I'm going to place my order tomorrow night. You have until then to order one of these bad boys. And I mean it - I want to see something in the email you send me, or..."

"Or I won't make any cookies for our film night next month," Susie put in. "I play hardball."

Lorna had to admit, she couldn't do with her friend's legendary cookies. She threw up her hands, palm out, in surrender. "All right. I'll pick something." She ushered her friends out and started clearing up the wine flutes. She loaded everything into the sink, filled it with soapy water, and then changed into her PJs.

Sleep eluded her for an hour. Finally, she flipped on her bedside lamp. Soft light bathed her ocean-blue sheets and she reached for the catalog she'd discarded by the foot of her bed, flipping to the pages showing the range of available vibrators.

As she read the specs for each one, running her fingers over the silky pages, a pleasant thrum started low in her body. Just because she had never thought of herself as sexually

adventurous, didn't mean she didn't miss men. Or the feel of a man inside, the delicious length and girth of him, the tickle of his chest hair against her nipples.

Almost unconsciously, her hand drifted down her body, re-learning the weight of her breasts, the press of her nipples into her palm, the brush of her cotton pajama top over her skin.

Her gaze traced the mammoth vibrator, eating up the ridges along its shaft, and the softly shaped head. Unbidden, a faraway memory of giving an old boyfriend a blowjob slid into her mind, and she licked her lips, remembering the salty-sweet taste of his skin, the rub of his flesh, hard as steel under velvet casing.

That memory brought on others. Memories of wrapping her legs around a man's hips, him whispering against her throat, sucking her nipples. The rush of moisture between her legs dampened the thin fabric of her panties and she lay back, sliding her hand past the loose waist of her PJ pants.

The first, tentative touch of her finger on her clit made her hips arch into the touch. Finding herself already wet, she let the images of the tantalizingly large vibrator, combined with her memories of sex and the men she'd slept with, run through her mind like a personal adult film. She stroked herself over and over, her fingers lightly circling over the silky-soft petals of her sex, until an orgasm rolled over her, flushing her skin, hardening her nipples, bathing her skin in a light sheen of sweat.

After, she thought, *I've definitely got to place an order for a vibrator.*

~* * *~

"Has it arrived yet?" Susie asked as soon as Lorna opened the door. She thrust a plate of double chocolate-chip cookies into Lorna's hands.

"Yes, it has." Lorna couldn't help but smile. It had only been a week since the night of the party, but already her life seemed to have turned into the sort of serial everyone wanted installments of.

"And have you used it yet?" Kate, following close behind, wanted to know.

"No, I haven't." Lorna crossed to the wall-mounted cupboards in her kitchen-cum-diner and took out wine flutes. "I sort of want to wait until my roommate goes out."

"Lame," Susie announced. "He's a med student. He's always out. Plus, he's out now."

"Yes, but he just left. I was hardly going to start experimenting when I had less than a half hour before you guys turned up."

It was half-true. The other part was that Lorna had opened the box, been shocked at the sheer size and shape of the thing, and had chickened out a little. Pleasuring herself with her hands was one thing – using this giant of a fake penis was another entirely.

She did *feel* a little lame, though.

"Tonight," she announced. "Tonight, I'll use it."

"Text me after," Kate commanded.

Lorna laughed out loud. She had no idea what she'd do without her friends.

They watched a couple of thrillers. Halfway through the second film, Susie's delicious cookies had been demolished, and the bottle of wine sat on the counter, holding only the sad, last few drops in its glassy depths.

The friends chatted throughout, but Lorna couldn't forget her promise to Susie and Kate, and when she closed the door behind them, after a tangle of arms, legs and slightly-drunken cheek kisses, she blew out a breath.

Time to try out my new toy.

Again, she tried to make it an experience for herself: candles, soft lighting. She locked her bedroom door, and then undressed slowly, enjoying the slide of fabric against her skin, the soft whisper of her clothes as they met the floor. Then she stroked her hands over her skin, squeezing her breasts, caressing her clit with feather-light touches.

When her body hummed with need, she gathered her new toy, plus a shiny blue bottle of sweet-scented lube, in her hands.

She'd expected the rubber-material vibrator to feel awkward in her hands – maybe too heavy, too rough. But to her surprise, she felt her damp sex clench when she ran her fingers over the vibrator's smooth head.

Despite what she'd thought, she ached to feel it inside her.

She slid the batteries in, clipped them in place, and then, hesitantly, laughing a bit at herself, she flicked the switch, to the lowest vibration setting. It wasn't half as weird, or scary, as she'd feared.

In fact, the vibration made a new flood of moisture coat her already slick sex, her clit all but moaning to be touched.

She squirted the silky-feel lube into her palm, rubbing it over the vibrator. Against her palm, the raised veins and skin-like texture in the vibe's rubber casing almost felt like a man. Lorna swallowed. She felt wet enough that she might not even need the lube – but hey, in for a penny...

Finally, her breathing shallow, her hands trembling with want, Lorna lay back against the pillows and poised the tip of the vibe at her entrance. For minutes that seemed to stretch into hours, she stroked it over herself, circling her clit, until she could bear it no more. The tension in her lower body stretched as tight as a bowstring, she slid the vibe inside her, inch by inch. The slippery walls of her sex gripped the vibe's rubbery surface, and she sighed in pleasure. After a few moments of easing it in and out of her, Lorna started to move the toy faster, creating a rhythm akin to sex. With her free hand, she stroked small ovals over her clit. In moments, the delicious flutter of an orgasm stormed her lower body. Excited, arching her hips, Lorna turned the vibe up to the next setting, sending the huge, fake penis inside her shivering and jerking.

Lorna's climax hit her fully, and she turned her face into her pillow, smothering her cry of ecstasy.

Later, floating on a cloud of afterglow, she thought: *Step 1: Experiment with sex toys, is complete. Now for Step 2: Find a man to share these experiences with.*

It wasn't that she didn't want to meet someone. Her friendly nature meant she smiled at strangers, struck up conversations on the subway, and always helped out someone in need when she could. But that didn't often lead to meeting the man of her dreams. And her job as a computer game translator didn't lend itself to dating, either.

Still, she smiled as she started to drift off to sleep. She'd taken the first step to a better sex life, and if a man came into the picture, she'd be ready.

Chapter Two

The next day, buying groceries paled next to the night's activities. Lorna could still feel the toy's vibrations inside her as she walked around, buying toilet paper, bread, two percent milk. Her state of arousal didn't seem to have lessened at all. If anything, using the vibe had simply made her ache to use it again. *Maybe tonight Adam will be out.*

Eventually, Lorna knew, she'd have the confidence to use it even when he was home, tucked in his own room. But for now, nothing struck her as worse than having a masturbation session interrupted by Adam asking where something was, or worse, inviting some friends over. Once, around a year ago, Lorna had forgotten to lock her door while indulging in some heavy petting with a casual boyfriend. Adam, tired from school, not thinking, had come in at a rather inopportune moment.

Her arms straining with the weight of the canvas bags hanging from her fingers, Lorna slowly climbed the flight of stairs to the apartment she and Adam shared, and let herself in. She'd just dropped everything with an immense sigh of relief when she heard a noise.

Someone's here. Adam? No, he had an early lecture.

She stilled.

"Hello?"

"Hey," came an answering voice from the direction of the bathroom. Shortly after, a toilet flushed.

Jamie. Everything inside Lorna tightened for a moment. Her cheeks flushed. Her mind had drifted to him more than once last night, as she'd thrust the vibe in and out of herself, imagining Jamie's eyes locked on hers, his legs tangling with hers.

Will he look at me and know?

Laughing silently at herself, Lorna blew out a breath and started to put the groceries away. She didn't really want Jamie to see her like this. She wore old sweatpants, a t-shirt with *Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner* emblazoned across it, and she'd pulled her normally shiny, wavy black hair into a scruffy ponytail.

And what was Jamie doing here anyway?

He appeared around the corner, his tall, lanky frame immediately prominent in the small kitchen-cum-living space. "Hey, Lorn."

She liked the nickname. "Hi."

He rubbed his neck. Lorna's gaze followed the movement, tracing the line of his jaw, fuzzy with the stubble he never seemed to shave off. It suited him – balanced out those baby blue eyes and gave him a sort of fallen-angel look. "It's kind of weird that I'm here and Adam's not, right? But pest control's in my apartment building this morning. Adam said it'd be okay if I hung out here for a bit. I guess he didn't tell you."

"He's very busy." Lorna settled the last carton of milk into the refrigerator. She didn't envy her roommate his hectic, med-student life style. It was unlikely to get any better once he graduated. "So, you okay, other than having your place fumigated?"

He nodded, shrugged one shoulder. His gaze seemed to burn into her. "I'm good, I'm good. You?"

Lorna swallowed. Had she imagined it, or had his gaze roved over her body? "I'm fine. You... want something to drink? We've got coffee, tea, juice, milk..."

"Juice is fine." He folded his long body, endless legs encased in dark blue jeans, on to a stool at the breakfast bar. "Thanks. You've been out?"

Lorna poured the juice. The cold liquid against the glass made her skin tingle, and she involuntarily thought of her vibe again. Heat shot through her body, and having Jamie in the same room didn't help. If anything, the twin sensations of arousal and embarrassment sharpened.

She set down Jamie's juice, their eyes meeting briefly. *If only you knew how much I think about you.* "Just grocery shopping. Nothing interesting. Now I look forward to an afternoon of translating a computer game about serial killer rabbits into German."

"You mean it isn't in German already?" Jamie teased, and the corner of his mouth tipped up into a charming grin.

Lorna's stomach flopped.

I'll be thinking of that grin next time I slip into bed with my new toy...

It needed a name. *Jamie* sprung to mind instantly, but Lorna discarded that. Too obvious, and if her friends, or worse, Adam, ever found out...

She'd never, ever live it down.

"So this game, what do the killer rabbits hunt?"

"Farmers, oddly enough," Lorna said, deadpan. Jamie laughed out loud, and Lorna's heart clenched as the sound washed over her. He really had no idea just what he did to her insides.

"Oh yeah," he said suddenly. "I've got something hilarious to show you." He reached around to the back pocket of his jeans. "Adam gave this to me this morning. I think it was some sort of joke."

And he placed Lorna's copy of the adult store's sex toy catalog on the counter, by his glass.

Lorna felt her world begin to topple, just a little. "Where... did he get it?"

"He said he found it lying around. Must have been junk mail or something. I mean, can you imagine owning one of these things?"

Lorna swallowed. Heat infused her body, and she suspected that a glance in the mirror might show that she matched the color of a tomato. “Er, well, I suppose there is some demand for them, if there are catalogs. I should get some work done. Stay as long as you want.”

She all but shot from the room and into her bedroom, where she closed the door, legs shaking, and slid down to the floor.

Next time she saw Adam, she’d kick to him death.

~* * *~

Jamie glanced from the glossy-paged catalog to the space where Lorna had been, and back. She had run off so fast that, if he looked really hard, he could see the particles of air where she’d stood vibrating.

I’ve upset her. He couldn’t think why. He’d been genuinely amused at the catalog, promising dizzy heights of pleasure. And the names for some of these toys, like they were film characters or something. He thought Lorna would laugh too, after all, living with Adam so long, she had to have developed a saucy sense of humor.

He flipped through the catalog again, and then something made him stop.

Next to the picture of a “Mountain Man Mammoth” vibrator, a little box had been checked. A pink ballpoint pen had been used.

Jamie remembered something then. Adam, complaining that he’d taken one of Lorna’s pens for an assignment, only to realize two words in that his writing was a perfect powder puff pink.

Lorna’s pen.

Oh, God. She’d gone and ordered one of these damned fake dicks and he’d blatantly made fun of it.

A rush of thoughts flooded his head. Lorna, who seemed to him a fun girl, the girl-next-door type, cool, nice to hang out with, friend material, *owned a vibrator*. Closely following this train of thought came an erotic image of her using it.

Jamie swallowed, and his body responded appropriately.

He’d always liked Lorna. What hot-blooded man wouldn’t? Her black hair and creamy skin could have come straight out of a novel, and her figure – proper curves, something for a man to get his hands on – drew eyes wherever she went.

Now he had *that* image stuck in his head; Lorna, settled back against a pile of silky pillows, fingers spreading herself as she rolled a vibrator across her clit and the petals of her sex.

Jamie shook his head. *Quit thinking like that and go apologize.*

He wisely left the catalog where it lay and headed for the closed door of her room. Tentatively, he pressed his ear to it. No sobbing. No throwing objects, either.

Maybe she really wasn’t offended and is just working.

The chances of that were pretty slim.

He knocked. "Lorn, it's me."

No reply.

He knocked again. "Lorn? One of those killer rabbits has eaten you, hasn't it? Want me to come to the rescue?"

Still nothing. Jamie sighed, resting his shoulder against the door. He'd never been fabulous at apologizing – he guessed it was an in-built man thing. "Lorna, I am sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I was kidding, but it was stupid. Let me make it up to you. Say, dinner tonight? We'll go to that new Japanese place downtown that you like." He paused. No objection. "I'll swing by around seven?"

Finally, he heard an "Okay" squeak out from behind the door.

Relief depressed his chest. "See you then."

And maybe, if dinner went well, he'd convince her to acquaint him with her new toy.

~* * *~

I'm going to dinner with Jamie. Okay, so it might be an apology dinner, Lorna reasoned, but her heart still fluttered. They would still have dinner, together, she and he, just the two of them.

This had occurred to her about a half hour after she'd eventually managed to look up from her sheets, when all the rosiness had finally drained from her face.

Now, given a few hours to get past the mortification, she rifled through the contents of her wardrobe. Kate perched on the bed. She'd come over straight after her workday at the school ended, because "you've wanted Jamie for ages and we're going to make sure you do this properly."

Lorna couldn't have agreed more.

She held a strapless red number up. "I like how my boobs look in this."

Kate made a pfft sound. "Too slutty. He's taking you out to apologize, not to get in your panties. If the two combine, great! But let's go with gorgeous but understated."

Lorna sighed. "Okay." She cast one forlorn last glance back at the dress. Her breasts really *did* look awesome in it.

Next she selected her wardrobe staple – a little black dress, cut just above the knee, with a modest scoop neck, and capped sleeves. "I like this."

Kate made a face. "Hmm, I like it, but it really does scream *this is a date*. And you don't want that."

Lorna tossed the dress on to the bed. The edges of the hanger narrowly missed Kate's head. "This is hard."

"That's because men are stupid."

Over the next half hour, they went through six outfits. Kate finally approved of a chocolate brown, knee-length, wrap-dress, secured with a wide gold belt. She chose a sparkly, flower-shaped gold slide to go through Lorna's black hair, too. "Good. You look as if you could be attending any nice occasion. My work is done."

Lorna rolled her eyes. "You can say that when dinner is over and Jamie hasn't flown the restaurant in disgust and or terror."

Kate hugged her. "You don't do yourself justice. It'll be fine. Now, go have a shower, put on some blush and lipstick, and have fun." She scooped up her tote bag, and then paused, a wicked expression playing over her features. "Maybe you'll have so much fun that you'll introduce Jamie to Mr. Mammoth."

Lorna colored, but laughed. "Don't call it that. It's... weird."

"All mine have names." Kate cackled as she swung her bag over her shoulder. "Think about it. It might make the experience more satisfying." Then her smile faded and she touched Lorna's cheek. "Seriously, I'm proud of you. And who knows, maybe Mr. M is a good luck charm. You've got dinner with Jamie, right?"

A smile blossomed on Lorna's lips. "Right."

~* * *~

He looks good enough to eat. The thought wound through her as Lorna opened the door to find Jamie on the other side. He'd gone for smart-casual; a black corduroy jacket over a smart white shirt. Dark blue jeans wrapped around his long legs. He wore smart brown shoes.

"Hey," he said, and the deep timbre of his voice made the hair on the back of her neck prickle.

"Hey yourself." She met his gaze. She'd always been a sucker for blue eyes, and looking into Jamie's, and felt she might fall into them if wasn't careful. "Thanks... for this."

He laughed as she grabbed her bag. "Don't thank me just yet. You might hate the food."

"How did you know I wanted to try out the Japanese place?" She pulled the door closed, and the heels of her brown wedges clicked on the wooden floor as they walked.

"Adam said something about it."

He'd been paying attention. Lorna's heart bumped in her chest. She told herself to calm down. "Oh?"

"Yeah, he has no life outside med school and you, remember?" Jamie teased. "How're the killer rabbits?"

Lorna grinned. "Almost seventy-five percent German. They'll be learning Italian tomorrow."

"You speak German *and* Italian?"

She nodded, pride flowering inside her at his impressed expression. “And Albanian, though there’s not really any call for that in computer games. At least, not yet. When it happens – I can corner the market.”

“Wow.” He whistled. “It must take a long time, all that translation.”

She shrugged as they passed sweet-smelling delis and cafes, the evening twilight crowding in around them. “It can be tedious. But it pays well, for what it is. I get to stay at home a lot, work in my PJs. And I get to use my degree – quite rare, these days.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve yet to use mine.” Jamie worked in TV – or so he liked he say. The reality was that while he worked for a company researching historical details for TV serials, his history degree fell by the wayside while he fetched tea and coffee. “I wonder when I’ll graduate from tea monkey.”

Lorna patted his arm consolingly. He felt warm and reassuringly strong beneath the soft cord of his jacket. “Soon. Maybe you should start putting something in the tea.”

He laughed out loud. “You know, that’s really not a bad idea. No one would even really notice. Sometimes they don’t even look at me when they take the cups from my tray.”

A note of sadness had crept into his voice, and Lorna’s heart squeezed. Jamie always behaved so cavalier, so happy-go-lucky, so she felt sort of... honored, to see this rare display of vulnerability.

“Do you like Japanese food?” They neared the restaurant and Lorna took a deep breath of the scented air, her taste buds already tingling.

“I do, actually.” Jamie sent her a smile. “I just don’t eat out that much. I usually grab a sandwich, or cook something from the freezer... or...”

“Order pizza?” Lorna guessed. Whenever Jamie came over to see Adam, they ate pizza and played videogames.

Jamie pressed a hand to his heart, as if he had been shot. “You got me. Men are so easy to predict, I guess.”

“Not really.” Lorna could never have predicted, a few days ago, that tonight she’d be dining with Jamie. Who knew how long she’d harbored a crush on him? It had gone on so long that she’d stopped keeping a record. But her stomach hadn’t stopped doing cartwheels when she glimpsed him, or heard his name.

And if her stomach didn’t calm down soon, dinner would be a disaster.

“Ladies first.” When they reached the door, Jamie pushed it open, then walked in behind Lorna.

The small restaurant’s dark, cherry wood flooring clacked under Lorna’s heels as a petite Japanese waitress, her hair coiled on top of her head, showed them to a table settled under an intimate alcove.

Jamie pulled out her seat. Lorna couldn’t stop a silly smile plastering itself over her face. At the same time, though, she pressed a mental hand to her heart. *Don’t think just because he’s being chivalrous means that this has become a date.*

The waitress handed them laminated oval menus and promised to come back for drink orders in a few minutes.

“So what’s good?” Jamie asked, grinning at her over the top of the menu. His intense blue eyes burned into her, and Lorna felt the first threads of desire weaving through her body.

“Well, whenever I eat Japanese, I *always* get dumplings. I’m afraid that’s non-negotiable.”

He scanned the menu. “Sounds good. So, do you share, or shall I get my own portion?”

Lorna sent him her best magnanimous expression. “Since you’re kindly footing the bill for tonight, I feel I might be able to share with you.”

Jamie’s smile faltered at her words. “I really am sorry about that. It was just a joke.”

Lorna reddened; feeling the heat crawling up her neck, she pressed a hand to her cheek. “I know. I... overreacted a bit. You didn’t have to do this, you know,” she added, gesturing awkwardly.

Jamie caught the hand she gestured with. “Maybe I wanted to, and I was just waiting for a good excuse.”

Lorna’s heart stilled for a second as their eyes met. *Is this really happening?* She opened her mouth to say something, anything-

The waitress appeared, and set down a bowl of shrimp chips between them.

Jamie let her hand go.

“Ready to order drinks?” the waitress asked.

Lorna asked for green tea. Jamie ordered a dry Japanese beer.

When the waitress left, Lorna let herself look at Jamie and wondered if she’d imagined what he’d just said. Had he meant to let her hand go, or had it been reflex to allow room for the shrimp chips?

“So what do you think?” Jamie folded his hands together on top of his flattened menu. Oh boy, did he have great hands; long fingers, wide palms. The sort of hands she could imagine playing a piano, or guitar.

The sort of hands she wanted to feel on her skin.

Wow, I’ve started thinking about sex a whole lot more since Mr. M arrived. Even though Kate had been joking, the name fit, and Lorna found it a lot more comfortable, even in her own head, to call her toy that rather than “my vibrator.” Less of a mouthful, as well. And who knew, if she accidentally said it out loud, she could be talking about a cat or dog.

“... About what?”

“About what I said.” Jamie brushed his fingers over hers, tentative; waiting to see how she reacted. “I mean, I like you. I really didn’t mean to upset you. Why do you think I hung around your place yesterday, even though Adam was out?”

“You had pest control in.”

“Yes, I did, but I could have gone anyplace. I could have read in the library, put in some overtime at work, chilled in Central Park. But I came to see you.”

Wow. The intensity on Jamie’s handsome face turned Lorna’s insides to butter. “I... really?” The part of her that had yearned after him for so long just couldn’t quite believe it yet.

“Yes, really.” The warmth glowing in his blue irises told her he spoke the truth.

The waitress arrived again to serve their drinks. “Ready to order your meals?”

Jamie flipped his menu closed. “You order,” he said to Lorna. “You seem to know what’s good. I’ll eat anything.”

Lorna asked the waitress for two portions of dumplings, one vegetable, one meat, a plate of udon noodles, sushi with cucumber and salmon, and sticky rice wrapped in thin layers of sweet dough.

“That’s less than I imagined,” Jamie commented when the waitress took their menus.

Lorna laughed. “Believe me, it was hard to narrow it down. But we need to leave room for dessert.”

An hour later, they’d talked their way through dumplings and their main course. Lorna sat back against the wall of the booth, groaning good-naturedly. “You know, Asian food is very deceptive. It looks small, but I think it expands in your stomach.”

Jamie scooped up more noodles. He handled the chopsticks awkwardly, but he’d improved much over the meal. “I’m still pretty hungry.”

Lorna eyed him enviously. “You’re just like my brother. Why do all men have hollow legs?”

“We have to finish the food women can’t.”

“How awful for you.”

He shrugged, and looked charmingly insincere. “It’s a burden we try to carry with grace.”

“If I had the energy, I’d kick you under the table.”

Jamie made a valiant effort and finished everything Lorna hadn’t been able to manage. The waitress cleared their plates away. “Would you like to see the dessert menu?”

Lorna hesitated.

“She would,” Jamie supplied.

Lorna poked him, feigning embarrassment, but secretly a little thrill wound through her. *He’s almost behaving as if we’re on a date... Or as if we’re a couple.* And she couldn’t have been more pleased.

They argued playfully before finally agreeing to share some sesame and red bean ice cream for dessert. Every bite melted on Lorna’s tongue and she knew she should have reintroduced her rule not to share. But watching Jamie slide the spoon past his lips sent a wonderful little tingle down her spine.

He paid, and then they stepped out into the cool night air.

“I’ll be all right, getting home,” Lorna told him. “You live in the opposite direction.”

“Don’t be silly.” He shook his head at her. “If my mother knew I’d let a lady walk home alone, she’d skin me.”

Adam had said once that Jamie’s Irish mother didn’t suffer fools gladly, if at all. Lorna wanted to meet her.

“Well, thanks.”

“All part and parcel of the apology dinner. Speaking of which, I’m sorry, again. This may be the last time I’ll ever say it. It isn’t a phrase I’m very keen on.”

Lorna nudged him. “Who likes eating humble pie, anyway?”

“Not men.”

The walk to Lorna’s apartment building seemed to fly by. New York, never truly dark, wrapped them in its encroaching twilight, and despite the other walkers, and the neon signs that grew from every surface, she felt as if she and Jamie were almost alone, in their own special bubble.

“This is me.” Lorna stopped by the door. Her heart carried on, slamming into her ribs. *Shall I invite him up? No, it’s too soon. He’ll think I’m slutty.*

But Jamie stood so close, she could smell his scent, and see the gold edging in the blue of his eyes, and, for the first time in a long time, she wanted to behave in a slutty way if it meant he wouldn’t.

“I had a good time,” he murmured, and his voice almost got lost in the whine of traffic.

“Even though it was supposed to make you feel bad?” Lorna teased. “Being an apology dinner, and all?”

Her comment made him laugh. “Maybe I’m doing it wrong. Do you think we should try again?”

Lorna hesitated, then thought, *why the hell not?* He was here, so was she. She’d done something right so far. *The worst he can say is no.* “I wouldn’t feel properly apologized to if we didn’t.”

His smile reached all the way to his eyes, tiny crinkles appearing at the corners. They shouldn’t have, but they made him even sexier to her. “I’m working solid until Thursday. How about Friday night, maybe a movie?”

It is a date. Lorna was sure of it, right down to her toes. “Sounds great.”

“Until then.”

“Until then.”

They stood, frozen, as people passed, as the wind whipped around them, scattering a few curled brown leaves.

Then Jamie leaned in, just a little, as Lorna lifted her face.

Their lips met. He tasted of beer and sticky Japanese rice, and just a sliver of sesame ice cream. When his tongue touched hers, her whole body responded. Her nipples tightened. Her skin tingled. The kiss stirred memories of other pleasures given to her by Mr. M, and an answering throb between her legs made Lorna deepen the kiss.

After too short a time, Jamie pulled back. “Good night, Lorn.”

His use of the nickname told her they were still okay. Her heart fluttered like a baby bird trying out new wings. “Night.”

She disappeared inside, and watched him from the security door's window, until his retreating figure blurred into the waning light.

Chapter Three

“So, you and Jamie, huh?” Adam asked the next morning as Lorna felt her way to the kitchen for her morning cup of coffee.

“Hmmm.” She groped around for her mug, her thoughts not entirely coherent yet. No human should ever be deprived of coffee. Furthermore, Lorna preferred it if she wasn’t spoken to before her first sip. Today, she’d planned to get coffee, and immediately retreat back under her sheets to relive all the wonderful moments of last night. However, hearing Jamie’s name perked her up, faster than a hit of espresso. “What did you say?”

Laughing, Adam shrugged on a hooded sweatshirt as he chewed a triangle of toast slathered with chocolate spread. “You. And. Jamie. Dinner. Last. Night.”

Awake now, Lorna threw a napkin at him. It sailed on the air for a second, and fell to the floor, pathetically far from its target. “I heard you. I just need a bit of coffee before I feel human. You must know this by now. Why, did he say anything?”

Adam swallowed. “He said to tell you I shouldn’t have taken your catalog of women’s things.”

Lorna couldn’t stop the grin that leapt on to her lips. “Well, you shouldn’t have, but you did get me a lovely meal, so I’m not really that mad. But I will be, if you don’t let me get some caffeine into my blood.”

“I’m leaving for work now, anyway.” Adam passed, setting his mug on the counter. “You know, Jamie’s a nice guy. I’m a hundred percent sure he didn’t mean to upset you.”

Lorna smiled genuinely. “I know. Now get your ass to the hospital.”

After he left, she flopped on the couch for a half hour, breakfasting on a bowl of muesli and a second cup of coffee. Then it was time to get to work on the killer rabbits. She’d be glad when that chapter of her life was over.

She looked at her bed longingly, but then, giving in, Lorna booted her computer up. Across the room, her cell phone beeped. When she retrieved it, she read the new text message:

It’s Jamie. Got your number from Adam. Hope you’re okay, look forward to saying sorry again on Friday.

Lorna read it three times before hugging the little device to her chest.

Maybe Kate was right. Who’d have thought ordering from a sex toy catalog would attract the attention of the man of her dreams?

The thought of her vibrator made her body respond appropriately.

There's time to see Mr. M before I get to work. She couldn't wait to feel it inside her again. An image of Jamie beside her, rubbing the vibe over her body, entered her mind, and had Lorna all but running for her invitingly rumpled bed.

~* * *~

Friday had taken forever to arrive. Even Lorna's new project, translating a hand-held console game about a group of adventurers tasked with finding a magic stone hidden in a dragon's cave, failed to hold her attention.

She couldn't get Jamie – or the image of him using Mr. M on her – out of her mind.

I wonder if this is what Kate feels like, she mused, remembering Kate's flippant remark about her collection of sex toys.

Maybe soon I'll have someone to try some more out with. She'd already been considering ordering something else, even if things with Jamie didn't work out. It felt strange, a good kind of strange, to just be learning about aids for pleasuring herself at twenty-seven years old.

I'll be watching porn next. Lorna laughed out loud at herself, and started to find something to wear.

The weather, never really kind to New York, had turned cold. Lorna slipped a fog-grey sweater over her head and pulled on fitted black jeans over her favorite brown suede boots. Outside, autumn blew in gales, sending leaves and bits of street debris into mini tornadoes between passersby.

Just as she fluffed her hair, and walked through a sprayed cloud of her favorite perfume – Adam would be thrilled when he next used the bathroom – a knock sounded at the door.

Does this man make everything look good? Lorna thought when she opened the door. Jamie wore jeans. The blue in his eyes put the denim to shame. His black sweater only made his light stubble seem darker, more touchable. Lorna's fingers itched to feel his hair.

Perhaps later she would – and more.

“Ready?” he asked. He stood in the doorway, his lanky frame almost filling it.

“Yes.” She didn't think she'd ever been more ready for anything in her life. “What're we seeing?”

“Ah, well, that's where I need your help,” Jamie began as Lorna closed the door. “If this is meant to be an apology movie, you should choose it.”

“In that case,” Lorna replied, her mouth turning up at the corners as she spoke, “I should choose something like a weepie or a chick flick. That way I can cry all over you.”

Jamie punched the air. “Too late for that. I checked. There aren't any out.”

“Well then, it clearly isn't a good enough apology,” she shot back, enjoying teasing him far too much.

He held open the apartment door for her. “Would popcorn help?”

Lorna hid a smile. "It couldn't hurt."

A short subway trip later, they stood in line for the movies. Lorna studied the huge posters on display above, with show times underneath in LCD displays. She pointed to a poster that showed a huge, dragon-like beast leaping at a helicopter. "That could be one of those 'so bad it's good' things."

Jamie grimaced. "Not sure I'm willing to risk it."

They settled on a biopic of a recently-dead gangster. The poster promised "gritty glamour, guns and sex." Lorna knew she'd just be happy to snuggle up to Jamie in the intimate darkness of the movie theatre.

He settled the popcorn between them as they found their seats. "You do realize," Lorna informed him, "if I hate this film, another apology will be required."

"Oh no," Jamie replied, but she saw the white of his teeth as he smiled.

Several times during the film their hands brushed as they both reached for the popcorn. Lorna's heart jumped in her chest when Jamie snagged a piece and held it to her lips.

By the time the film ended, she felt more than ready to invite him in. Her sessions with Mr. M had proved the old adage – the more sex you have, the more you start wanting – and her body hummed with desire.

So it took almost no courage at all for her to ask, at the door of her building, as the leaves whirled windily around their feet, "Want to come in for a coffee?"

Jamie's smile spread slowly over his gorgeous lips. "Can't think any anything I'd like more."

Lorna led the way. Did she imagine it or did the heat on Jamie's gaze on her ass sear through her? *I hope he is checking me out.* She said a silent prayer of thanks up to whatever God had made her choose to wear her black jeans. They did make her backside look fantastic.

She slid her key into the door, feeling Jamie on her heels. The long, lean line of his body radiated warmth, and feeling him brush up against her back sent a shiver of awareness over her torso. Her nipples hardened inside the soft, lacy cups of her bra. No plain cotton now. She wore delicate lilac lace, and panties that matched. *Just in case.*

Jamie slid on to the stool at the breakfast bar as Lorna opened the refrigerator. She poked around inside, then sighed. "We're out of milk. Adam always uses it all for his notoriously milky coffees."

"It's the only source of calcium he's going to get," Jamie joked. "Some doctor he'll make! It doesn't matter. I don't mind black coffee."

Lorna set the kettle to boil. She still hadn't got around to buying the coffee machine she wanted yet, and she stood by the counter awkwardly for a few moments. *He's here. We had a date. Now what?*

Jamie answered that unspoken question for her. "Come here." He crooked his finger playfully.

Lorna crossed to the breakfast bar, keeping it between them, half out of a desire to tease him a little and half out of her dwindling, but still active, fear of rejection. At this stage he was

still Jamie—Adam’s friend, Jamie—the guy she’d liked for so long it had practically become ancient history.

He didn’t disappoint, though. Jamie cupped her cheek, sliding his fingers up her face and into the wavy tendrils of her black hair. “You’re so gorgeous,” he whispered.

A smile brighter than sunshine curved Lorna’s lips. “I’m glad you think so.”

“I’ve thought so for a long time.”

He leaned in, and their lips met. When his tongue touched hers in a gentle, intimate dance, Lorna found the confidence to tunnel her own hands into the tattered-silk softness of his hair. Someone moaned, low and arousing, and Lorna was surprised to discover that she’d made the sound.

Jamie didn’t mind at all. Without breaking the kiss, he rounded the breakfast bar and took her in his arms. Lorna slid her hands under the edges of his open jacket. The soft material of his sweater tingled against her sensitive palms. The warmth of his body positively made the soft fabric sizzle.

The kettle whistled from the counter. Lorna instinctively moved to see to it, but Jamie held her fast. “It can wait. I’d rather taste you than coffee.”

“Hmmm.” She all but melted into him.

Jamie’s hands stayed politely in her hair, on her shoulders and her waist as they kissed, as he explored the softness of her mouth with his. Lorna ached for him to touch her breasts, to caress her nipples, to just *touch her skin* with his bare hands.

He behaved the perfect gentleman, which both thrilled and frustrated her.

They shared coffee, and then he said goodnight. They lingered at the door. The last kiss Jamie gave her tasted of the bitterness of coffee swirled around the sticky sweetness of cinema popcorn.

“I’ll call you,” he promised.

She watched him go down the wooden hall, his footsteps echoing, and then she closed the door shut quietly.

He’d gone home without taking advantage of her – the perfect date. *My mother would be ecstatic.*

Except he’d left her horny as hell.

She washed the coffee cups, running her thumb over the place Jamie’s lips had rested. She missed him already. So he’d left her miserable *and* hot for him; no wonder people avoided this dating gig.

Her body thrummed with anticipation, still alive with want.

Mr. M crept into her mind, and she turned off the tap and the lights, heading for her bedroom. She closed the door, slid out of her clothes and between the sheets. She lit her favorite candle. It had become a sort of ritual for her now. She’d started to understand Kate. *I’m not surprised that she has so many sex toys.* She’d never felt as in tune with her own body as she did since learning to use her vibrator.

Lorna reached for the small tube of lube on her table and spread it generously over herself. The cold gel tickled, and she pressed her legs together, suppressing a squeal of delight. Her body knew what awaited it.

This time, she didn't turn Mr. M on. Instead she thought of Jamie; of how his weight would feel pressed against her breasts, how his hands would caress her breasts, cupping them in his palms. She rubbed the vibe's head over her clit, slick with gel and her own arousal, arching her hips.

When she finally slid Mr. M inside her, her muscles clenching around his smooth rubber skin, Jamie's named sighed from her lips.

~* * *~

"I've got to go out of town for a week."

Lorna almost dropped the fork that she'd raised to her mouth. The spaghetti she'd swirled around the tines slid off. She looked up at Jamie. "Ah, oh. What for?"

He scooped up a bite of lasagna. "For what could be my big break. A TV research company in Chicago needs someone to pick up the slack while one of their historians is off sick."

"That's great!" Lorna's heart swelled. "I hope it goes well."

Jamie had been "apologizing" to her for almost five weeks now. They saw as much of each other as they could, snuggling up in the movie theatre, enjoying meals out, and suddenly a week without kissing him, without sharing dessert with him, stretched ahead of Lorna miserably.

She also hoped, though she didn't voice it, that he wouldn't meet someone amazing and decide not to come back.

That's a ridiculous thought.

Was it, though? Despite the frequent dates, and unspoken knowledge that each date would be followed by another, they had yet to declare their status as an exclusive couple, or to move things into the bedroom. Lorna felt insanely relieved that Kate had persuaded her to buy a vibrator. She'd never experienced this level of sexual frustration.

"I hope so, too." He cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking her lower lip. "I'll miss you."

The tension in her unwound slowly. *Don't be stupid. He's into you.* "Me, too."

Chapter Four

Waiting for luggage. See you soon.

On her way to the Arrivals gate, Lorna stopped and read the text over and over, a huge grin blooming on her lips. Jamie had just touched down at LaGuardia.

She'd offered to meet him at the airport, hoping it didn't come across as bunny-boiler behavior. When she'd said as much to Kate, the brunette had laughed at the odd phrase – something Lorna had picked up in her extensive studying of linguistics and colloquial European terms.

But Jamie had seemed thrilled by her offer. Now Lorna waited, every cell in her body trembling in excitement and anticipation. She wore her new gray wrap dress. It hugged her breasts and hips, falling loose below her waist. She'd teamed them with her favorite black jeans and brand new, mink-brown winter boots. Autumn had truly taken a huge bite out of the city and didn't seem ready to stop yet.

People flooded from the arrivals gate, pushing trolleys, carrying sleepy children, hugging friends and relatives. The lines started to dwindle. Lorna stood on her tiptoes to see past some particularly tall men.

Finally, he appeared around the corner. His hair seemed to have grown inches in just a week. Gorgeously tousled strands scattered around his face. He'd shaved, and his skin looked strokably smooth. Lorna's hands itched to touch him.

Once he came within reach, Lorna rushed towards him, throwing her arms around his neck. "Missed you," she murmured into his chest.

Jamie stroked a hand over her hair. "It seemed like a long week."

She snuggled into him, and he released his duffel bag. As it hit the floor with a soft thump, he wrapped his arms around her. After a moment, Lorna stilled. She could feel Jamie's arousal against her stomach, and her own body responded in kind.

"Let's go back to my place," Jamie all but growled against her cheek. "We can order in."

Lorna could have jumped for joy. Her inner muscles clenched in response to his throaty words, the unspoken promise of intimacy making a thrill jump through her blood.

Outside the airport, a jumble of cabs, misty rain, and shouting crowds greeted them. They found an empty cab, and Lorna, Jamie and his heavy duffel bag slid tiredly onto the back seat. Jamie gave his address, and the driver grunted, turning up the rock station he'd been listening to.

The cab set off with a bump, and Lorna leaned into Jamie, the contact heightening the sexual awareness threading through the air around them. "How was the trip?"

"Okay." He slid his hand through her hair, down to the nape of her neck, his thumb drawing small, lazy circles on the sensitive place just under her ear.

"That good," Lorna teased, the end of the word captured in a soft gasp as he continued to stroke her.

“Afraid so.” His mouth turned down, almost into the shape of a horseshoe; Lorna thought he looked irresistibly adorable. “I only got in danger of doing actual research once the whole time. Turns out my boss sent me ahead with glowing recommendations of my beverage making skills.”

Lorna stroked his shoulder soothingly, her fingers tingling at the contact, wanting to touch him under the fabric. “I wish I could make you feel better.”

His gaze lingered on her lips. “I have a feeling you will.”

Her heart thumped and she leaned in for a kiss. Their lips touched, and Lorna’s blood spiked when Jamie slid his tongue over her bottom lip, half kiss, half silky, damp caress.

I want him to put his tongue other places.

Tonight would be the night.

The cab ride home was blessedly short. Lorna’s intimate muscles clenched when Jamie lingered over their last kiss in the darkened back of the cab, just before he paid the driver and wished him a good night. The driver replied with something that might have been sarcastic. Lorna’s spirits flew too high for it to bother her.

They climbed the stairs to Jamie’s apartment, stopping almost every step for a kiss, a touch, a whispered word. Every muscle in Lorna’s body ached for Jamie to touch her naked skin, to feel his lips against her breast, to feel his body pressing against hers, to feel him slide inside her, making her his.

I’m so ready. She didn’t think she’d been more ready – and Lorna couldn’t remember feeling this comfortable with a guy, sexually, for a long time. She had Kate to thank for that, Kate and Mr. M. *If things go well, I want to introduce him to Jamie.*

“Welcome to my humble abode.” Jamie slid the key home, and they half-collapsed into the door as it opened, a glorious tangle of arms and lips, and the jangle of Jamie’s keys as they fell to the floor. His duffel bag went the same way, and Jamie kicked the door closed with his foot.

“Wait.” He held Lorna very still. “My roommate’s supposed to be gone for the week, but... I want to check.”

Lorna smiled gratefully. The last thing she wanted was for her first time with Jamie to be interrupted by a stranger asking if they wanted food or something equally jarring.

She unbuttoned her coat and shrugged it off, then leaned against the smooth white surface of Jamie’s kitchen counter top. The apartment was what she might have referred to as “man-clean;” not cockroach worthy, but not pristine. A few dirty dishes sat in the sink, a throw straggled haphazardly over the couch, and a book had been left open on the floor. It felt cozy.

A door shut, and Jamie appeared, grinning sheepishly. He wore a v-neck sweater under his discarded coat, which gave a tantalizing hint of dark curls of hair on his chest. “Sorry. Wanted to check. Nothing worse...”

“I agree.”

He opened a drawer in an ancient cabinet, stacked with books, and pulled out a sheaf of pieces of paper. He shuffled through them for seconds that seemed to stretch into minutes, and then met her gaze, his own questioning. "Are you hungry, or..."

Lorna smiled tentatively. Had he changed his mind? She moistened her lips, unsure of how to say what she wanted. Her skin burned for his touch. "Ah... Are you?"

He dropped the menus, his gaze still on hers, dark with want. "Not for food."

Lorna's heart leapt. His words whipped up the excitement that had already tautened all the sensitive places in her body.

Jamie crossed the small room in a few steps, cupping her face in his hands, kissing her deeply. He pulled her close, fitting her body against his, and Lorna's heart leapt, her body responding when she once again felt the length of his arousal against her stomach. *I want to feel him against me, skin to skin.*

Jamie made her feel sexy, desirable, confident. And thanks to her self-exploration with her vibrator, she didn't hesitate in sliding her hands under Jamie's sweater, spreading her fingers over his heated skin to touch the warm smoothness of him. *He feels amazing.*

"Let's go into the bedroom," Jamie whispered against her neck.

Lorna could only nod. She gasped with surprise when Jamie scooped her up in his arms and took her into his bedroom. He nudged the door closed with his foot.

She didn't know what she'd expected his room to be like. But he lay her down on a soft mattress, the sheets cool against her back, and as he stretched out beside her, feathering kisses over her neck, everything else in the room around them melted away. Her world centered on this man and the pleasure he gave her.

Jamie's lips explored the curve of her neck, the shallows of her collarbone, and the sensitive place where her neck met her shoulder. She let her eyes slowly flutter closed, every iota of her being focusing on the sensations he caused just by pressing his skin against hers.

His kisses roamed over her torso, over the fabric of her dress, and she wished the barrier would float away so she could feel him and only him. *Jamie.* She didn't need anyone else.

"Lorna..." Jamie murmured her name against her collarbone, and the heat of his breath whispered through her dress to dance across her skin. His hands slid over her body, eliciting a ticklish ripple in her lower stomach, and she arched into his palms.

His hands not leaving her body, Jamie moved up a little so their faces were aligned, and brushed his lips over hers, tempting, teasing butterfly kisses that made her pulse skitter and her sex grow damp with already urgent wanting. His tongue danced along her lips, licking, tasting, stroking, long, drawn out moments which just made Lorna long to feel him plunge into her mouth.

Finally he did, his tongue stroking over hers in a primal rhythm, his hands caressing her in long, lingering strokes, open palm, his fingers leaving a trail of heat on her skin.

Jamie's hand slowly slid up her torso, skirting the edge of her breast. The simple touch through her lace bra set her nerves alight, her nipple tightening as she imagined his touch on one of her most sensitive areas.

He seemed to hesitate, silently asking for her permission.

Lorna covered his hand with hers, guiding it up, until his palm covered her breast. She left her hand there a moment, then moved it away, hoping he'd touch her the way she so desperately wanted.

Jamie didn't disappoint. He molded her breast, cupping, stroking, worshipping, expertly plying her super sensitive flesh. When his fingers stole beneath the neckline of her dress and brushed her nipple, she cried out.

"I want to take your dress off." He murmured it against her neck.

Lorna nodded, winding her arms around him, stroking the firm, lean line of his back. How often she'd imagined touching him like this. "Please."

Slowly, excruciatingly, achingly slowly, Jamie unhooked the row of tiny buttons that fastened the front of her wrap dress, one at a time, exploring each new inch of skin with his lips. "Beautiful," he breathed into her cleavage, his words tingling across her skin, fleeting as a heartbeat.

Six buttons later, her lace-clad breasts were bared to his gaze. Lorna looked up at his face, and the desire she read there made her feel sexy. Bold. She thought of the fun she'd had with Mr. M. *The sort of fun I can have with Jamie.*

"Touch me." She whispered the command.

He traced a finger over the globes of her breasts, squeezed a little in the cups of her push-up bra. Her nipples ached, the sensitive points hardened, begging to be stroked and kissed.

Jamie dropped a kiss into her cleavage. "I'm going to take your bra off."

She couldn't answer. The sensation was too great. She just nodded.

Jamie helped Lorna sit up a little, then unclasped her bra from behind. As he slid it down her arms, leaving her breasts bare to him, Lorna experienced a moment of insecurity. What would he think?

But it fled as quickly as it had come when Jamie filled his palms with her flesh, caressing, his thumbs stroking her nipples as she'd hoped he would. Pleasure arrowed sharply through her, riding an invisible current that travelled straight to her sex. She knew if she were to press her hand to her panties, she'd find herself hot, wet and ready.

Jamie angled his body down, catching her gaze for one burning moment, then lowered his head to her breast. "I want to kiss you here."

Lorna knew her sharp intake of breath told him she wanted that, too.

The first touch of his tongue made her arch into the warmth wetness of his mouth. The gentle roughness of his tongue on her hardened flesh made her quiver against him, her hands fisting on his shoulders.

In her mind's eye, she wondered how she must look; naked to the waist, Jamie's mouth at her breast. But that thought flew away as Jamie changed the stroking rhythm of his tongue, flicking her nipple back and forth, sending sensation streaking through her, drawing out a shudder of pleasure.

Lorna spread her hands wide on his back, the feelings he stoked inside her making her bolder, more wanton. "I want to touch you, too."

Jamie lifted his gaze to hers, then sat up, and slowly removed his sweater. Lorna's eyes hungrily followed the hem of the fabric, eating up each inch of his lightly tanned skin, furred with whorls of dark hair. They spread over his chest, then arched down, over his flat stomach, where they disappeared beneath the waistband of his jeans. *I want to see what he looks like under them, too.*

He discarded the sweater with a soft swish of fabric.

He's gorgeous.

Then he lay against her against, the hair on his chest teasing her nipples. He felt so deliciously, incredibly manly. Lorna curled her arms around him, stroking the smooth skin of his back, touched here and there by a light covering of hair.

"I want to see more of you."

Lorna's heart bumped at his words. "I want you to see more of me, too."

She'd imagined herself saying these things to Jamie, but never had she thought it would happen. However things turned out, she'd have this night to relive forever.

And I intend to relive it many things. Especially now she had Mr. M for company.

Thought of her vibrator evaporated as Jamie found the side tie to her dress and unfurled it, parting the fabric. Underneath, her stomach lay bare down to the waistband of her black jeans, Jamie's hand rested against her skin, and suddenly she noticed how tanned his skin was against her own, how much she loved seeing him touch her.

Jamie dropped kisses down to the button, then circled his finger around it three times, before gently sliding it free. He kept his gaze on hers, burning, probing, as he eased the small silver zipper of her jeans downwards.

"Let me take these off."

Lorna lifted her hips, and Jamie worked the fabric of her jeans over her slim hips, following the denim, occasionally kissing each inch of leg he exposed. He hovered his mouth over the lace of her panties, and Lorna knew he could smell how wet she'd become for him, because she could.

He breathed on the damp triangle, then continued his journey down.

He paused for a moment to unzip and tug off her boots and socks, and then her legs were gloriously naked.

A slight chill tingled over her, but in seconds Jamie lay by her side, his hands everywhere, his mouth on hers, his tongue tracing sensual patterns on her lips, on the sensitive insides of her mouth.

Lorna cupped his face, the scrape of his stubble tingling wonderfully against her palm. She arched into him, wanting to feel his weight, the length of his erection against her thigh making her insides melt. "I think you need to lose more clothes, too."

Jamie grinned against her mouth. "As the lady commands."

She felt a sudden, small chill as he knelt up on the bed. The soft light in the bedroom highlighted the planes and angles of his torso, and Lorna let her gaze devour him in huge gulps, trying to imprint his image on her mind in case this never happened again.

Just as her mental computer hit save, Jamie flicked open the button on his jeans, revealing more of the arrowing dark hair that had started its journey around his belly button. He must have been able to feel Lorna's eyes on him, because he took his time with the zipper, sliding it downwards slowly, centimeter by aching centimeter, on to a triangle of black fabric, tented deliciously by his erection.

"All the way off?" he asked.

"All the way off." Her voice sounded a little raspy, even to her own ears, in the dusky quiet of the room.

Jamie sent her the slightest curve of her lips, and then moved to stand up by the bed. He pushed his jeans down his long, lean legs. The soft denim rustled its way down. He sat, removed his boots and socks, and one smooth move later, he wore nothing but the black boxers.

Lorna's heart bumped painfully hard against her ribs. *I want him.*

She had no time for a follow-up thought. Jamie stretched out beside her, the hard length of his erect shaft brushing against her thigh in the most intimate of caresses. Want for him made her wetter than she'd ever been. "Jamie."

He whispered his lips over hers. "Tell me what you want."

Lorna didn't want to shy away, but despite learning more about herself sexually than she'd known before, she still felt a little intimidated by voicing her wants and needs. Instead, she took Jamie's hand and placed it on her heart, silently asking him to touch her.

He didn't disappoint, cupping her breast in his warm-palmed hand, stroking, caressing, his touch gentle yet firm. When he kissed her and then gently squeezed her nipple, she moaned into his mouth.

"This dress needs to come all the way off," Jamie murmured against her lips.

Lorna nodded her agreement.

Jamie curled his arms around her, pulling her gently up against his chest. She inhaled the woodsy, intoxicating scent of his skin as he divested her of her open dress. The fabric stroked against Lorna's skin as Jamie removed it, stoking the already burning well of desire inside her.

He let the garments fall to the floor. All that hid her body from his gaze now were her lace panties. She thought he'd move to take them off, but instead he started kissing her again, his tongue dancing with hers. His arm curved around her, drawing her on to her side, closer and closer to his body, until she felt the soft scrape of his chest hair against her nipples, and the insistent press of his erection against the curve of her belly. He moved his hips forward, and a surge of desire made Lorna respond in kind, the long, hard length of him against her skin sending a hitch through her breath. She gasped against his lips.

The knowledge that he wanted her so much made her bolder, surer. "I want you."

Jamie didn't say it back, but he cupped the curve of her backside, bringing her closer to his full hardness as he stroked his tongue around the soft line of her bottom lip. The nerves there tingled, sending direct lines of sensation down to her sex, already damp. Her muscles clenched. *I want to feel him inside me.*

“You feel good,” Jamie whispered into her mouth. He broke the kiss to roll with her on to her back, fully exposing her to his gaze. He traced a tantalizing path with his finger down her neck, over her collarbone, between her breasts. He paused briefly to dip his finger into her navel, tickling, making her laugh, before he finally, finally, cupped her damp sex through her panties.

Lorna arched into his touch as he stroked her there, the tip of his index finger circling her clit through the fabric, learning the shape of her. He dipped under the edge of the lace, teasing, and then, when she would have moved to do it herself, hooked his fingers in the sides and drew them down her legs.

She heard the soft swish as fabric met floor, and Jamie moved over her, his gaze hot and sharp on hers. He kissed his way down her body, stopping to tug at her left nipple with his lips. His breath fluttered, warm and hot, over her lower belly, and then her muscles clenched fast and hard and brutally when his tongue made contact with her clit, easing between the wet petals of her sex to stroke her.

“Jamie!” She couldn’t help the exclamation that flew from her lips; barely even recognized her own voice.

He circled his tongue around her sensitive bud, alternately gentle and a little firmer, stroking playfully and then tenderly. The tightness inside her grew as taut as a finely crafted bowstring, until she all but pushed her hips towards him, her legs spread wide.

Jamie breathed gently over her aching sensitive flesh. One more flick of his tongue and she came apart around him, every inch of her body trembling with the intensity of orgasm aftershocks.

She opened her eyes to see Jamie gazing at her, a satisfied smile on his face. He stood briefly to remove his boxers and Lorna’s gaze traced the firm curve of his buttocks. When he turned to face her, the sight of his erection, bared to her, rising full and firm from a curly nest of dark hair, made her sigh with want.

“Come here,” she murmured, her breathing still hitched.

Jamie paused to take a condom packet from the drawer in his bedside table. He moved over her and slid it on, rolling the rubber down slowly as Lorna’s eyes followed eagerly. His gaze never leaving hers, he lowered his body to hers, eased his hands up her hips, and thrust into her, inch by incredible inch. Lorna clamped her muscles around him. God, if Mr. M had been amazing...this--Jamie--was another level completely. *Jamie!*

When he’d settled inside her to the hilt, she wrapped her legs around him, and he groaned as she brought him in even deeper. *I want to feel all of you.* She spread her hands across his back, touching, stroking, a part of her still in a daze that he wanted to be with her in this way, this wonderful man she’d fantasized about for so long.

Then he moved, and everything except how it felt shot from her mind.

Slow, long thrusts, almost all the way out before gliding back in, electrified every nerve ending in the walls of her oh-so sensitive sex. “Jamie, Jamie.” She couldn’t seem to stop sighing his name as he moved inside her, nipping playful kisses on her lips, her cheeks, the curve where her neck met her shoulder.

She lifted her hips, unconsciously trying to draw him in deeper still, and everything changed. Jamie groaned against her lips, a sound of half-pain, half-pleasure, and his thrusts became shorter and sharper. The delicious friction built and built inside Lorna as he stroked her in the most intimate way possible. His eyes, cobalt blue, never as intensely dark as now, arrowed in on hers as she tightened her legs around him, her fingers tightening instinctively on his shoulders.

“Lorna-”

She felt the long length of him tense and jerk inside her, and the tiny, erotic movements triggered her own orgasm. Her muscles clenched hard and fast around him as he thrust quick and deep, over and over, pressing his mouth against hers, swallowing both their throaty groans of pleasure. Moments afterwards, while Lorna reeled from the pinpricks of pleasure dancing across her skin, Jamie collapsed on top of her, his face pressed into the curve of her shoulder, his breathing shallow, his breath fluttering against her skin.

Lorna kept her arms and legs wrapped tight around him, the trembles slowly subsiding from her limbs, her skin flushed warm from the glow of her climax. Jamie’s heart hammered against her own, the weight of him wonderfully languid on top of her.

She drew lazy circles on his back, and felt his lips curve against her shoulder.

“Good?” he asked.

Good? She could barely think coherently. She wondered briefly what her name was. “Very, very good.”

Jamie lifted his head enough so that she could see him arch a brow. “Only very good? I guess I’ll need to get some more practice in...”

Chapter Five

The days passed in a blur of sweet, sometimes shyly sexual texts and emails, long kisses goodnight, and dinners together. Before Lorna knew it, she and Jamie had been dating for over two months.

Adam teased her about it mercilessly.

“Seeing Jamie again tonight?” he asked her one morning as she stretched to reach the oat cereal in the cupboard.

Lorna didn’t even try to hide the huge, silly grin that spread across her face. “Yep.”

Adam dug into his own bowl of cereal. He’d just got up and his messy hair curled boyishly across his forehead. “He’s walking around like a grinning lunatic all the time, as well.”

“Really?” Lorna’s smile just got bigger.

Adam shook his head in mock sadness. “It’s like a sickness.” But he shot her a smile afterwards.

“How’s school going?” she asked.

“All right.” He rubbed a hand through his hair, messing it up further. “Hard work now. I know it’s worth it though...it’s what I want to do.”

Pleased for him, Lorna snuck a chocolate Krispy Kreme in a wax paper bag, into his satchel before he left for work.

Even translating a game about murder and mayhem set in the dingy backstreets of Victorian London didn’t dampen Lorna’s mood. She floated around the apartment on a lust-fuelled cloud, cleaning, working, grinning, and took a break later in the day to dip into her current novel, a bodice-buster set in regency New York. Normally, Lorna enjoyed a good historical read, but since she’d been sleeping with Jamie – not to mention her not infrequent sessions with Mr. M – her libido seemed to have cranked up the heat several notches, and this had spilled over into quite a few areas of her life.

After five or so pages of detail about the heroine’s hardened nipples and the hero’s attention to them and the rest of the regency beauty’s body, Lorna began to feel the familiar thrum of desire in her own blood. She read a little more, enjoying the description of the Victorian man’s naked body, and then she set the novel aside.

A little alone time with Mr. M wouldn’t go amiss. Especially as she wouldn’t see Jamie for another good few hours at least. She often found that orgasming a couple of hours before sex made her much more sensitive when Jamie slid inside her.

Jamie....

Just the thought of him moving in and out of her, his face tensed in pleasure, the smell of his skin, caused a sudden damp rush between her legs.

Lorna retrieved her vibrator from his hiding place.

Not wanting to rush, she slid between the covers of her bed, smoothing her hands down her body, enjoying her own curves, much bolder on her own than she'd yet to be with Jamie. She cupped her breasts, felt the weight of them, the hardened points of her nipples through the fabric of her shirt and the lace of her bra. When her breath came in shorter, sharper pants, and her breasts felt fuller, achy, she slipped her shirt over her head, and unclasped her bra. When she ran her fingers over her now naked nipples, her breath hitched in anticipation and pleasure.

Next she removed her jeans and let them slip off the side of the bed, unnoticed. When she cupped herself lightly through her thin, cotton panties, she felt the familiar patch of warm moisture that told her she was very aroused.

For a few moments she thought of Jamie's hands there, stroking, caressing, and she drew her fingers across her sensitive spot in light, large circles. Finally, her clit hard and aching, she drew her panties down her legs. They went the way of her jeans.

She'd become very wet now, and Lorna stroked herself slowly, enjoying the pleasure her own body gave her. When her muscles clenched, aching, longing to feel something inside her, she reached for the lube. When Mr. M had been fully coated--it didn't quite feel as good as stroking Jamie--Lorna lifted her hips and, after rubbing the vibrator's textured head over her clit, pushed it gently inside her.

Her muscles clenched hard, and she almost came after a few gentle thrusts.

She didn't want to come yet. She'd learned, on her own, that the longer she waited, the better the orgasm would be.

So she lightly danced her fingers over her clit and her nipples, pushing Mr. M gradually faster and deeper inside her.

Before long, her muscle spasms became quicker, and stronger, one last circle of her very slippery clit with her fingers, and she came, unable to suppress the moan of pleasure that escaped from her lips.

She lay back in bed, sighing, her body humming, alive with pleasure.

After a moment, she removed the vibrator from inside her and cleaned it.

She couldn't wait to see Jamie later.

And maybe, soon, I'll ask him if the three of us can play together.

~* * *~

"So? So? So?"

Lorna laughed as Kate slid into the booth opposite her at a café a few streets from her building. Outside, autumn had really taken hold, littering the streets in bronze-brown leaves. Lorna's hair had been all but tousled into a beehive by the season's wild gushes of wind. "So what?"

Kate rolled her eyes dramatically and drilled a finger into Lorna's arm. "You know what. It's been months, *months*, and I haven't heard a peep out of you about Jamie, or the vibrator!"

Lorna playfully slapped her friend's hand. "It's only been two months. And I don't suppose you want to repeat that? I'm not sure all of the city heard."

Kate grinned and pretended to be very interested in the small laminated menu card in front of her. "Well, get on with telling me then, and I'll shut up."

"No, you won't."

Kate grinned. "You got me. But isn't it worth a try?"

Lorna drummed her fingers on the table surface and sighed. "All right, all right. But don't repeat any of this to the kids you teach. I know what you're like."

"Hey! I'm a great teacher." But she leaned forward. "Dish, dish, dish. No detail is too small."

Just then, a petite blonde waitress stopped by their table. Lorna ordered a Caesar salad with coffee, and Kate ordered a club sandwich and some juice. The waitress took their order with a grin that told Lorna she might just have overheard Kate a few moments ago.

"It's going well," Lorna told Kate. "Actually, no, that doesn't do it justice. Jamie is amazing. I've never dated a guy like him. It's been.... Almost three months now, and I haven't found a single thing I dislike about him. At all. I mean, isn't that odd?"

Kate sighed romantically. "It's like you live in a Disney cartoon."

"Sort of. Adam says he sometimes sees tiny cartoon hearts floating around my head. He says it's sickening."

"He would." Their drinks arrived and Kate sipped her juice. "And the sex? Tell me about the sex. Like I said, leave no detail out."

"You're eager," Lorna commented, stirring sweetener into her coffee.

Kate laughed. "You're my friend, I have to be privy to these details. Also, I have to get my kicks somewhere, don't I?"

"Okay, okay." Lorna sipped her coffee. She'd over-sweetened it. "Let's just say, your choice of, ah, purchase at the party we had was a really, really good idea. I've been, ah, getting a lot of use out of it."

"I knew it! I knew you'd love it!" Kate clapped her hands together. "Does Jamie know?"

"No...." Lorna stirred her coffee idly. "I sort of want to tell him, but I'm nervous that..."

"That he might be intimidated?" Kate supplied when Lorna's words trailed off into silence.

"Yes."

“In my not inconsiderable experience, some guys are, and some guys are turned on by it. I guess there’s only one way to find out. I mean, don’t wave it in his face or anything, but suggest it. Sexily.”

Lorna couldn’t suppress a smile at the thought of Jamie, holding her vibrator, about to use it on her, his eyes hot with want. That delicious, familiar tingle started between her legs, too. “I want to. It’s just...well, we haven’t been together that long.”

“All the more reason to introduce him to your friend now. Ease him into the idea, although I bet you anything he’ll be so hot he’ll practically throw you into the bedroom. Bottom line, hon, a guy likes giving his woman pleasure, no matter what form that comes in.”

“All right,” Lorna smiled. “So, you’ve had a lot of experience in this area, then...?”

Kate grinned lasciviously. “What can I say. Men just can’t resist a kindergarten teacher. It’s the power we wield. Draws them like flies.”

They laughed over the rest of lunch and planned a shoe shopping expedition, with the option for an afternoon break for ice cream.

~* * *~

Two nights later, Adam had a rare night off and had planned to go out on the town with a few buddies, crashing with one of them after. “Sweet place,” he grinned. “In the middle of Manhattan. Gorgeous views, or so I’m told. Expect to see me truly hung-over tomorrow.”

Lorna laughed and waved him out the door, dressed in his best button-down shirt and whiffing pleasantly of woodsy aftershave.

She’d asked Jamie over for the night to watch movies and order take-out. She hoped that a few hours of snuggling on the sofa and a glass of wine or two, would give her the courage she needed to ask him to use her vibrator on her.

She took her time getting ready, brushing her hair into a dark sheen, applying a light dusting of bronze eye shadow, before slowly slipping into her newly purchased, emerald silk-fee bra and French panties. The cut of them flattered her curves, and the uplift in the bra gave her extra cleavage. The sight of herself in her bedroom’s full-length mirror, naked except for underwear and make-up, made her shiver in anticipation. She let her gaze roam over her body in the reflective glass, imagining Jamie’s hands on her, touching, stroking, caressing, arousing.

After dressing in a twilight-grey tunic embroidered in silver at the hem and black jeans, she fastened a heart-shaped silver pendant around her neck. It hung low, between her breasts, drawing attention to them.

Having finished dressing, she examined herself one last time in mirror. She looked sexy; she felt sexy.

I’m ready for tonight.

In the kitchen, she opened the wine, let it breathe. It was Jamie’s turn to bring the takeout food, and just as she wondered what he’d chosen, the buzzer sounded. She hurried to the door, lifted the phone. “Hello?”

“It’s Jamie.” His voice made her insides clench with want, even through the inanimate speaker. “I’ve got some yummys.”

“Well then I better let you in,” she teased, and pressed the door release button.

She heard his footfalls on the stairs and opened the door. He stood behind it, brown paper takeout bags in his arms, wearing a charmingly lopsided grin. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted. Got Japanese and Thai.”

Lorna took one of the bags from him. “Just what I was in the mood for.” She gestured to the huge stack of DVDs on one side of the couch. “...I wasn’t sure what you wanted, either.”

Jamie followed her as she set the bag on the counter of the tiny kitchen area, and, after putting his bag beside it, he took her in his arms. “I want you.”

Lorna snuggled into him, feeling the familiar, welcome calm wash over her, feeling she always got when he cuddled her like this. “I’m yours, for as long as you want me.”

Jamie dropped a kiss on her forehead, lingered, for a moment, as if breathing her in. Then, “Okay, I’m starved. Let’s eat.”

They set up on the couch, arranging small pull-out tables for food and wine. They bickered good-naturedly over which DVD to watch, finally settling on an cleverly-executed spy thriller about a married couple accidentally hired to report on each other. By the time the film had run for an hour, the food had been utterly demolished, save for a few stray chicken gyoza dumplings that Lorna picked at lazily, lounging in Jamie’s arms on the couch.

On screen, the chiseled-jawed male protagonist stood, flat-backed to a wall in a darkened alley, a gun in his hands. A thin sheen on sweat filmed across his brow, his hair damp. The music created an air of eerie uncertainty.

Lorna snuggled into Jamie, hoping the character she’d grown quite fond of wouldn’t meet an untimely end. Jamie curled his arm around her. “Scared for him?” he teased.

Lorna smiled up at him. “It’d be an awful shame for him to die. Look how pretty he is.”

Grinning, Jamie played with the ends of her hair. “Prettier than me?”

“Of course not.” Laughing, the film forgotten, she turned her face up to his, silently asking for him to kiss her. He didn’t disappoint, his mouth whispering lightly back and forth over her own. Then he stroked the tip of his tongue over her lips, parting them. When their tongues finally met, dancing over each other, Lorna sighed happily into his mouth. When Jamie’s hand came up to cup her cheek, then caress her neck with feather-light touches, her nipples hardened inside the cups of her sexy new bra.

“I want you,” Jamie whispered against her lips, wonderfully swollen from his welcome barrage of kisses.

Lorna pressed into him. “I want you, too.”

He grabbed the remote and pressed pause. “We can continue this later. Why don’t we move things into the bedroom?”

Lorna looped her arms around his neck and he scooped her up, one hand under her back and the other under her bended legs. She pressed her face into the curve of his neck, inhaling his delicious, naturally male fragrance. She sighed against his skin, desire and excitement

making the place between her legs damp, readying herself for his touch, for the slide of him inside her.

Jamie carried her into the bedroom and set her own on the bed in the small, cozy space. He lay down beside her, stretching out, propping himself up on one arm so he could look down at her. His gaze roamed over her, his eyes snapping with heat, with want, and Lorna's breath hitched at the open desire sketched all over his face.

She was about to speak when Jamie lifted his free hand and drew lazy circles over her torso, teasing the curves of her breasts, drawing a line down her cleavage. "So," he murmured, his gaze intent on what he was doing, "we've been dating a while, and I still don't really know what you like."

Puzzled, Lorna reached up to cup his cheek, his light smattering of stubble gently, pleasantly grazing her palm. "What do you mean? I like Japanese food. I like comedies. I like you."

He smiled, turned his head to press a kiss into her hand. "I mean...sexually. I know I haven't brought this up since, but...that catalog started all this. Did you buy anything?"

"Oh." Lorna flushed. She'd wanted to bring this up herself. He'd surprised her. *Now's your chance*, the little voice in her head whispered. Still, she felt her cheeks heat with nervousness. "Well..."

"It's just..." He dropped his arm and lay down beside her, dropping kisses on her lips, her cheeks, the side of her face. His other hand continued to tantalize her, only the tip of her index finger touching her through the fabric of her tunic, his motions arousing and slightly distracting, possibly easing her into the topic of conversation. "I can't stop thinking about you using it on yourself."

Just then, he circled her already erect nipple, and Lorna gasped, arching into his touch.

He held her gaze. "Would you like to use it... in front of me?"

A moment of silence threaded between them. Lorna let two heartbeats pass, trying to breathe herself a little calmer, trying to build up the courage. "Actually..." She caught his hand in both her hands, entwined their fingers. *You can do this, just ask*. "I'd really like it if you would use it on me."

Jamie went still for a moment, his eyes flashing with uncontained desire. "I'd really like that, too."

All the tension in Lorna released, and her body filled with a sudden surge of desire. Her lips curved. "Now?" she murmured, her mind running wild with erotic, arousing images of Jamie touching her, Jamie holding Mr. M, and siding the smooth toy over her clit and into her waiting, welcoming passage.

Jamie kissed her. "Soon. First, I want to undress you."

And he did, slowly, taking his time, kissing every inch of exposed flesh. He helped her to sit up, encircling her with his arms, easing the tunic up her torso and over her head. It landed with a soft crumple on the bedroom floor.

“Whoa,” Jamie murmured when he saw her new bra. The cups pushed upwards and together, giving Lorna a fantastic cleavage; showing off her curves. His reaction made her blood heat. “When did you get this?”

Lorna pulled him close for a kiss. “I was shopping with Kate and I saw it in a window... and then all I could think about was you touching me.”

Jamie kissed her back, hungrily, his hands roaming over her, stroking the exposed slopes of her breasts, teasing her nipples through the delicate fabric of her bra. “God. You’re really hot. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

At his words, Lorna pushed herself into his hands, wanting to feel his touch, to feel his hands on her bare skin, cupping her breasts, stroking her nipples. “You’re the first.”

He let out a low moan at that, and then his arms curled around her. He unbuttoned her bra and her breasts, freed, tightened at the rush of air, the nipples standing straight and hard.

Jamie eased her back to lay down on the bed. As Lorna watched, he lay down on top of her, his head level with the rise of her breasts, and began to caress her nipples with his tongue. The firm curve of his erection jutted against her thigh and Lorna ached to touch him there. Instead, she threaded her fingers into his hair, holding him close to her breast, the stroke of his tongue mirroring the urgent throbbing between her legs.

“Jamie...”

He lifted his head, met her gaze. “Let me undress you some more.”

She could only nod. Jamie moved down her body, unbuttoning her jeans and sliding them slowly down her legs. He set them aside, then moved back up her body, hovering over the fabric of panties. She felt the flutter of his warm breath through the thin layer, and squeezed her legs together at the rush of desire that flooded her.

Jamie pressed a kiss to the vee between her legs, leaving her aching for more, and then he stood at the foot of the bed to undress. This time, though, instead of just watching, Lorna moved closer and knelt up before him. “I want to do it.”

He smiled down at her, and when she placed her hands on his chest, his heart bumped erratically. “Be my guest.”

Lorna smoothed her hands over his chest, feeling the soft curls of his body hair beneath the shirt he wore. She eased her palms down his torso, enjoying the feel of lean muscle under her hands, and then slowly rolled up the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head. When the shirt fell to the floor, she pressed her face into the slight indent in the center of his chest, breathing in his intoxicating scent. He smelled of sex and Japanese food and man. The combination made her weak with desire.

“I’m wearing other clothes, too,” he teased when she simply pressed against him, enjoying the feel of her nipples against his skin.

She looked up, grinning. “I’m getting there.” She trailed her hand down his chest, ran her finger along the waistband of his dark jeans, and enjoyed his surprised laugh when she tickled him. Then she flicked open the button, drew down the zipper. When she pushed the fabric down, the bulge of his erection sprang up, barely contained by the black cotton of his boxers.

“I’ll do this,” Jamie offered, and removed his jeans the rest of the way. His socks followed, and then he stood before her, naked save the black rectangle of his underwear, tented by his

hardness. Jamie took Lorna's hand and placed it on the evidence of his need for her. "Touch me."

Desire made her bold, and Lorna stroked her fingers over him, squeezing his length, cupping the weight of his balls. After a few moments, she longed to feel his skin against her, to stroke the velvety softness of him. She hooked her fingers into the waistband, eased his underwear down, exposing his erection. As she pushed the fabric downwards, revealing all of him to her gaze, a tiny bead of moisture appeared at the tip of his shaft, and Lorna leaned forward to kiss it away.

"God," Jamie breathed. He removed his boxers the rest of the way, and lay back down on the bed, bringing Lorna with him. "I want you to do that some other time, but not now. Right now I want to use your vibrator on you."

Lorna nodded, the taste of him still fresh on her lips. More excited now than ever, she found herself wriggling out of her panties and dropping them over the side of the bed.

"Where do you keep your toys?" Jamie whispered against her neck.

The warmth of his breath, as well as his words, made her shiver in anticipation. "There's just the one at the moment. Bedside drawer."

He reached over, opened it, and got the lube out, too. "Maybe we can get more in the future."

The reference to the future and to them, as a couple, moving forward, made Lorna's heart fill with joy. But she didn't have much time to concentrate on that, because Jamie squeezed some lube on to his palm and smoothed it over Mr. M. Lorna watched, entranced, seeing his hand move over the plastic dick and imagining that same hand pleasuring himself.

Maybe I'll ask him to do that...later. The thought heightened her already acute arousal.

Jamie stretched out beside her, concentration sketched on his handsome face. He hovered the vibrator over her for a moment. "Do you want it to...vibrate?"

She shook her head. "No. Not this time." She moistened her lips, dry with excitement and anticipation. "I just want you to put it inside me." She took a breath. *Don't be nervous, don't be shy.* "I like to pretend it's you, when you aren't here."

"That is really, really hot." And then he did as she asked.

First, he circled the head of the toy over her clit, slicking her already wet flesh, moving slowly, teasingly, until Lorna arched her lips, breathy moans escaping her lips. "Please," she murmured, her muscles clenching, longing to feel the hard ridge of the toy in her most intimate place.

Jamie met her gaze for a moment, his features drawn taut with want, and he eased Mr. M inside her, inch by wonderful inch, pausing to give her time to adjust.

When he'd slid it most of the way in, Lorna squeezed her muscles experimentally. It felt incredible.

"Good?" he asked.

"Amazing." Watching him, naked, beautiful, his face plastered with blatant desire for her, made the experience all the more arousing. Knowing he controlled the vibrator and its

movements inside her. Knowing she'd asked him to do this to her, and that it aroused them both.

She felt free in a way she'd never before experienced.

"I like it, too." His gaze was riveted on the plastic penis as he stroked it in and out of her, varying the tempo, his own breathing becoming faster and shallower. With his free hand, he caressed her clit in ever decreasing circles.

"Jamie." Lorna covered his hand with hers, so they both grasped the butt of the vibrator. "I want you. Just you now, inside me."

"I want that, too." He set the toy aside on the bed, and then grabbed a condom from the back pocket of his discarded jeans. Lorna let her gaze wander freely over his lean, lithe body as he rolled it on to himself, down his long, hard length. "I want to be inside you."

Lorna opened her arms to him and Jamie lay down on top of her, his weight welcome, her nerves singing with pleasure in every place his skin touched hers.

When he slid inside her, all the way in, in a single stroke, she came, flying apart in his arms, her muscles clamping down tight on him. He gasped against her neck, murmuring her name, and started to move as the spasms of her climax started to fade, bringing her to her peak again and again.

Lorna shifted slightly, bringing him even deeper inside her, and with a strangled cry of pleasure, Jamie emptied himself inside her, his heart pounding against hers, Lorna's arms and legs wrapped around him in the most intimate of embraces.

Later, they lay curled together in the afterglow, heartbeats slowing, the musty, almost primal scent of sex diffusing into the room.

"You know," Jamie murmured into her hair. "It's funny."

"What is?" She almost felt too languid to speak.

"Your vibrator sort of brought us together."

Lorna found herself grinning as she snuggled closer against him. "I know. Wasn't that a stroke of luck?" She paused, her smile widening as she realized she'd unwittingly rechristened her toy. He wasn't just Mr. M anymore. He was her *Lucky* Mr. M, because he'd brought her Jamie.

"So." Jamie brushed his lips over her forehead. "Don't suppose you've thought about ordering anything else from that catalog?"

Lorna pressed herself again him. It seemed she was about to get even luckier.

About the Author

Jasmine is a writer of sweet & sensual romance. She lives in Cardiff, UK, with a bearded dragon called Kai, a small yet impressive mountain of books, and far too many hats. She eats an unhealthy amount of Chinese food.

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Chapter One

Marianne Dawson woke to the steady and determined thump of a headache. Gingerly, she lifted her hand and poked the sensitive place right above her right eye, wincing at the sudden, and intense, stab of pain. Yep, she probably had – or would very soon have – a very nice bruise. Just in time for the weekend.

She shifted with a grimace. Great. She'd passed out in the middle of a job. Hopefully she hadn't been out too long; she'd just bet the well-to-do couple that had hired her to redesign their penthouse garden would be thrilled to find her unconscious on their patio.

But the surface under her didn't feel like stone, slate...or even grass.

It actually felt a lot like...a bed.

Loathe to find out where she might be, Mari didn't lift her lids. She slowly became aware of sounds around her. The steady, clinical beep of monitors, the rustle and slide of footsteps and, over it all, the blanket of antiseptic scent. Very slowly, she opened her eyes, her mind whirling with what she might see.

She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised to see a hospital room, but she gasped nonetheless, causing the pounding in her head to escalate to new levels.

And then she remembered.

She'd been carrying a large bag of fertilizer across the Wyndham family's gorgeous penthouse garden, the bag so large that she could hardly see over it. The October sunshine, unusually bright, shone down and, lost in a daydream, Mari hadn't bothered to check the ground beneath her.

The ground on which she'd recently laid her rake.

The memory made Mari cringe. Only people in slapstick movies – and apparently now her – got hit in the face by a rake.

Hopefully the only person nearby had been her best friend and business partner, Jen, who had presumably brought her here.

But had that really been necessary? Mari tried to sit. Her gaze traveled the length of her body, down to her hot pink sneakers, before a wave of dizziness assaulted her. Whoa. Apparently it had been very necessary.

Where had Jen gone?

Thinking caused a stabbing pain behind her eyes and Mari lay back on the flat pillows, rubbing her temples in small circles. It helped a little.

Around her, thin white curtains prevented her from the full effect of the working hospital around her. She could make out the shapes of feet under the curtain's hem, the movement, but little else. Every few moments, half a shape appeared through the curtain fabric, as someone brushed too close.

"Ms. Marianne Dawson?"

Mari's eyes snapped open. That hurt, too. She frowned, biting back a groan.

She soon forgot the pain when her gaze settled on the man standing at her bedside. A single coherent thought made its way through her headache: *My God, he's hot!*

He was tall and lean; she'd never seen a man fill out a doctor's white coat better. His hair, a rich chocolate, glinted under the fluorescent lighting, picking out strands of coffee-dark and caramel-light brown. It looked like he might've styled and combed it earlier in the day, but through the day he'd obviously run his fingers through it, tousling the mass and causing a few tendrils to hang over his forehead, giving him a boyish, unkempt look.

Her gaze dropped to his face, drinking in beautifully sculpted cheekbones, a strong jaw, and eyes of an intense sea green.

"That's me," she said when her brain started to work again.

"I'm Dr. Campbell. How are you feeling?" he asked gently. "Do you need anything for the pain?"

"Not yet." She rubbed her hand over eyes that still gave her a slightly fuzzy view of Dr. Dreamy. "I only just woke up."

"Okay." He wrote something on the clipboard he held. "I need to ask you some questions. Is that all right?"

"Sure." She closed her eyes. The headache retreated a little.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Do you have a history of any serious medical conditions?"

"My grandmother had pretty bad asthma."

He made a note; she heard the quiet stroke of his pen on paper. "Do you feel nauseous or feverish?"

"No."

"Does it hurt to look at the lights on the ceiling?"

She opened her eyes and directed them towards the strip lighting. "My head still hurts, but no more than usual."

"Where exactly is your headache, right now?"

She cautiously hovered her hand over the sensitive spot in her forehead. He made a noise that might have been a chuckle.

"What's funny?" Mari asked.

He sobered immediately. "I'm sorry. Nothing."

Mari resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "At least laugh with me and not at me. I could do with a good laugh right now."

Indecision plastered his face, and then he said, "I'm guessing you received this injury by being smacked in the head by the handle of a rake."

Grudgingly impressed, Mari asked slowly, "How do you know that?"

"Because the name of the local hardware store is imprinted in your forehead."

What? She wanted to look. She needed a mirror. How bad did it look? Were the words clear? How quick could she cover it up? Desperate to know, Mari tried to sit, but sharp pain lanced through her.

Jen's very timely arrival prevented her from trying again. Jen hurried to the other side of Mari's bed. "Sweetie, you're awake! I'm sorry I left you, I wanted to leave the penthouse in a relatively neat state."

"It's okay. And thanks." Mari reached for Jen's hand. Her blonde, curly-haired friend squeezed it affectionately.

"Will she be okay?" Jen asked Dr. Dreamy.

He nodded. "She'll be fine. I suggest you go home, though. You shouldn't return to work until tomorrow at the earliest," he added, addressing Mari now. "I'll prescribe some medium strength painkillers in case you need them. Try a couple of ibuprofen first, though."

"That sounds nice."

Now he did chuckle. "Don't overdo it." He touched her shoulder gently. Through the sleeve of her plain grey shirt, his hand was warm and firm. "I'd like you to try and sit up and tell me how your head feels."

She did so, gingerly. The pain in her head remained consistent, but didn't worsen, and she told him that.

A smile ghosted around his mouth, immediately drawing Mari's gaze. "Good." He gave her a slip of green paper. "Take this to the pharmacy on your way out, and please do come back, or see your doctor, if you think something's not right or the symptoms begin to worsen. You might want to have someone stay with you for the next couple of hours, though I don't think you have a concussion."

"Thanks."

"Do you have hectic weekend plans?" he asked, then added, "You might want to take things easy for a couple of days."

The jackhammer above her eye slowed its pace a little as she remembered what she'd be doing in the two days ahead. "I've organized a surprise party for some friends," she said with a smile for Jen. "They've been in England for the last three months."

"Sounds nice." His eyes warmed, suggesting he really meant it. "All right, you seem good to go." His hand rested on her shoulder. "Take it easy."

"Thank you."

He stayed by her side through her swinging her legs over the side of the bed and standing, until Jen took her hand.

"Take care," he told her, and then he hurried to the next patient. Her attention lingered on the shape of his torso in his white coat until he was out of sight.

~* * *~

"You sure you're okay?" Jen asked, concerned, as she and Mari made their way towards the pharmacy.

Mari shrugged her handbag over her shoulder. The world looked a lot less fuzzy than it had. “I feel much better. Although I’m looking forward to having a few of these babies.” She waved the green slip Dr. Campbell had written out for her.

Jen stopped at a vending machine, tapped it. “Do you want something to drink? It might help.”

“Sure.” She waited while Jen popped coins into the machine’s narrow slot. The mechanisms inside whirred and clicked and then two thumps were heard. Jen scooped up two bottles of water and pressed one, blessedly cool, into Mari’s hands. “Half of headaches are dehydration, you know.”

“I’m pretty sure mine *isn’t*. At all.” She stopped, and tugged on the sleeve of Jen’s lightweight black sweater. “Are there.... Words imprinted on my forehead?”

Jen seemed to have an internal debate with herself for a few moments before she grimaced and nodded. “Kinda.”

Oh, boy. Mari reached up and rubbed at her forehead. It hurt. A lot. For the first time in a long time, she wished she’d grown bangs of some sort to cover the imprinted text. “Oh well. It’ll fade before long. I just want to go home. How’s the penthouse garden looking? Thanks for sorting that out by the way.”

“No problem,” Jen assured her as they joined the line for the pharmacy. A woman in a white coat dispensed medicines with surprising efficiency. “It’s fine. My plan now is to get you home and then go back to work to finish some things off. Even if you don’t work tomorrow morning, we’ll still be ahead of schedule.”

“Good.” Mari gave her friend a one-armed hug. “I love being ahead.”

Jen’s happy grin was blinding. “I do my best.”

“You do great,” Mari smiled. “Do you have weekend plans?” The line moved forward, and now only an elderly couple stood between them and the counter.

“I have a totally hot three-way date: Jack Bauer, and my good friends Ben and Jerry.”

Mari snickered as she finished her water. She eyed Jen’s slim figure. “I have no idea where you put it all.”

“You aren’t exactly Miss Piggy yourself,” Jen pointed out, playfully poking Mari in the side.

“I know that. But no one can go through Ben and Jerry’s like you. You’re like an ice cream disappear-o machine.”

“Yep.” Jen patted her annoyingly flat stomach. “That’s the way I like it.”

Their turn came and Mari handed over the little green slip. In no time at all, they were headed for the subway and on their way back to Mari’s apartment in Astoria.

“Take Dr. Dreamboat’s advice and be careful, okay?” Jen urged Mari as they entered 4D. Despite being fairly small – or cozy, as the realtor had described it – the apartment let in a lot of light and the creamy paint on the walls made it appear larger. “You gave me quite a scare.”

Mari hadn't even thought about how her accident might have affected Jen. "I'm so sorry," she told her friend sincerely. "I'll be careful. All I have to do tomorrow is blow up balloons – and I'll have help. Sure you don't want to come?"

Jen shook her head. "Thanks, but family stuff's tied up my last few weekends and now I just want some chill out time by myself." She hugged Mari tightly. "Go put on your PJs and relax. I'll see you Monday."

"Okay. Thanks."

Jen saw herself out and Mari dumped her bag on the couch with a sigh. Knowing it couldn't be put off, she made the short journey to her cupboard-sized bathroom and looked in the mirror.

Dr. Campbell hadn't been wrong about her forehead.

If you liked UPROOTED and want to know more about Rachel and Will, then here is first chapter of Jasmine Aherne's novel, STRANDED.

Chapter One

Rachel Coles stretched her legs out and relaxed into her seat. Around her, people filled the plane's cabin, preparing for the flight.

Outside, airport workers at Heathrow loaded the last minute hold baggage and readied the plane for takeoff. Rachel eyed their bulky earmuffs, imagining that hearing a plane take off from nearby would probably be hell on your ears.

She smiled, leaned back a little more, and let her eyes drift closed. *Aaaahhh*. A whole row, all to herself. What a blissful journey this would-

"Excuse me, ma'am." An American voice, male and pleasantly deep, interrupted her thoughts.

Damn it. Rachel opened her eyes to see a tall, lean man standing by her seat, a briefcase in his hand.

"I'm afraid I have to disturb you."

"No problem," Rachel replied, unclipping her seatbelt and standing to let him pass. The tail of his grey jacket brushed against her stomach. He took the window seat, leaving an empty space between them.

He tucked the briefcase under his seat and stretched out his legs as much as his tall frame allowed.

Rachel flicked through the pages of the in-flight magazine, sneaking glances at the man out of the corner of her eyes. For such a serious looking guy, he caught her attention. His clean-shaven cheeks highlighted great cheekbones enhanced by longish golden blond hair and smoky grey eyes.

“Business or pleasure?” The man’s question interrupted her search through the magazine for the listings of in-flight movies and music.

She turned, closed the magazine out of politeness and habit. “Oh, ah, pleasure. And you?” He appeared so professional in his clean-cut grey jacket with the slim, burgundy tie and crisp white shirt. *Guess he’s been on business. Maybe something important.*

“A little of both. I’ve been in London on business and now I’m done, but when I get back there’ll be plenty to do.” He gave her an entertainingly grim smile.

Rachel wondered what he did and if he’d consider it rude if she asked. Damn the British and their unerring need for politeness. “Ah,” she said, in lieu of anything else.

A few moments passed. “What sort of pleasure?” he asked.

Rachel shifted in her seat and debated about how to answer. A seven and a half hour flight wouldn’t pass quickly if she didn’t have someone to talk with. Stupidly, in her excitement she’d forgotten to pack a book.

“I’m surprising my fiancé.”

The man whistled. “Lucky guy.”

Rachel smiled. She hadn’t missed the way his gaze had very quickly darted to her left hand; Calum hadn’t given her a ring yet. So what? They could choose one together, he’d told her. Still, her naked finger nagged at her again. “I’m sure he thinks so.”

“He’d be a strange man not to.”

Maybe he flirted with her, but likely only to pass the time. She surreptitiously peeked at his hands. No ring. But then, sometimes that didn’t mean anything. *Like my not having a ring doesn’t mean anything.*

“Thanks,” she said cautiously, and then, “I’m Rachel.”

“I’m Will.” He didn’t hold out his hand for a handshake and neither did she. But he added, “Nice to meet you.”

They settled into companionable silence for a few moments and then the plane started to move. The flight attendants stood in the aisles and began the security demonstrations while they gave instructions over the cabin intercom. She paid attention, but willed the demonstration to pass, too excited about her trip to focus on the crew’s words and actions. *My surprise visit to New York, and to my fiancé, is about to begin.*

A giddy little thrill shot through her at just thinking the words. *And I’m his fiancée.* That sounded even better.

The demonstrations finally ended, the seatbelt light blinked and flashed, and then suddenly the plane took off. Rachel leaned over and looked out of the window as they left the ground behind. Will watched, too.

When they had leveled out, he said, “Amazing how high we get so fast, isn’t it?”

Rachel nodded. “Pretty amazing.”

“Did you know that the plane moves at about one hundred and fifty five knots at take-off?”

Rachel suppressed a grin. He seemed like he might be a machinery geek. "I didn't know that." She now guessed that his occupation could be something to do with machines. Civil engineer, maybe. Maybe he even worked maintenance on aircraft.

"Not many people do."

"I bet." She imagined Will as a gangly, geeky boy. He'd certainly grown into a handsome man.

Her thoughts turned to Calum, and she wondered about his youth. If he had been an artist from a young age. If he had been teased for it. She realized with an uncomfortable start that she actually knew very few concrete facts about him.

Her conscience chided her for flying thousands of miles to see a man she knew so little about. *But I do love him*, she reassured herself. *And I'm sure that he loves me back*. She would be in his arms soon, and then everything would work out.

Her chest constricted and she swallowed back her trepidation. *I worry too much*.

"Do you know a lot about planes, then?" she asked, to pass the time and to take her thoughts off her rather morbid realization.

"Not about planes. I find it useful to know a little bit about everything. So, how long are you in New York for?" he added, smoothly changing the subject.

"Just two nights. It's a short visit. I'd like to stay longer but Calum, my fiancé, has work. He's an artist. I've got a pretty full plate too, but I wanted to see him."

Will shifted in his seat. The seatbelt light had flicked off with a soft beep his long, tapered fingers unbuttoned the seat belt, leaving the separated halves resting on his pinstriped trousers. Aware she stared at his lap, she jerked her attention back to his face. "What do you do?"

Ah, the question she'd wanted to ask him. "I make cakes for special occasions." She reached into her small black purse, took out a card and handed it over. "I can make pretty much whatever you like."

Will turned the pretty cake-shaped card over in his hand. Rachel had requested special silky smooth cardstock. *Look how nice my card looks and feels; that's the way my cakes will be*.

"Nice card," he commented. "Kinda looks good enough to eat."

"That's the idea." She grinned, liking him. Now she had her chance. "What do you do?"

"I make furniture. Specialized. Sort of custom made to order."

"Oh," she murmured reverently, her mind filling with images of gleaming rocking chairs, hardwood floors and elegantly, high backed chairs.

"Didn't expect that, huh?" He smiled, a long, slow sexy smile that started on the left side of his mouth and worked around. *It's too bad I already have a man of my own*. "Not many people do. Not a lot of furniture is entirely handmade in this day and age."

She nodded, genuinely interested. "It must be a sort of lost art."

"You know, I think it is." His gorgeous lips tilted upwards, alerting Rachel once more to his strikingly handsome face. Nothing compared to Calum, of course, but still, nice to look at. Nothing wrong with appreciating scenery. "There are people who still like to know where

their things came from, who made it, how long it took. To know that someone put love and effort and sweat into it – that they cared about it, and that it hadn't simply been cut from a machine like a piece of a jigsaw."

Then he sat back, an embarrassed frown tugging at his mouth. "Sorry. I got a little carried away there, didn't I?"

She shook her head. "I enjoyed listening to you."

They fell into a friendly silence again. Rachel pressed a button, and the TV on the back of the seat in front of her came to life, displaying a menu. For the moment, she left the headphones off and used the touch screen. She didn't need to study the movie list, she had already made her selections from the magazine. But her position made it easy to sneak glances at Will, who occupied himself with similar motions.

"See anything you like?" he asked.

"Hmm, I don't know," she hedged. She'd never been that great at making fast decisions, which made her snap decision to marry Calum so surprising to her friends. She'd even surprised herself a little.

She idly scrolled through the movies. The music stations offered an eye-watering amount of choice: anything from reggae to panpipes to rap at the touch of a button.

"Might watch a film," she answered. "You?"

"Maybe later. I ought to be doing some work." He lifted his briefcase and opened it, pulling out a laptop. He set it on the tray table and turned on his computer, leaving her to the movies.

For a few hours, she lost herself in a film about an out of control computer once trained to protect humans. Rachel enjoyed the fast-paced and well-produced movie. When it ended, she turned to see Will tapping away at his laptop, his brow furrowed in concentration.

After a few minutes, he stopped, pressed a few more keys, and then closed the lid of the portable computer. It secured with a barely audible click. "Good film?"

"Very, thanks."

He sat back. "That's enough work for me." He looked out of the window. "We'll be in New York before we know it."

Rachel felt her stomach settle a bit. *Not too long*. She let her thoughts drift, pushing aside her worries, and soon the gentle motion of the cabin, together with passenger's muted voices, lulled her to sleep.

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A while later, she came slowly awake and stretched her rested muscles. She lifted a hand and gently worked out a kink at the nape of her neck.

"Sleep well?" Will asked, noticing she'd woken.

Rachel nodded. "Good, thanks." She felt rested, ready to meet her fiancé.

"Where are you staying?" Will asked and she answered. He nodded. "I've heard it's nice there."

“What part of New York do you live in?” she replied, smoothing the thighs of the cut-off jeans she wore with new sandals. They wrapped around her calves with pretty, ribboned laces and had been a last-minute purchase while she had been waiting in duty free. She loved the way her legs looked in them.

“The Financial District, near Wall Street.”

“Must be busy.”

He shrugged his broad but leanly muscled shoulders; he did cut a nice shape in that suit. “It’s New York. Everywhere is busy. You’ll soon find that out. Will your guy be meeting you at the airport?”

“No, of course not,” she laughed. “It’s a surprise.”

Will nodded. “Yeah, but you should probably leave him a message or something. What if he’s at the other end of the city? It’ll still be a surprise. And I bet he’d want to pick you up.”

Rachel thought about it. “You’re right. I don’t know where I’m going, and it would be great to see a familiar face.” *And great to leap into his arms when I set foot on American soil for the first time.* “I’ll call him as soon as we land. I left him some messages on my way to the airport, just to check that he’d be around, but...”

The first, nasty little stirrings of doubt gnawed. Perhaps this hadn’t been such a great idea. *Hmm, wish I had thought of that before I spent over three hundred pounds on tickets to New York....*

Will touched her arm. Heat radiated through the sleeve of the loose fitting, bohemian style shirt she wore. “Hey, I’m sorry. I needn’t have suggested you call him. You’re right, I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see you.”

Rachel smiled, feeling better. *He’s right. Quit being paranoid.* “Yes. I’m sure.”

The remainder of the flight passed without incident.

“Have a great trip,” Will said as the plane taxied along the runway towards the airport terminal.

“Thanks. It’s been very nice meeting you.” She started to stand, as did everyone else, as the plane came to a complete stop.

“Wait. Here.” He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and withdrew a small business card. “Take this.”

She smiled, took a neat, plain card. The square edges bit softly into her hand. “Thanks,” she said, a little confused. “Should I ever need custom furniture, I’ll be in touch.”

He winked, unexpectedly, and it made her heart stumble a bit. “You never know. Maybe I’ll call you. Never can tell when I’ll need a special cake for that special occasion. Do you ship to the United States?”

Rachel felt her lips curve as she replied to him. “Sure. Why not. But I’d have to arrange for overnight shipping so the cake would be as fresh as possible. It’ll cost you.”

“I’m sure it’d be worth the price,” he said over his shoulder as they started down the long corridor that would lead to the airport luggage collection area. “You take care, Rachel.”

“You too,” she called after him, but he had already sped away. She let her gaze linger on him until he disappeared in the crowds of people, feeling a little sad for a reason she couldn’t pinpoint. And then she shrugged it off. She was in New York, and it was time to go and find the love of her life.

As an additional thank you, please enjoy the first chapters from more of our contemporary releases.

The Veteran by Connie Wood

Will their past thrust them into danger - or each other's arms?

Roman Grisham returned from combat never able to return to the military he so loved. And he wants answers. His answers are linked to the shy and quietly sexy, Germaine Andrews who is looking for quiet seclusion after her life was torn apart. Now they need each other to unriddle the past - but it's their future that is fraught with danger.

Chapter One

Here she was again, alone in the catacombs.

Germaine looked up from her computer screen, rubbed her eyes and tried to stretch out the kinks in her neck. This was the one downside of working in the library's archives. All the computer work left her stiff and sore. Still, working down here in the catacombs of the NSW State Library had enough advantages to tip the scale in its favor.

She stood and walked over to the small tinted window that allowed only dusty filtered sunlight to penetrate the archival records room. Her high heeled pumps echoed across the tiles. She smiled, looking at the hazy silhouettes of the birds flittering across the ground at eye level with her. To most people it would be strange to see the world from a ground-level perspective. But not to Germaine. It showed her a beauty that most people didn't notice. It made her appreciate the details of life. And the details were important; they could save your life. Or get you killed.

It was good to get lost in the details of work and life. At least then you didn't have to worry about the bigger picture. Especially when the bigger picture held bleak and frightening memories.

The view of the Royal Botanical Gardens held a major bonus of working in the catacombs. Her brief glances at the gardens, albeit through the tiny window, calmed and soothed her. It was also a perfect escape at lunch time. A good book and a packed lunch eaten out in the sunshine rejuvenated her. It also gave her the perfect excuse not to have to socialize with all of her colleagues.

The shrill ringing of the phone broke the silence and echoed through the vast space of the room. Germaine walked across the room to her small cluttered desk and picked up the phone.

"Good morning, Archives. Germaine speaking." Her voice held little friendliness, only cool professionalism. She had long stopped trying to be sociable to her work peers. She now wore her professional manner as armor.

"Good morning, Germaine. How are those electronic newspaper articles coming along?"

Her boss's enquiry was a moot point. He knew exactly how she was doing. Paul had been down to her sanctuary yesterday afternoon to check up on her. He was in a hurry to get the articles catalogued and constantly harassed her every chance he got.

Irritation gnawed at her. She was a very capable archivist and fiercely protective regarding herself and her space. People tended to be friendly and wanted to know about her and her life. Germaine didn't want to share. It just hurt too much. Her pain constantly burned

just below the surface and people had a tendency to want to scratch it. But it wasn't in her nature to be overly rude to anyone. Which was one of the main reasons she had taken this job with minimal supervision in a solitary environment.

"The articles are going just fine, Paul," she tried to put a smile in her voice. "How can I help you?"

"I don't want to pull you away from your work but something urgent has arisen and I don't have anyone else capable enough to take care of it."

Curiosity caused a frown to crease her smooth brow. "What sort of 'something'?"

"There's a gentleman who requires access to some of our classified archives for some research that he is doing." The trepidation in the elder man's voice set off alarm bells in her mind. Something was seriously wrong, she could feel it.

"I don't have classified security access, Paul. Besides, I know how important these articles are for you," she added as a last resort.

"The articles can wait. You have been added to the classified security database as of this morning. All you need to do is come up to the Information Technology department to get your clearance codes."

Those warning bells started clamoring for attention, making her stomach knot. Why was she being given instant security access?

"What is it you want me to do exactly, Paul?" She couldn't hide the accusation and panic from her voice. She was being pushed out of her comfort zone. Again. And she didn't like it. Every time it happened disaster wasn't too far behind.

The silence from the other end of the phone was deafening. When he finally spoke his voice held a nervousness and sorrow that she had never heard there before.

"I need you to go through the war files with this gentleman." He paused, "I'm really sorry Germaine, but you were specifically requested for this job."

Her heart clenched at his words, her breathing becoming so erratic she was unable to speak. Germaine closed her eyes as images assailed her. The screaming and panic were as clear in her mind now as it had been that day three years ago. People running and terrified. The blood. The slivery flash of a knife. *Not again! No!* Her mind warned. She couldn't handle this. Every instinct within her told her to hang up the phone and flee. Run away as fast as possible. As far away as possible.

But she couldn't do that. Wouldn't do that again. She was sick of running and besides, it never did her any good. Her past was always there. And she needed this job and not only because of the salary. The quiet serenity her confines offered had been a godsend and she had found a semblance of comfort here. She wouldn't give it up so easily. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Who made the request? And why me?" She knew exactly why her. But she needed to know how much Paul knew.

"I'm sorry Germaine, but I can't elaborate. Let's just say the request came from a very high source." There was discomfiture in the old man's voice and Germaine felt for him. "My boss told me a little bit of information about you that was not in your personnel files. He said it

was not violating any confidentiality, but all the same I feel bad knowing things without your consent. I'm sorry that I have to ask you to do this."

He did sound sorry. Against her better judgment feelings of compassion for her boss welled inside her. She knew very well what it felt like to have to do something you didn't want to do.

"Why should I do this? If you know enough to make you feel sorry for asking this of me, why should I agree?"

"Honestly, there is no reason you should. I don't know if I would have the strength to do it. But I do know that you are a beautiful and intelligent young lady with your whole life still ahead of you. It would be such a shame for you to hide away in the dark for the rest of your life."

Her heart beat a tattoo against her chest, his words hitting a place deep inside her that she had hidden long ago. She had been attractive once. Now the first thing that people saw was the angry red gash that ran across her face, marring what beauty she once had.

"Do this for yourself Germaine, put your demons to rest and live the rest of your life happy."

Could she dare hope that her demons could be put to rest? She had lost so much already. It was easier to hide in the dark. Safer. Your heart couldn't shatter if you didn't put it out there.

Live the rest of your life happy. His words vibrated through her. The idea was heaven. And scary as hell.

Closing her eyes, Germaine whispered into the phone, "Okay, Paul. I'll do it."

Now there was no turning back. She was going out—into the light. She hoped it didn't burn her.

~* * *~

Roman sat on the special shower seat that had been provided by the well meaning folks at the Veteran Affairs Unit. Its hard white plastic was cold and unwelcoming, reminding him of his four months in the hospital recovery unit. How he hated the damn thing. Cool water spilled down his back making him shiver. Still it wasn't enough to take the heat out of his body. He'd been so hot since coming back. The burning heat inside him threatened to consume him if he didn't get it under control soon.

His ever-so-helpful psychiatrist at the VAU suggested that writing about his experiences might be cathartic for him. Her words still reverberated resentfully through him. *"Not to be published of course! Nobody would actually ever read them! The military would deny all knowledge of incidences, and of you and your team."*

Bitterness welled inside him at the memory of being abandoned since he had been home. Sure they said they were there to help, but being unable to speak about his experiences in full, only made the memories sit and fester in his belly. The only time they actually materialized was in the dark. In searing clarity. Making his nights hell and his days exhausting. Not that he had much physical exertion to distract him lately. His physiotherapy was over and he had nothing to occupy his time.

So Roman had gone to the only people on the planet who could understand his plight. He went to his team, his brothers-in-arms. Drinking hard, they talked long into the night. But

when the morning came and the hangover was gone, his brothers had returned to the training that would prepare them for another tour of duty. He was the only one left behind, unable to join them. The thought raised bile in his throat.

Anger boiled within him and he physically lashed out at anything within reach. His arm crutches clattered to the tiles. Fine-milled soap and bottles of expensive hair and bath products flew across the double shower cubicle. At least I'm able to be miserable in comfort, he thought bitterly. They had paid him dearly for his leg. For his memories. For his soul.

Roman buried his head in his muscular arms and roared in frustration, wondering if the constant ache in the center of his chest was ever going to get better? The physical pain in his leg had been excruciating, but still easier to deal with than the pain in his heart. At least his leg healed. Well, one leg had healed to leave scarring; the other had been amputated just above the knee. It was a good thing that the rest of him was in such great condition. The physiotherapy had taken less time than anticipated. His prosthetic leg had been fitted a lot earlier than expected, leaving him to get on with his life.

And that was where the trouble had really started. *What was the rest of his life?* All he had known was his once-happy life in a small town. With his mates from school and college. Most of them continued on to live nice, normal and neat lives. *What would they think of him now?* He had gone on to join the Navy. And the boy they had all assumed would turn out to be nothing had thrived and come into his own in the armed forces. Until the day they had recruited him for something special. Something secretive. Something deadly. And as it turned out, something that would change his life, and his heart, forever.

Roman gripped the shower seat as he breathed deep and tried to get a grip on his emotions. He had no idea what the rest of his life would hold, but for now he would follow the suggestion of the simpering little psychiatrist. He would write about his experiences. He would tell his tale. But first, he would do some research. He would find out how and why he and his team were chosen for their missions.

His plans were already in motion. He'd contacted his once-superiors to gain security access to the research information. Hopefully, he'd hear their decision soon. With a purpose in mind, Roman reached up and turned off the water. He grimaced as he leaned over and retrieved his arm crutches. He now had to maneuver around the things scattered on the floor.

He sat on the edge of the bath to dry himself, looking wistfully into the porcelain tub. He had missed his long luxurious baths while he was in the field, covered in dirt and grime. Back then, showers had been a sporadic luxury. He had yet to have a bath since being back. Getting in and out of the tub was still out of his capabilities and that is what annoyed him the most. He had been most capable once.

The trill of his telephone echoed through the bathroom and he quickly picked it up, glad to have a hands free unit that he took everywhere with him.

"Hello."

"Mr. Grisham? This is Paul Heathrow. We spoke yesterday regarding the access to some archive files?"

There was a pause on the phone. One which Roman had no intention of filling.

"Yes, well. I've called to say that you have the clearance necessary to access the files. You can start your research as of Monday morning."

Excellent. Now the real work could begin.

"Thank you, Mr. Heathrow. I'll see you Monday."

He was about to hang up when the man added, "I'm afraid there is one condition that has been added to your request though. You will have to be assisted at all times by a fully qualified librarian."

Anger surged through Roman. How could he freely access all the information he needed if he was to be babysat by some quaint little librarian?

"That was not part of the agreement. I was lead to understand that I would have full security access."

"That is still correct, Mr. Grisham, but I have been told to give you an assistant. She is very capable and also has full security access. I believe you'll find her discreet and very confidential. I'm sure there will be no problems."

Full security access? Why would they give someone else full access so easily after he fought so hard for it?

"What is the name of the assistant?" he demanded.

"Her name is Germaine Andrews. I can assure you, Mr. Grisham, that you'll find her most adequate."

~* * *~

Monday morning shone bright, glaringly mocking Germaine's mood. She'd been regretting her moment of bravery all weekend. The only thing stopping her from fleeing the city altogether had been Paul's words vibrating through her head about the possibility of living her life happy. Away from her past.

Bracing herself, Germaine slid the security card through the machine that allowed her entry into the cold sterile room. It was so different from her safe haven downstairs. This room was bright. Harsh sunlight shone through sparkling windows and bounced off arctic white walls. She heard the constant whirring of machines, their incessant noise buzzing through her head.

Still there were only a handful of select employees who were able to venture into this section of the building. There would be very few people with whom she would have to interact. Fewer people who would stare at her scar and look at her with pity.

Paul stood at the doorway nervously fidgeting with a security tag. She walked over to greet him and he gave her shoulders a fatherly squeeze before he led her through another security door. She stifled the urge to inwardly cringe at the unaccustomed contact. She stiffened her resolve before allowing herself to be led into the room.

Germaine stifled an instinctive gasp. The handsome masculine man sitting at the small white table sent immediate electrical impulses coursing through her body. Never before had she reacted so instantaneously to a man. Her barriers were so strong that appealing good looks rarely affected her. Nothing productive would result from her yearnings and she cringed again and fidgeted uncomfortably.

"This is Mr. Grisham. He's interested in doing some research and requires your assistance."

Paul spoke directly to Germaine, though her attention was still placed on the attractive man who remained seated. He lifted his head in a slow, predatory manner. His gaze rose to meet hers and she blinked. His dark brown eyes told her instantly that he didn't want her assistance in any way, and she took a step back.

Placing his hands on the arm rests he used his upper strength to raise himself slowly from the chair until he was able to get his feet under him. Germaine swallowed as his biceps rippled from the effort.

He stood still for a fraction of a second before he started toward her. He had a lopsided gait that oozed sensuality. He was moving slowly and deliberately like a predator, even though his limp was pronounced. She shivered, and she had the feeling that he could move at the speed of light if needed.

She had met men like him before. They were dangerous. Deadly. She tried desperately to raise her emotional barriers against him. He stopped in front of her, completely ignoring Paul. He held out a strong deeply tanned hand.

"I'm Roman Grisham." A slight smile played against his hard mouth. Steeling herself, she reached out and grasped his hand firmly. She made sure she had a good firm hand shake. She needed to be on an equal footing with him. Well, as equal as anyone could be with this man.

"Germaine Andrews." It was all she could think to say. All rational thought slipped away as the warmth of his hand seeped through her and his gaze held hers.

Roman's grin widened into a genuine smile making him devastatingly handsome. "I'm sure we're going to get along just fine Gerri."